

Fragment on the history of apostasy

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Now the rise of the Apostasy in point of religion was on this manner. When the Sun Moon & Stars of the Heathen Roman empire were smitten & the great red Dragon that old serpent called the Devil & Satan who deceived the whole world was by Michael & his Angels (in the wars between Constantine the great & Licinius) overcom & cast out of the heaven of the Roman throne & in its room the Christian religion was exalted to that throne: then did the honour, riches, power & temporal advantages of this religion begin to tempt the heathens dayly to turn Christians; & in such converts who for temporall interest thus flowed into the Church the Devil now came down amongst the Christian people of the Eastern & Western Empires called the inhabitants of the earth & sea. For such converts being the most hypocritical sort of men & under the profession of Christianity retaining their old heathen vices & their inclination to all kinds of superstition, they were still heathens in reality thô in profession Christians, & may deservedly be called the synagogue of Satan who say they are Ie{ws}. (that is Christians) & are not but do lye.

In Dioclesian's persecution of ten years which was far greater then all others put together the Woman in heaven being with child of a Christian Empire cried travailing in birth & pained to be delivered & at the same time the great red Dragon with his tail (or train of attendants civil & military) drew the third part of the starrs of heaven (the saints of the Greek empire which was the third part of the whole) & cast them to the earth. And the woman brought forth a man-child [the Western Christian empire under the dominion of Constantine the great] & the Dragon was ready [by the treacheries of Licinus] to devour her child as soon as it was born: And the manchild [by the victory of Constantine over Liciniu{s}] was caught up unto God & to his throne. [For at that time, as we exp{lain}ed above] there was war in heaven: Michael [or the Manchild] & his Angels fought against the Dragon & the Dragon fought & his a{ngels}, & the great Dragon was cast out that old Serpent called the Devil & Sat{an}. [the heathen religion] which deceived the whole world. he was cast out unto the {earth} [of the eastern Empire] And there was heard a loud voice in heaven saying Now is come Salvation [from the persecuting Dragon] & strength & the Kingdom of our God [a Christian Empire] & the power of his Christ [or dominion of his mystical body the Christians:] For the accuser of our brethren is cast out who [in the persecution] accused them before our God & they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb [slain afresh in his mystical body in that persecution] & by the word of their testimony. [the testimony of confessors & martyrs] & [in the persecution] they loved not their lives unto the death. Therefore rejoyce ye heavens & ye that dwell in them [the victors over the Dragon, as many of them as are truly saints.] Wo to the inhabitants of the earth & Sea [the hypocritical part of Christians & such as should not endure the following temptation] for the Devil [whom Michael cast out of heaven] is [by the flowing in of dissembling heathens who say t{hey} are Christians & are not but do lye] come down unto you with great wrath because he knoweth that he hath but a short time [to reign am{ong} you untill he be cast in chains into the bottomless pit.] So then the Dragon in being cast {out} of heaven ceases not but begins a new {illeg} on earth among the Christian inhabitants of the earth & sea, the empire from th{illeg} the converts still keeping the name of the Dragon & the Man-child in being caught{t up} <1v> to heaven soon vanishing out of sight - - - - -

– While the Empire continued heathen the small encouragements for hypocrites to turn christians was a guard upon the Christian religion to keep it from growing corrupt. For the mystery of iniquity which then worked

could not grow to any maturity for want of hypocrites to work upon: but after the heathen religion which thus withheld the revelation of this mystery, was taken out of the way that mystery no longer wanting a fit people to work upon must begin to grow proportionally to the increase of hypocrites & so as in a short time by the prevailing of such fals christians to be revealed. For in a dayly flow of such converts into the Churches it could not be but that in a few years the hypocrites would be more then double or triple to the sincere not to say more then ten or twenty times their number. Now by this influx of fals converts the mystery of iniquity grew in these respects.

First the Churches by the mixture & allay of such converts soon became very corrupt in manners. They that please to read the Book of Salvian De Providentia Dei an author very sober, cordate & pious will find that within less then an hundred years after Constantines victory the Christians all over the Empire so far as his information reacht were grown as much or more debauched in manners (whoring, drinking, swearing, lying, gaming, cheating, injustice oppression) then even the barbarous nations & old heathens & the various sorts of heretical christians. This Salvian shews to satisfy his readers that God was just in subjecting the Romans to the violence & dominion of the less wicked Barbarous nations who in the yeare 407 invaded the western empire. And if you will be at the pains to compare him with what you may find to the same purpose scatered up & down in the Ecclesiastical historians, Gregory Nazianzen, Faustinus his Libellus precum, Ierom, Austin Guildas & other authors of those times, as well concerning the pride ambition, contentiousness & other ill manners of the Clergy & Monks, as those of the rest of the people; you will find sufficient reason to beleive that Salvian wrote the truth impartially. He wrote not in a peevish way to accuse his age but in a sober way to answer an objection made by many of his own age about the justice of God & to satisfy them by relating the matters of fact which they to whom he wrote were judges of as well as he. Nor is't a wonder that Christians should become so vitious in so short a time seing the most immoral of the heathens would be most apt to turn Christians for interest & the most ambitious Christians would seek most for preferment in the Churches. Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical history tells us that Christians between the persecutions of Decius & Dioclesian through a respite of 30 or 40 years from persecution began to grow very corrupt in manners. & much more would they grow corrupt in a more lasting peace when they were not only freed from persecution but flourished in riches & honours & dominion over the world & were daily allayed & corrupted by the influx of the most hypocritical & consequently the worst of heathens. It may be said indeed that the manners of Christians were corrected by the persecutions they suffered under Constantius Iulian & Valens: but those sufferings were not much in the west & but for a time & not directly for religion but upon accusations for various crimes, as Basil tells us of the sufferings under Valens & Athanasius & Hilary of those under Constantius. And the same method was used by the King of the Vandals against the Africans. For when he would persecute them he caused their sacred virgins to be searched by midwives & those who were found vitiated, to be forced by tortures to confess who had layn with <2r> {them} saying Dicite quomodo sacerdotes vestri concumbunt vobiscum & then upon their confession about four thousand of their Bishops & Priests were banished together as Victor de Persecutione Vandalica relates. This I mention in confirmation of what Salvian affirms of the Africans. For he describes them the unchastest of all the Romans & that God's judgment was conspicuous in subjecting them to the Vandals who were the chastest of all the Barbarians & by their laws had almost made the Africans themselves chast. And the cruelty of Valens the Emperour & those about him in causing 80 Presbyters to be burnt together in a ship would afford us another notable instance were it not that I find in Gregory Nazianzen (who lived in the time when the thing was done & neare the place where twas done) that the first report was but of one Presbyter sentenced to be burnt with a ship at Sea & of many people standing upon the shore to see the execution done. [But an earlier instance we have in the contentions about Athanasius & some others . For whilst Athanasius was accused of killing Arsenius &c & contended that Arsenius was alive & the Eusebians in the Council of Tyre in confutation thereof produced (not the hand of Arsenius in a bag as the vulgar story is but) a corps for them to view who pretended to know Arsenius, as Athanasius & three hundred Bishops of Egypt & the West in the letter of the Council of Sardica to the affirm: the heats in managing these & such like disputes & at length the consent of all the world against Athanasius (even those few who were banished for him off)]

In the next place the Churches began in this age to incline to superstition in forbidding to marry & commanding immoderate abstinence from meats. For such was the discipline of the Monks & in some measure of the clergy. How the monks began to grow first in Egypt & then in other places in the reign of Constantine the great & his sons as in a few years incre{a}sed to an immense multitude I need not describe. The first institution is still by many applauded but I find it faulty in these things. Moderate fasting of private men in secret or of the whole church openly upon set occasions is commendable: but for any private man or

sect {of} men to make a publick profession of fasting & devotion not common to the whole church {is} that singularity reprehended by Christ in hypocrites who loved to pray standing in the synagogues & in the corners of the streets & disfigured their faces that by their sad countenances they might appear unto men to fast, & therefore had their reward in this world in the applause of men. <2v> And Secondly by perusing the histories of the first Monks (written by I find it was a general complaint among them that upon their entring into the profession of a Monastick life they found themselves more tempted in the flesh then before & those who became strickter professors thereof & on that account went by degrees further into the wildernesses then others did, complained most of all of temptations. The reason they gave of it was that the devil tempted them most who were most his enemies & fought most against him: but the true reason was partly that the desire was inflamed by prohibition of lawfull marriage, & partly that the profession of chastity & daily fasting on that account put them perpetually in mind of what they strove against, & their idle lives gave liberty to their thoughts to follow their inclinations. The way to chastity is not to struggle directly with incontinent thoughts but to avert the thoughts by some employment, or by reading, or meditating on other things, or by convers. By immoderate fasting the body is also put out of its due temper & for want of sleep the fancy is invigorated about whatever it sets it self upon & by degrees inclines towards a delirium in so much that those Monks who fasted most arrived to a state of seing apparitions of weomen & their shapes & of hearing their voices in such a lively manner as made them often think the visions true apparitions of the Devil tempting them to lust. Thus while we pray that God would not lead us into tentation, these men ran themselves headlong into it. And as I have not met with more uncleanness superstition ignorance & folly in any sort of men then in the lives of these first Monks written by their admirers Palladius, Theodoret & others, so it may suffice that their profession of forbidding to marry & teaching to abstain from meats is by the Apostle condemned & made the character of such as in the last times should depart from the faith.

In the third place it is observable that in this age the heathen doctrine of dæmons was brought into the Churches by lying signes & wonders. For after that the miracles of the Apostolick age were ceased & for 200 years were scarce heard of in the churches, there began in the latter end of Constantius's reign a new fame of strange miracles of a different kind done in Egypt & Syria at the tombs of the martyrs; whereupon the miracle working reliques of the Egyptian martyrs were about the beginning of the reign of Valentinian & Valens sent from thence into all the world & new martyrs dayly found out in all places the wandring Monks carrying their reliques up & down. And with the noise of these miracles came into the Churches the beleife of the Ghosts of saints being about their tombs & reliques & of their being able to heare & help those that invoked them. And to these superstitions, the heathen converts being through education & custome very propense, they grew so fast in the Churches that it may be safely said that before the final division of the empire the invocation of saints was grown customary. At the same time came in also the superstition of working miracles by the signe of the cros, & the humour of writing legendary stories, that age receiving such writings with applause. And lastly at that time began Christians to kill men for religion as you may see by two sanguinary Edicts of Honorius against the Donatists & all other African Roman communion & by the proceedings against them both before & after. And whilst the Donatists assembled in their churches were besieged there & their churches burnt over their <3r> {heads}

To these instances may be added the history of the Banishment of Chrysostom; the carriage between Íerom & Ruffin; the manners & carriage of Peter Bishop of Alexandria described by Gregory Nazianzen; the wars between Basil & bishop of Tyana about the limits of their Bishopricks described by the same Gregory; the blood through which Pope Damasus waded to the Bishoprick of Rome touched upon by Ammianus & some others & fully described in the Libellus precum of ; The burning of the Churches of Constantinople & Egypt; the passionate and sometimes seditious writings of some of the greatest men & their being approved of by the age: The endeavours of the western Churches to exalt their jurisdiction & authority above that of the Eastern, & that appeales should be made by all the world to the Bishop of Rome; The stirring up Emperor against Emperor so as to endanger engaging them in a civil war about Church concerns; the strange histories of the Councils of Tyre & Sardica; & the great inconstancy of the Romans in point of faith they being carried about with every wind of doctrine First the novel definitions of Arius met with such reception as to make him in a letter to Constantine before the Council of Nice boast of the multitude, then upon the Emperors writing a publick letter against him to be posted up in every city & calling the Council of Nice, they condemned him almost unanimously & at the Emperors motion received the word Consubstantial into their Creed. Then the wind turning again they at the Council of Ariminum rejected the same word as universally & soon after upon a new turn of affairs the west complying with Valentinian & Liberius, the East with Theodosius; the

same men in one Council subscribing under oath to one thing in another to the contrary & being allowed to do so. Which shews that the age was perfectly such as Nazianzen describes it to be, ready for any side according to the turn of the times, as ready to turn for interest to any Christian party as a little before from heathenism to Christianity for the same interest. Whence we need not wonder that in the short reign of Constantius over the west the world should turn so universally as to occasion the proverb, Athanasius contra Mundum, & make Nazianzen of opinion that Athanasius (soon after the death of Constantius) was the first that by divine inspiration discovered & manifested to the world the Deity of the Holy Ghost, the Church in its more tender age not bearing with so great a mystery.

[* the error of the western Churches from the Nicene Council in the sense of the word Homoüsios they]

I hope I have now sufficiently proved that the age from the first Conversion of the Empire to Christianity declined perpetually in manners by the influx of immora{l} & hypocritical heathens: so as within a few years to become as hypocritical & vitious as our own times at least: the most immoral of the heathens being apt to turn first & so by their converts to make the Christians as corrupt at least as the heathens which remained unconverted. In shewing this I have insisted most upon the manners of the Catholics, there being no need to prove the corruptness of the rest. And whilst I compare those times with our own it makes me like our own the better & honour our clergy the more, accounting them not only men of better morals but also far more judicious & knowing. Tis the nature of man to admire least what he is most acquainted with: & this makes us always think our own times the worst. Men are not sainted till their vices be forgotten. The old heathens first commemorated their dead men then admired them, afterwards adored them as Gods, then raised them above newer Gods so as to make them Gods celestial & at length equalled the first of them to the supreme God, as the Egyptians did Osiris, the Assyrians Baal, the Greeks Iupiter.

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And so So if we have a kindness for any age we are apt to deify it when old enough. But this is the fault of superstition

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And whilst the Council of Nice & the Greeks universally understood the word homoüsios or consubstantial of two substances of like nature the Latines translated it unius substantiæ & by one substance understood one singular substance. & then accused the Greeks of Arianism for dividing the substances of the Father & son & the Greeks mutually accused the Latines of Sabellianism for making them one in singular substance. Afterwards Constantius conquering the West & bringing both parties to confer together in Councils the Latines were made to understand the Council of Nice better nor did the distinction of persons suffice to end all dispute till in the council of Alexandria the latine language of one substance & three persons was reconciled to the Greeke of one usia & three hypostases both being expounded of one substance in kind or nature & three substantial persons in number. And at the same time the Greeks became divided & subdivided into many parties: so great was the levity of those times.] Thus easily did the Latines first vary from the Council of Nice & then return to it
