

Notes on early Church history and the moral superiority of the 'barbarians' to the Romans

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Thus far of the almost incredible difference of the Barbarians & Romans in those principal Christian virtues, Charity, Abstinence from pleasures & Chastity. In the next place we will compare them in respect of persecuting, & here if we consider persecution according to the notion which persecutors frame to colour over their persecuting, which is that the true Church may punish men by the temporary sword for error in Faith: it must be granted that if the Barbarians were the true Church then the Homousians during Theodosius's reign & afterwards were very great persecutors & the Barbarians none at all. But this is but to return their own argument upon those who are so blind & wicked as to applaud that for piety in them selves which they cry out against in others for {wickedness}. We are not to measure Persecution by the rule of Persecutors. The Magistrate may punish or cut off any for their vices or evil actions but not professors of Christianity for erroneous opinions, least they pluck up the Wheat with the Tares. The Church may reprove or excommunicate but she has as little authority to guide the arm of the Magistrate as to handle his sword: for this is to make her self the judge & him but the executioner. Shee may excommunicate but not force into communion. Christ never instituted that a means of her propagation & preservation. If we would have them once with us we <1v> must use the proper means to beget faith in them, & not urge them by violence to do what is contrary to their perswasion, seing whatsoever is not of faith is sin.^[1] By violence a Church may increase her numbers but ever allays & debases her self with impure mixtures, force prevailing with none but Hypocrites. And this I take to be the chief reason of the great wickedness of the Romans which ensued Theodosius's reign, his persecution squeezing out the cons{cien}cious & filling the persecuting church only with the Hipocritical part of the Empire. Every Persecutor is a Wolf Matth 10.16, 17, & every Christian that preaches it is one of the fals Prophets called Wolves in sheeps cloathing Math 7. These are the Christians of whom he said Then shall many be offended & shall betray one another & shall hate one another Matth 24. And to all such belongs that reprehension. Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. Luke 9. In short: whatsoever wears sheeps cloathing if it be as ravenous as a wolf it betrays it self by it's ravenousness to be no sheep. The Wolves may worry the sheep but Christ never taught the sheep to worry the wolves. By their ravenousness we are to know them & not to excuse their ravenousness by pretending they are sheep. For 'tis our Saviour's rule speaking of these wolves, to judge the tree by the fruit & not the fruit by the tree. Matth. 7.

Hence then we have another character of a true Church. For you have already heard how vehement persecutors the Homoüsians were in Theodosius's reign besides what they did afterwards; but the Barbarians were so free from it that Salvian 40 years after their breaking into the <2r> Empire wrote thus of the general state of the west. Dicit fortè aliquis, non id esse nunc temporis ut pro Christo nos perferamus quæ tunc Apostoli pertulerunt. Verum est. Non enim sunt Principes Pagani, non Tyranni persecutores, non sanguis sanctorum funditur, nec fides supplicijs comprobatur — — — — et ideo cùm et Principes Christiani sint, & Persecutio nulla sit & religio non inquietetur, qui ad probandum fidem experimentis durioribus non compellimus inferioribus saltem officijs domino plus placere debemus. Salv. lib. 3 De Gub. Dei. This was the

generall moderation of the Barbarians for the first 40 years of their conquests: which was the more admirable in that they abstained from retaliating persecution on those that had so highly provoked them by it. They shewed themselves Christians in abstaining from persecuting: It was more for Conquerers not to persecute a conquered people, but not to retaliate persecution on their conquered persecutors was a high instance of Christian Principles.

This is enough to shew the temper of their religion at their first breaking into the Empire: though if we should prosecute it to later times when their religion began more & more to decay, we should find them generally less persecutors then reigning Christians used to be in any ages since. The ^a[2] Ostrogoths never persecuted. The Visigoths are not accused for it till the reign of Evarix & he did no more then to ^b[3] make a law that no successors should be created to their Bishops dying: which <2v> Law together with the Persecution ceased with his reign. The Vandals I reckon began not to persecute till Hunneric A.C. 484. For Geiseric was rather a Tyrant then a persecutor being as cruel to those of his own religion as to others, & making no Law against the Homousian Religion as he must have done to raise a national persecution. But whatever the later times were when the Barbarians began to degenerate & imitate the Romans, its enough as I said to shew the temper of their Religion while influenced by those Roman Christians whom the Theodosian persecution had made fly to them, that at their first Conquests & for 40 years after, besides some time after Salvian wrote they persecuted not at all, & afterwards not so much as the Romans: no not the Vandals if acquitted from the forgeries of the Moncks whose custome it has ever been to cry up Malefactors of their own party for Martyrs.

We have seen how much the Barbarians transcended the Romans in their duty towards man: let us now see out of the same Salvian how much they differed in piety & devotion towards God. Dicit Deus – – –

[1] Rom 14.23

[2] a. Procop. de Bel. Got.

[3] b Consule Sidonij Epist 6. lib. 7, eodem tempore scriptam. Nam fabulas Monachorum de hujus æque ac aliorum persecutionibus planè contexuit Gregorius Turonensis ut mihi videtur.
