

Christianity and Classical Culture

*A Study of Thought and
Action from Augustus to
Augustine*

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Preface

The theme of this work is the revolution in thought and action which came about through the impact of Christianity upon the Greco-Roman world. This is a subject of profound importance, but it has not received the attention it deserves, especially perhaps from English-speaking scholars. The reason for this lies partly in the rather special character of the problems involved, partly, however, in the acceptance of a distinction between areas of investigation, which to my mind at least is wholly arbitrary and in no way warranted by the actual course of events. The result is that classical and Christian studies have become dissociated with consequences which are, perhaps, unfortunate for both.

In this work I have ventured to defy the accepted convention and to attempt a transition from the world of Augustus and Vergil to that of Theodosius and Augustine. I am fully aware of my temerity in embarking on such an enterprise. But I have been impelled to undertake it both because of its intrinsic interest and because of the light it throws on subsequent developments of European culture. And I have been emboldened to do so from a sense that, however difficult the religious and philosophic issues to be encountered, they cannot be neglected by the historian except at the cost of missing what is central to the events of the age.

In a subject so vast and intricate it has been necessary to make a somewhat rigid delimitation of the field. I have, therefore, taken as my starting-point the Augustan Empire, with its claim to "eternity" as a final and definitive expression of classical order. This is not to suggest that the work of Augustus was in any deep sense novel. On the contrary, it was merely the culmination of an effort begun centuries before in Hellas, the effort to create a world which should be safe for civilization; and, from this standpoint, such originality as the emperor exhibited was merely one of method. In this sense, however, his settlement

may well be accepted as the last and not least impressive undertaking of what we may venture to call "creative politics."

The history of Greco-Roman Christianity resolves itself largely into a criticism of that undertaking and of the ideas upon which it rested; viz. that it was possible to attain a goal of permanent security, peace and freedom through political action, especially through submission to the "virtue and fortune" of a political leader. This notion the Christians denounced with uniform vigor and consistency. To them the state, so far from being the supreme instrument of human emancipation and perfectibility, was a straight-jacket to be justified at best as "a remedy for sin." To think of it otherwise they considered the grossest of superstitions.

The Christians traced this superstition to the acceptance of a defective logic, the logic of classical "naturalism," to which they ascribed the characteristic *vitia* of the classical world. In this connection it is important to notice that their revolt was not from nature; it was from the picture of nature constructed by classical *scientia*, together with its implications for practical life. And what they demanded was a radical revision of first principles as the presupposition to an adequate cosmology and anthropology. The basis for such a revision they held to lie in the *logos* of Christ, conceived as a revelation, not of "new" truth, but of truth which was as old as the hills and as everlasting. This they accepted as an answer to the promise of illumination and power extended to mankind and, thus, the basis for a new physics, a new ethic and, above all, a new logic, the logic of human progress. In Christ, therefore, they claimed to possess a principle of understanding superior to anything existing in the classical world. By this claim they were prepared to stand or fall.

It is none of my business as a historian to pronounce upon the ultimate validity of Christian claims as opposed to those of Classicism. My task is simply to record those claims as an essential part of the historical movement which I have attempted to describe. This I have done to the best of my ability by letting the protagonists on either side speak, so far as possible, for themselves. Still less appropriate would it be to hazard any application of issues debated in the first four centuries to the problems of our own distracted age. Nevertheless, to those who are looking for a solution to those problems, it may at least be sug-

gested that the answer will not be found in any attempted revival of obsolete conceptions associated with the life of classical antiquity. This is not to disparage Greco-Roman achievement, still less its close and attentive study. On the contrary, it is to see it in a perspective from which, I think, it gains immeasurably in value and significance. As the Christians (somewhat ungenerously) put it, the best approach to truth is through a study of error. And from this standpoint it cannot be denied that the great classics were one and all splendid sinners. Their work thus constitutes a "possession for ever," if not quite in the sense they imagined, at any rate as an imperishable record of thought and aspiration in what must always be regarded as a chapter of unique importance in human experience.

The present work is one of interpretation. As such, it is based primarily on a study of the relevant material in ancient literature and citations from modern authors have been kept to a minimum. It is hardly possible to measure one's indebtedness to scholars whose labors have contributed to throw light on different aspects of the subject. I hope, however, that I have not failed to make a proper acknowledgment of my obligations in specific cases. In conclusion I wish to express my thanks to various members of my old university who have seen the MS. either in whole or part and whose criticisms have enabled me to avoid numerous errors both of style and content. I am particularly grateful for the help I have received from Professor R. G. Collingwood and Mr. R. Syme.

C.N.C.

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