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Charles Elsee

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## CHAPTER I

## ROMAN RELIGION IN THE THIRD CENTURY

THE period in which Neoplatonism takes its rise is essentially an age of transition. Lying as it does between the age of pure Græco-Roman paganism and the final triumph of Christianity, it is the period in which both of the opposing forces are making their preparations for the last great struggle. Paganism arms itself with the new philosophy and summons to its aid all the forces of Roman conservatism ; whilst Christianity, which has already in great measure secured its hold on the masses now attacks the highest circles of society, and endeavours to satisfy the craving for a true system of religious philosophy.

But before entering upon a detailed discussion of the religion of the Roman Empire in the third century<sup>1</sup>, we may by way of introduction take a passing glance at the picture which Lucian gives of

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter I have ventured for the sake of brevity to employ, without further qualification, the phrase "the third century." The period discussed would be more accurately described as the half century between the death of Commodus and the accession of Philippus Arabs ; commencing with the accession of Septimius Severus in 193 A.D., and extending to the death of Gordianus Junior in the year 244.

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Roman society and religion in the earlier part of the second. Shallow and heartless as he is, he nevertheless occupies a position of his own. When considering the evidence of the Christian apologists we are sometimes tempted to think that it must be prejudiced. The writers are carrying on a controversy against a system for which they feel that they have something better to substitute, and whose weak points they are bound, in spite of themselves, to exaggerate. They are liable to persecution, and therefore they may tend to overestimate their own simple faith and purity in contrast with the unbelief and licentiousness of the pagan world around them. But Lucian's position is different. He feels no fear of persecution. He has no special wish to regenerate or to reform mankind. He is a satirist, who writes in order to amuse himself by showing his utter contempt for the dead system that claimed to be the religion of the Empire.

This contempt is of course most openly expressed in such works as the *Jupiter Tragoedus* and the *Dialogues of the Gods*. But even if we leave these satirical works on one side, we still find in Lucian the clearest evidence of the low state into which religion had fallen. The memoir of *Alexander the False Prophet* and the account of the *Death of Peregrinus* are documents of considerable historical value; and in these we see, on the one hand the love of notoriety for which Peregrinus is ready to pay the price even of self-immolation; and, on the other, the blind credulity on which Alexander is able to work by the crudest of methods—a credulity which is not limited to the ignorant peasants of Asia Minor, but extends

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to the highest circles of Roman society. And in both works alike we see the love of sensation which has taken the place of the old Roman reverence for religion.

It is a matter for regret that Lucian has not given us a more complete account of the Christians of his day. The Church was passing through a great crisis: she had to face the question whether she was to remain a small society of religious devotees, or to go forward and take her place at the head of the great religions of the world. The Montanists preferred to remain where they were: the Church as a whole decided to go forward. At such a time the evidence of a writer like Lucian would have been of peculiar interest. But he passes over Christianity almost in silence. In his authentic works there are perhaps not more than two direct references to it. He tells us<sup>1</sup> that Alexander was wont, at the commencement of his "Mysteries" to cry "If any Atheist or Christian or Epicurean have come to spy upon the Ceremonies, let him flee." And it is to be remembered that Alexander would be no mean judge of the audience best suited for his purpose, so that his warning cry suggests that the Christians at this time were not all such simple and credulous folk as we are sometimes inclined to suppose. The other reference to Christianity occurs in the account of Peregrinus<sup>2</sup>. In his younger days this person had professed himself a Christian, and Lucian describes with mingled admiration and contempt the way in which his fellow-Christians tended him during an imprisonment for

<sup>1</sup> Lucian, *Alex.* 38.<sup>2</sup> Lucian, *De Morte Peregrini*, 12.

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the sake of the faith. This is the passage that gives us the clearest view of Lucian's own ideas upon the subject of Christianity. It is too much to say with Suidas that he is a blasphemer; for that charge can only be made good by reference to the pseudo-Lucianic *Philopatris*. In the account of Peregrinus<sup>1</sup>, the reference to "their crucified sophist" expresses rather pity for Christian credulity than downright contempt.

Such are the only direct references to Christianity which are to be found in Lucian's writings. It is clear that the subject had but little interest for him. It failed to excite his curiosity, and he practically ignores it.

With regard however to the condition of pagan thought in his day, Lucian is a most valuable witness. He is a man of considerable ability, at once thoroughly versatile and thoroughly sceptical, whilst his detached attitude lends especial weight to his opinions. The impression that we gain from a study of his writings is that there was no central force in paganism at this time: the old powers were found to be effete, or, at the best, to be spasmodic and local in their effects, and it seemed as though the whole system were crumbling away through sheer inability to survive.

But it must not be assumed that this would be equally true as a description of the religion of the Empire half a century later. In the period between Lucian and Plotinus there occurred an extraordinary revival or recrudescence of paganism. This was not merely a revival of external ceremonial, such as took

<sup>1</sup> *Ib.* 13.

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place in the time of Augustus. It was a genuine reformation, and it led to the growth of a more spiritual religion than the Roman world had ever known.

Of this revival of paganism no contemporary historian has left us a complete account. Indirect evidence however is not wanting. It is to be derived in abundance from sources at once numerous and varied. Much can be gathered from heathen writers, —from historians like Dio Cassius and Lampridius, from philosophers like Porphyry, and from sophists like Philostratus. Further contributions may be levied from Christian writers, from Clement of Alexandria and Origen, from Tertullian and Augustine. Nor must the evidence of inscriptions be neglected, which is invaluable, in this as in other cases, as affording contemporary corroboration to the statements of our other authorities.

The characteristic note of Roman society at this period was its cosmopolitanism. More than one generation had passed away since Juvenal uttered his lament<sup>1</sup> that the Orontes was emptying itself into the Tiber, and no attempt had been made to check the stream of foreign immigration. The aristocracy of the second century, liberal and progressive as it had been in matters of legislation, had been comparatively conservative in matters of religion. But the end of that century witnessed a change. The religious revival of this period affected all classes of pagan society, and the enthusiasm which it aroused was expended as much in the welcoming of new divinities as in the service of the old ones.

<sup>1</sup> Juv. 3. 62.

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The mere number of gods and goddesses who succeeded in obtaining recognition in the Empire at this time is astounding. It is impossible within the limits of the present chapter to do more than mention the principal classes into which they fall, and to touch upon one or two of the most important of the deities. The old Roman gods were still the official guardians of the state<sup>1</sup>. Their temples continued to stand in unimpaired splendour; they themselves still received sacrifices on all important occasions; and the office of Pontifex Maximus was still conferred upon each successive Emperor. The old colleges of priests, augurs, and the like, still existed, and membership in them was an honour that was much sought after; whilst the various guilds and societies for purposes of trade or of mutual benefit all had their religious aspects.

Of the cults which became prevalent after the fall of the Republic, the most widespread was the worship of the Emperor<sup>2</sup>. As a general rule the Romans did not attempt to impose the worship of their gods upon conquered peoples, but in this particular case they made an exception. The worship of the Emperor was enforced in order to add to the stability of the Empire, by causing men's religious emotions to be centred on the man in whom the executive power was vested, and thus to efface those rivalries between the various towns and tribes which tended to foster a local and national rather than an imperial patriotism. As each town was merged in the vast Empire, the

<sup>1</sup> J. Réville, *La Religion à Rome sous les Sévères*, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Réville, p. 30.

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importance of local politics and local religion tended to decline, and the place of the local deity was taken by the Genius of the Empire, worshipped in concrete form in the person of the Emperor.

To the student of Church History this cult is of the greatest importance. Its enforced observance formed, in times of persecution, the dividing line between Christian and Pagan, and refusal to sacrifice to the Emperor was regarded as a species of treason. For the purposes of this essay its chief importance lies in the fact that it is one of the signs that the general drift of paganism tended towards some form of monotheism. The office, rather than the person of the reigning Emperor, was the real object of worship : and the many inscriptions extant in honour of the Wisdom, Justice or Clemency of the Emperor show how completely he had come to be regarded as a secondary providence, visible, accessible, and on earth ; a divinity so near at hand that, according to Tertullian<sup>1</sup>, men were more ready to perjure themselves by all the gods than by the Genius of the Emperor. At the same time, the apotheosis of departed Emperors did not tend to raise the tone of heathenism. Rather it served to diminish the value of deity and to place an efficient weapon in the hands of those who wished to bring discredit upon paganism.

The reigning Emperor was usually worshipped, not in person, but through the medium of his *Genius*<sup>2</sup>. But the possession of a Genius was not the prerogative of the Emperor alone. There was a special Genius for every man, every family, every nation ; we even

<sup>1</sup> Tert. *Apol.* 28.<sup>2</sup> Réville, p. 39.

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find them assigned to the gods. Their worship was a survival from the primitive Roman religion which recognised a special deity for every single department of life: but the current ideas about the precise nature of Genii had been considerably modified by the Greek notions about *daemons*, and it would seem that in the third century there was a considerable variety in the opinions prevalent upon the subject. They were regarded, sometimes as immanent in the persons or things to which they were attached, sometimes as entirely external: some Genii were almost on a level with the gods, others again were but little higher in the scale of being than their charges. The Genius of each individual corresponds closely to the Christian conception of a guardian angel; as compared with the gods he resembles the family doctor, who watches over the wellbeing of his charges on all ordinary occasions, whilst they are the specialists, one or another of whom is summoned in cases of emergency.

Similar to the Genii were a number of personifications of abstract qualities to whom worship was offered. Such were *Honos*, *Spes*, *Libertas*, *Virtus*: the object worshipped being in each case the Genius of the quality named. How far these were mere abstractions, and to what extent they were regarded as actual deities, the worshipper himself would probably have found it hard to explain.

The belief in Genii was not merely a vulgar superstition. The philosophers recognised a world of spirits intermediate between gods and men: beings whom Celsus describes<sup>1</sup> as the proconsuls or satraps

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Orig. *c. Cels.* 8. 35.



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of the gods, and whom Plotinus defines<sup>1</sup> as eternal like the gods, but participating in the material world like men. There is also, in the writings of the Christian Fathers, ample evidence of a firm belief in angelic powers: and, more than this, the Fathers do not throw any doubt upon either the existence or the potency of the spirits worshipped by the pagans<sup>2</sup>. They differ from heathen writers only in maintaining that these particular spirits are invariably evil.

The foregoing deities, however orientalised their worship may have become, were at least Roman in origin. But the greater part of the conglomeration of creeds, which formed the religion of the Empire, was derived from foreign sources<sup>3</sup>. Egypt and Carthage, Phrygia and Syria, all sent their respective contingents to the Roman pantheon: even the wild German tribes were not unrepresented. It was the necessary result of the mixed character of the population. Eastern slaves carried with them superstitions from the East: merchants of Alexandria brought with them Egyptian gods as well as their wares; above all, the soldiers, recruited mainly from the frontiers of the Empire, carried their own deities and their own forms of worship wherever they went. Sooner or later the strange gods drifted to Rome, and, once planted, their worship was bound to spread. The mere novelty of these foreign cults made them objects of curiosity: the penal enactments, which still existed though never enforced, against those who encouraged strange rites, may have served to give

<sup>1</sup> Plot. *Enn.* 3. 5, 6.<sup>2</sup> Cf. Tert. *Apol.* 22.<sup>3</sup> Réville, p. 47.

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them the added attractiveness of forbidden fruit; whilst they received a further impetus from the fact that many of them possessed special orders of priests whose sole business lay in the propagation of their religion. But the true cause of their success lay in the inability of the old Roman religion to satisfy the spiritual longings of the people. The old worship had served so long as Rome was struggling for bare existence; but even before the beginning of the Empire there were signs of the prevalence of a profound sense of religious discontent. Something less barren, less utterly unspiritual, was required, and any cult that claimed to supply this need was sure to be welcomed.

Foremost among the Eastern divinities, which came crowding into all parts of the Empire, stands the Egyptian Isis. Temples and statues without number were erected in her honour: the Emperors themselves took part in her processions. She was originally the personification of the female element in nature, but as time went on she assumed the attributes of several Greek and Roman goddesses—Juno, Ceres, Proserpine and Venus—and became moreover the patroness of shipping and commerce. She possessed not only an elaborate priesthood, but a lower order of mendicant brethren; and the magnificent ritual in her temples, alike in the daily worship and on the occasion of great festivals, cannot but have had its effect on the popular mind.

The other chief Egyptian deities were Osiris, the dog-headed Anubis, and Serapis, who afterwards gained greater popularity even than Isis. In the