

INTRODUCTION

I wish that it were possible to meet with one who could deliver to us the history of the Apostles, not only all they wrote and spoke of, but of the rest of their daily life, even what they ate, and when they ate, when they walked, and where they sat, what they did every day, in what parts they were, into what house they entered, and where they lodged—to relate everything with minute exactness, so replete with advantage is all that was done by them . . . for when a man leads a spiritual life, the habit, the walk, the words and actions of such a one, in short all that relates to him, profits the hearers, and nothing is a hindrance or impediment.¹

These words of John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, at the end of the fourth century A.D., express, as clearly as any have done since, the purpose of social history, which is to depict the daily life of our ancestors in all its complexity.

The practices and customs of the early Christians, the pattern of their life as exemplifying their faith, is to many quite unknown, for although the social historian has presented a great number of vivid pictures of pagan society in the first centuries of our era, the Church historian has so far been slow to follow in his footsteps. And yet in the records of the primitive Church there is a wealth of information about the likes and dislikes, the habits and superstitions, the clothes and the food of its faithful and unfaithful members. It is true that there is a certain overlap between what we might term secular social history and Church social history, but at the same time there is a considerable difference between them.²

Like Israel of old, the New Israel, the Church, stood in sharp opposition, even antagonism, to the pagan culture which formed its environment; sacred and secular were clearly distinct, and since secular, at least under the Roman emperors before Constantine, meant pagan, Christians lived a life apart, aloof from their polytheistic and frequently immoral neighbours and all the paraphernalia of day-to-day living in a society

¹ *In Philemon. exord.*

² A more detailed analysis of this distinction is given in the Appendix.

dominated by emperor cults, mystery religions and the worship of an ever expanding pantheon of gods. What sort of life did the early Christians lead in their isolation and how did the conversion of Constantine affect it? It is the purpose of these studies to attempt in part an answer to these questions.

We begin with Clement, a Christian philosopher and teacher in Alexandria at the end of the second century: a man who sought to make a bridge between his beliefs and those of the cultured class to which he belonged both by birth and education. Clement was acutely aware of the distinction between the Christian way of life and the pagan, but his missionary ardour, typical of many at that period, impelled him to observe and criticize all that he saw and to utilize pagan modes of thought for the propagation of the faith. He is representative of the many apologists who preceded him and a forerunner of the many intellectual giants who were equally zealous in the task of conversion. There were unfortunately others in the Church who showed an equal zeal in wrongdoing, one such was Paul of Samosata, who, in the mid-third century, lived licentiously and taught heretically at Antioch; a man who, as his contemporaries expressed it, acted "as though he was not a bishop but a sophist and a charlatan". Here we see the reverse of the picture, a readiness to compromise with pagan ideas and pagan morals; to omit it would tend to falsification, presenting an idealized representation which falls short of the truth, to include it is to bring out by contrast the spiritual stature of those many Christians who, unlike Paul, refused to follow the easy road of capitulation to the world.

An interval of forty years brings us to Carthage in the midst of the bloodshed and horror of the Diocletian persecution and to the martyr Victoria in particular. It may seem strange in a description of daily life to include an account of the last day in any individual's earthly existence, but, although the Church enjoyed long periods of peace in the first three hundred years and although persecution was often only spasmodic and short-lived, to become a Christian was to accept the possibility, if not the certainty, of ending one's life on the rack or in the amphitheatre. Such a possibility profoundly affected the Christian's attitude to contemporary society, intensifying his hostility to it, and to omit any reference would be to pass over in silence

an important feature of the life of the early Church as a whole.¹ By the middle of the fourth century, with the conversion of Constantine an event in the past, persecution was no longer an imminent reality; and in Rome Diogenes the sexton, who typifies the humble working class Christian, could rejoice in the easing of the tension between the Church and the State, while experiencing a certain professional regret at the consequent abandonment of the catacombs in favour of open-air cemeteries. Fifty years later, John Chrysostom, one of the great bishops of the Church and occupier of the important see of Constantinople, had cause to lament the steady decay of the earlier social dualism; his biting strictures on contemporary society echo the satire of Clement, but what especially nauseated him was that the behaviour and fashions he so deprecated were those of his own congregation; the world was crowding into the Church. It was as a reaction to this acute secularization that the monastic movement began; the first monks fled not only from the world but from the world in the Church—in so doing they saved the Church and Christianity. Regarded at first with much suspicion by those in official quarters, the support of such men as Basil of Caesarea, Jerome, Augustine and John Chrysostom won for the monks a rightful place in the Church. Although the West was behind the East in its readiness to accept the movement, the work of John Cassian, our final character, himself a friend of Chrysostom, at Marseilles in the second and third decades of the fifth century, did much to allay hostility, and he indeed was the true father of Western monasticism; whether a Benedict of Nursia or a Benedict of Aniane or a Bernard set out to systematize or reform, it was upon his foundations that they built. So the present study ends with an account of the thought and ways of that individual who was to play such an important part in the medieval period—the monk.

The most radical omission in this brief series of studies is the portrait of a Christian lady, virgin, matron or widow, apart from the martyr Victoria. The reason for this is twofold: in the first place, the Christian woman lived a secluded life, seldom leaving the house except to go to church, carefully veiled when she did so in order not to see or to be seen by the lewd-eyed pagans she

¹ The fact of martyrdom emphasizes more than anything else the refusal of the majority of Christians to compromise, their absolute renunciation of the world.

passed in the street. At home her tasks were simple and limited; she helped with the cooking, made clothes, and devoted herself to prayer and Bible reading. Happy and dignified though her daily life may have been, it was, while not humdrum, sufficiently unvaried to be incapable of sustained and detailed description.¹ In the second place, in the few instances where more details are forthcoming, they concern those ladies who practised the ascetic life either at home, like Jerome's disciple Marcella in Rome, or in a nunnery, like Macrina, whose brother Gregory of Nyssa wrote her biography; but their daily life was little different from that of the monk of whom more vivid accounts have been preserved and who therefore appears in the present work in the person of John Cassian.

The extent to which imagination should play a part in this reconstruction is a delicate question to decide. How far, for example, is it legitimate to employ direct speech, which is so much more vivid than indirect?² The general principle, however, is easily discernible, viz. that no statement should be made, no description given, no remark reported, which is not based upon verifiable evidence. But to provide each fact with its appropriate reference to a contemporary document would be to overload the text, rendering it almost unreadable; instead, a list of authorities is appended to each chapter for those who would either check them or pursue the subject further; these may be safely ignored by the general reader. For him, however, some footnotes have been printed where their substance is such as to be of interest either by adding to or by further explicating what has been said in the text.

One further problem remains, namely, the trustworthiness of the sources themselves and in particular, when sermons are used, how far precept reflects practice; a homily exhorting to the practise of a virtue is not sufficient evidence to conclude that the audience is addicted to the vice opposite to that virtue. Short of embarking upon a long and minute discussion of each statement, which would be tedious to the extreme, the general

¹ Cf. J. Donaldson, *Woman, her Position and Influence among the Early Christians*, 1907.

² Cf. Toynbee's reference to the method of Thucydides: "His *oratio recta*, while more vivid, is really no more fictional than the laboured *oratio obliqua* in which the moderns present their composite photographs of public opinion." (*The Study of History*, abridged ed., 1945, p. 45.)

reader must obviously accept on trust what is here recorded, making use of the references if he so desires. But this much may be said, that where the writings of a Christian may be compared with those of a contemporary pagan there is a notable unanimity of observation, e.g. Libanius and Ammianus Marcellinus both provide independent testimony to the truth of Chrysostom's picture of his age; and further, though there is something of a deterioration of Christian life, there is good reason to suppose that precept and practice were in closer agreement in this period than has often been the case in subsequent ages.

SAMPLE