

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

ROME AND OURSELVES: AN HISTORICAL SURVEY.

By G. G. COULTON, M.A. Camb., Hon. D.Lit. Durham; Fellow of St. John's and Hon. Fellow of St. Catharine's College, Cambridge.

FIFTEEN centuries ago, when the Roman Empire broke up and Alaric sacked the capital of the world, men said that Christianity was played out—or rather, that Christianity was the real cause of the world's misfortunes, and that the one remedy was to turn to the heathen gods, who would receive penitent humanity back to their bosom, and restore the Golden Age. It was in answer to this that St. Augustine wrote one of the most famous volumes in all literature, his discourse on *The City of God*. The first ten books of this discourse are directly controversial, designed to show, first, that even the horrors of A.D. 410 were not so bad as many horrors of the pagan past, and, secondly, that, even if we desert Christ, the world can never return to Jupiter and his fellows. Among the other twelve books of *The City of God*, many pages again are filled with negative criticism; far more than half of this great work is negative, though Augustine's own mind was perhaps the most constructive of his age. There are moments in history at which a man's first and last word must be Carlyle's *Everlasting No!* Difficult as were St. Augustine's times, one plain resolution was his from the first: whatever happens, we will not go back to the pagan Pantheon! Difficult as our days may be, we can start from a similar resolve: anything rather than go back to what the Church of Rome was before the days of Protestant competition, or to what (so far as we can see) she would again become if Protestant competition were removed! So long as certain impossible things are publicly pressed upon us as the highest religious truths, so long we must not shrink from condemning them with equal publicity as exploded falsehoods.

Let me make it plain that I refer here not to the rank and file of Roman Catholicism, but to their hierarchy, to their public spokesmen, and above all to their professional apologists. The Roman Catholic layman who can say from his heart, "My creed offers an explanation of the mystery of the universe which, to me, is more real than any other; the sacraments of my Church bring my soul nearer to God than anything else I have experienced or can conceive," seems to me to stand on an inexpugnable foundation. We shall find his life consistent with his words; we shall respect him even through our disagreement; and, remembering the Pauline counsel, "Covet ye the best gifts," we shall be less concerned to disagree with him than to discover the secret, and, so far as possible, to enlist the efficacy of that which still gives life to the Roman Church, and makes it one of the great moral factors of the twentieth century.

It is only when the Roman Catholic steps out from this natural zone of truth and safety, and especially when he trespasses upon his neighbours, that we feel bound to resist him as uncompromisingly as St. Augustine would have resisted the virtuous emperor, Marcus Aurelius. The Roman Catholic has truth to guide his life, but he must not insist on proclaiming that this is the only truth. By his sacraments he has access to Christ ; but he must suffer others to come in their own way to Christ, and forbid them not. He must not encourage, but discourage his priests, and the hierarchy who control those priests, when they claim divine sanction and historical justification for doctrines which, if they could again become almost universal, would plunge the world back into barbarism. Here, for instance, are a few sentences from the most learned of modern Roman Catholic encyclopædias, the writer being a professor of whom *The Catholic Encyclopædia* assures us that "Granderath's name will live for ever among scholars." This Jesuit professor writes : "The Church has not only the right and duty of punishing heretics, but even, by so doing, she earns the highest merit in the sphere of supernatural blessings." Henry VIII and Elizabeth, he goes on to say, were real persecutors ; but "quite different is the authoritative condemnation and punishment of heresy by the Catholic Church. She acts in virtue of a divine commission, and of a power she has received from God ; and that which she rejects as error by her definitive decree is really error."¹ University professors at Rome, four times at least in recent years, have publicly proclaimed the Pope's right of inflicting bodily punishment for disbelief upon all baptized Christians ; and three of these have explicitly asserted his right of life and death over them. No Pope has yet dared to explain away that time-honoured motto : "No salvation outside the Catholic Church."² Thousands of modern priests, no doubt, assure us quite sincerely that they hope good Protestants may be saved, and that their Church would never dream of applying coercion to Protestants-born ; but these modernists are here voicing their own private judgment, in flat contradiction with their great saints and scholars of the past. Fortunately for themselves, they do not know what their own hierarchy was teaching explicitly until quite recent times, and is still maintaining implicitly. These modernists do not, in their heart of hearts, value the doctrine of Infallibility so seriously as to realize the difficulty of reconciling that doctrine with any sort of toleration towards Christians outside the Roman communion. But the hierarchy, presumably, does value this Infallibilist doctrine quite seriously ; and certainly the world at large would value very seriously any attempt on the part of modern Rome to "earn the highest merit in the sphere of supernatural blessings," by inflicting fines, imprison-

¹ Herder's *Kirchenlexikon*, vol. v. (1888), col. 1448. I have printed the whole passage in my pamphlet, "Roman Catholic Truth."

² See the eighteenth of my *Mediæval Studies* ; "The Death Penalty for Heresy."

ment or death upon all baptized Christians who, having had the Roman claims fairly put before them, still pertinaciously reject those claims. It is high time, therefore, that the official Church should formulate clearly and unequivocally some doctrine which will explain how Infallibility can be reconciled with Christian charity, or even with the most ordinary human justice. So long as the Pope keeps silence on these points, while the laity and the inferior clergy are developing modernist ideas of tolerance on their own private judgment, this is an abdication of the very essence of Infallibility in any practical sense ; for he thus bows to meet popular judgment, and accepts tacitly (or, at last, may be, explicitly) that verdict which all reasonable people would have agreed upon even though no Pope had ever existed. Yet here, if anywhere, is the need of a definite and immediate voice from Infallibility, since nothing can come more clearly into the domain of faith and morals than that belief that we earn supernatural blessings by killing our neighbours in the name of Christ. Yet such was the frequently expressed conviction of the greatest Roman authorities, down to and far beyond the blessed Robert Bellarmine, one of the most learned scholars Rome ever produced, who has already passed into the first stage of canonization, and will doubtless be placed, as soon as the required interval of time has elapsed, side by side with St. Peter and St. Paul. When our King James I pleaded that mercy must at least be shown to those who had sucked in heresy with their mothers' milk, Bellarmine met him with arguments which, from the Roman point of view, are quite unanswerable ; if James was not in fact crushed, this was only because he was in the fortunate position of being free to deny Bellarmine's fundamental assumptions. There are two voices, therefore, in the modern Roman Church. The voice of the Roman Catholic whom we know personally is that of a Christian, and as a true Christian we respect him. The priest's voice, again, is generally consistent with Christian charity, and the priest also we respect for his Christian works. But far above these simple and respectable Christians stand doctors of the Church like Bellarmine, university professors like those four at Rome who have spoken out between 1875 and 1922, and Popes who seem tacitly to approve all that their predecessors said on this subject ; who can scarcely be ignorant, for instance, that Leo X condemned *ex cathedra* Luther's proposition that "the burning of heretics is against the will of the Holy Ghost,"¹ yet who show no sign whatever of correcting past proclamations of intolerance by some equally public and unambiguous declaration of tolerance. We must make allowance, of course, for the difficult position of a modern Pope ; and, while we exonerate him personally for not attempting what may well seem impossible, it is very important to trace the currents by which the Roman Church, which he represents, has drifted into this

¹ In the bull *Exurge Domine*. The *ex cathedra* character of this bull is pointed out by the great canon lawyer, J. F. v. Schulte, "Die Macht der römischen Päpste," p. 27.

dilemma. Why must she now either disavow her own past, or renounce, if only silently, all pretence of directing the human conscience on one of the most important questions of faith or morals which has ever emerged in the history of thought ?

The answer, I believe, is very simple. The dualism which we have noted in the modern Roman Church is a chronic, if not an essential, feature of that institution. From the first moment in history at which we can properly speak of a Roman Catholic Church, as distinguished from that far more Catholic Church of the earlier days when East and West still formed one communion, there were two different religions in that Church. Western civilization in the Middle Ages was a synthesis of ancient society with that of the barbarian conquerors. The two elements coalesced as best they could ; the higher elements came more and more to the fore, as they always will in such a struggle, but at the expense of much compromise with the lower elements. Christian missionaries converted pagan populations ; but Christianity, in the process, absorbed a great deal of paganism. While we give every credit to the mediæval Church for what it did a thousand years ago, we must not allow modern religion to be bound by the terms of peace with Paganism which Roman religion was tempted, or perhaps compelled, to make in those distant days of protracted struggle and incomplete victory. We must hold ourselves free to follow each fresh indication of truth that God gives us through history, through science, through the unforeseen mazes of social development. The Roman hierarchy, mainly by its own choice, has renounced this liberty. In Roman Church law, from its beginning to the present day, Esau struggles with Isaac ; the son of the bondmaid with the son of the free woman ; and he that is born after the flesh too often persecutes him that is born after the spirit.

The most interesting and instructive example, perhaps, of the compromise between Christian and barbarian elements in mediæval Catholicism is in its doctrine of heaven and hell. Men were awakened to face the deepest problems of life and death ; but they did so partly at the cost of a crude eschatology ; the gold had to be hardened with heavy alloy to stand the wear and tear of currency among these rough multitudes. Christ's words were set in the most glaring contrasts of light and shade ; the exigencies of controversy compelled eminent thinkers to define beyond their natural inclinations, if not beyond all reason ; and Christian philosophy thus gave a permanent sanction to popular ideas. In thought, as in territorial conquest, we are constantly driven forward by the necessity, real or fancied, of keeping that which we possess already ; Newman's *Apologia* shows us how he was driven to Rome because the only other alternative seemed unthinkable ; and St. Augustine, long before Newman, believed in hell because he seemed unable otherwise to retain his belief in heaven.¹ Similar necessities drove Augustine to lay the crudest emphasis upon baptism. Tertullian

¹ *De Civ. Dei*, lib. xxi, c. 24.

and Gregory of Nazianzus had here been mercifully latitudinarian ; to Tertullian, the unbaptized child of Christian parents is an " innocent." ¹ Augustine, a man far more kindly by nature, was far less pitiful here in logic. All unbaptized must needs be in hell ; there can be no intermediate place for them between hell and heaven ; heaven is unthinkable ; so to hell they must necessarily go, and in hell there must be punishment, *poena*. Of what exact degree, he will not venture to specify ; in one passage of striking mercy compared with the rest he refuses to assert that it would have been better for such children never to have been born ; he will not here define either way. ² But St. Fulgentius shortly after him, speaking as representative of the 466 bishops of Africa, has no doubt that the Catholic faith compels us to assume these unbaptized children of Christian parents to be in actual torment of fire. ³ St. Gregory the Great, and even Anselm, followed the Augustinian doctrine. The first who dared to plead for greater mercy was the quasi-heretical Abelard ; and Abelard's merciful teaching was carried still farther by Thomas Aquinas. From that time, most of the great schoolmen admitted that unbaptized children might enjoy some sort of natural happiness in their own milder hell, their *Limbus Infantium*. But, when the Reformation had made this a very burning question again, then the more learned scholars of the Roman Church went back to something like Augustine's harsh doctrine. And, if orthodoxy took this gloomy view even of the children of pious parents, we need not wonder that pessimism should have prevailed with regard to mankind in general. Yet, even when we are thus prepared for it, we must shudder here at the inky blackness of mediæval despair. Aquinas, with characteristic good sense, will only commit himself to a general comparison ; he reckons the saved as " few " [*aliquos*], and the damned as " very many " [*plurimos*]. ⁴ The calculations of other orthodox teachers range from one saved soul in a thousand to one in more than a hundred thousand. ⁵ Moreover, while the more cautious judgments of men like Aquinas were studied by comparatively few scholars even at the universities, these more lurid calculations were spread broadcast by popular preachers. The man who damned more than 100,000 souls for every one that is saved was Berthold of Regensburg, perhaps the greatest preacher of the whole Middle Ages, to whom Roger Bacon has paid a special tribute of admiration. And here is Berthold's estimate of the fate awaiting this overwhelming majority of mankind. " If thy whole body were of red-hot iron, and the whole world, from earth to heaven, one vast fire, and thou in the midst,

¹ *De Bapt.* c. 18.

² *Serm.* No. 294, § 3.

³ *De Fide ad Petrum*, cc. 26, 27, 44 ; see Bellarmine's summary of this whole controversy in his *De Amissione Gratiæ*, lib. vi. I have translated this at some length in a recent pamphlet—*Infant Damnation in the Middle Ages*. (Simpkin Marshall and Co.)

⁴ *Sum. Theol.*, 1a, q. xxiii., art. 7.

⁵ I give full references and quotations in *Five Centuries of Religion*, vol. i, pp. 446-7.

that is how a man is in hell, but that he is an hundred-fold worse." These tortures (adds Berthold) will be multiplied a millionfold again when men are restored to their bodies at the Day of Judgment; "they will endure as many thousand years . . . as the number of all the hairs that have grown on all the men and beasts that have lived since God first made Adam; and then, after all those years, the pains will only be at their beginning."¹

Who, it may be asked, took these things in earnest? It must be answered that a large number of pious folk took them very much in earnest, just as, at a later date, they took the similar horrors which we wrongly associate with Calvin's name, though these have mostly good mediæval pedigrees. The majority, as contemporary preachers assure us, thought little of these things in their lifetime, but believed and trembled, and felt the question very practical on their death-bed. Popular theology emphasized the hazards of the last moment no less sternly than the horrors which lay beyond those hazards. Christ was by this time the Stern Judge—*districtus iudex*—and the real intercessor was the Virgin Mary. However evil a man's life had been, by her favour he might pass into heaven; it is scarcely possible to exaggerate the crude literalness with which this doctrine was preached. Again, however pure his life had been, to die in the wrong faith would damn him; if he had deliberately ceased to enlist the Virgin's good offices, or repudiated the Pope's authority, there was no hope for him. These ideas, growing up in popular theology, had become the science of the schools; and, when the human mind began to advance one step farther, a great rent came between the newer thought and the older orthodoxy. In the thirteenth century, as a modern Roman Catholic philosopher points out, men believed themselves to have reached an equilibrium in thought, so that (he adds) "their extraordinary optimism led them to believe that they had arrived at a state close to perfection."² The scholastic philosophers systematized the traditions into which they had been born with such industry and genius, with logic, so irresistible when once their premisses have been granted, that they might well have seemed divine to all men who accepted those premisses, and who, in fact, would have been burned for rejecting them. For that was one of the most definite triumphs of scholasticism, the legalization and regularization of religious manslaughter. Until the end of the twelfth century, heretics had frequently been killed, but generally by a sort of lynch law. In most districts they were extremely unpopular; and, though priests or bishops sometimes had them executed more or less formally, it was generally enough to stir up the people against them. But the orthodox thirteenth century, with its belief in its own perfection, was necessarily driven much farther than this. Dissent increased in proportion as official religion was stiffened and formulated; there were now whole dissenting popula-

¹ *Predigten*, ed. Pfeiffer, vol. i, p. 127.

² M. de Wulf, *Philosophy and Civilization in the Middle Ages*, 1922, pp. 18, 268.

tions, as in Southern France and Northern Italy ; orthodoxy was theoretically perfect, yet in practice heresy was growing like a snowball ; something must be done. That *something*, to all who accepted the orthodox premisses, took a form which was obvious and inevitable. Men, at the best, have only a minor chance of escaping hell ; they have no chance whatever, unless they die in the orthodox faith. Every heretic is not only a brand for the burning, but a traitor and a poisoner ; he may take thousands down to hell with himself. As the great preacher Etienne de Bourbon puts it, wine turns easily to vinegar, but no human power can turn vinegar back to wine : a good Catholic may easily be turned to heresy, but not recalled. And the still greater preacher, Berthold of Regensburg, " I myself, by God's grace, am as fast rooted in the Christian faith as any Christian man should rightly be ; yet, rather than dwell knowingly one brief fortnight in the same house with a heretic, I would dwell a whole year with five hundred devils." Philosophers like St. Thomas Aquinas, starting from these ideas, forge an unbreakable chain from heresy to the stake. No section of his great *Sum of all Theology* is more closely reasoned and more convincing than this.¹ Some allowance must be made, at first, for a man who has picked up heresy by mistake. But, when once he has had the Catholic case put fairly and fully before him (except in the few negligible cases of mental deficiency), then he must accept it, or be burned as a pertinacious heretic ; for he is worse and more mischievous than the thieves, forgers, and murderers who are daily given over to execution. And Popes had already anticipated the saint in this conclusion. From 1231 to 1917—that is, for nearly seven centuries—it was an integral part of canon law that the pertinacious heretic should be burned. Moreover, any Pope, by a single stroke of the pen, could now restore that law : for the ancient penalty has never been expressly and formally abolished ; just one single sentence was inserted in the Revised Canon Law of 1917 to the effect that all punishments not expressly rehearsed in this present code are abolished. This reversal of previous papal decrees rested on the independent decision of Benedict XV ; if tomorrow the present Pope preferred to strike out that single sentence, he would thereby at once restore the old law, and any baptized Protestant might justly be compelled to choose between conversion and the stake.² What is even more painful, the most orthodox of Anglo-Catholics hold their lives, on papal theory, by the same frail tenure ; and if Pius XI had the will and the political power, my lord of Zanzibar must be converted, or burn.

This, then, is one of the many historical reasons which compel us to meet the official Roman Church, as at present constituted, with such words as St. Augustine would have used even to the most virtuous of Pagan emperors. Common justice demands that we should recognize the social good done by that Church ; we often

¹ 2^a, 2^m, Quaest. XI.

² For fuller details, see my *Mediæval Studies*, No. 18.

respect and admire Catholics as our fellow-citizens ; even towards those whom we find least convincing and sympathetic, we owe the same charity as we owe to a Bolshevik. But, when it comes to a more practical point than this, we must not let our sympathy with the individual blind us to the legal constitution of his community. Our charity to the individual Bolshevik leaves unimpaired our duty of resisting any attempt to unite the British state and the Bolshevik state under one single organization, with one code of laws, unless the Moscow Government could begin by expressly and finally abjuring certain articles of its present constitution. And, until the Roman Church can pronounce on this question of faith and morals, abjuring her claim of religious persecution at least as unequivocally as for seven centuries she asserted it, we have St. Augustine on our side, who felt that no advance was possible so long as men hankered back after an impossible past ; we have St. Paul's example, with his uncompromising protest against those who would destroy the liberty which we have in Christ Jesus : " To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour ! "

Dr. H. E. Fosdick wrote *Twelve Tests of Character* (Student Christian Movement, 5s.) for a Ladies' Journal, but most of the contents deal with men. It will be valued by all who desire to see how life can be well lived for the highest ends and how many have fulfilled their life-aim and others have failed. One sentence rings in our ears, and we ask is it as true of England as of the United States ? An Insurance Company compiled statistics of hundreds of young men who started life at the age of twenty-five. All had apparently the same chance. " Forty years afterwards, when these young men are sixty-five years old, they will on the average have fallen into the following classes : thirty-six dead, fifty-four financially dependent on family or charity, five barely able to earn their own living, four well to do, one rich." What a prospect for humanity, if this be universally or even partially true ! As we might expect, Dr. Fosdick illustrates his points with many anecdotes and quotations. He is never dull and is always invigorating. We hear a good deal of the outgrown philosophy of the late Samuel Smiles, but, with a fair acquaintance with the works of that much-derided inspirer of the youth of a past generation, we must in all fairness remark that we find it very hard to distinguish between the morals of Smiles and the teaching of Fosdick. After all human life can only be lived satisfactorily when a man makes the most of his opportunities for culture and self-improvement, and does not forget that there is such a thing as duty to God and man. We most heartily commend this thoughtful, readable and suggestive volume to all who esteem grit, perseverance and devotion to a high ideal. Our author never poses or preaches, and yet he comes home to the heart all the time.