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St. Paul's Ideology for the Urbanized Roman Empire

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No one is likely to equal the sensation which Gibbon produced with the 15th and 16th chapters of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* where he viewed the rise of Christianity from the perspective of secular history. While he adhered on the surface to a pious, naive, and conventional veneration of the early church, at the same time he pierced the aura of holiness and taught his readers — in the name of philosophy — to understand religious movements realistically. It is unnecessary for us now to review the human causes which an 18th-century historian found for the success of Christianity. But the social sciences have progressed since Gibbon; and without committing ourselves to the more abstruse and schematic theories, we can apply some worthwhile insights to the data from ancient sources. In particular we can examine the growth of a new religion as an index of its ideological effectiveness within a certain environment.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, especially as promoted by St. Paul, reached large numbers of people who were alienated from the traditional form of Mediterranean civilization. The new movement was vigorous because it was organized on novel principles. The greatest leaders and many

members of it were bachelors, and each one was eligible for a particular function according to his ability, regardless of his background. The towns of the Roman empire were full of men ready for such a fellowship, but nobody before St. Paul had figured out what to say to them. Obsolescent though the old system was, it had escaped any concerted challenge. The dissenters were many but individual, until Paul's message roused them to organize.

Ancient communities, including city-states, were fundamentally ethnic, with hereditary membership. They consisted not of individuals but of families, and these were grouped into tribes. If they were at times replenished or augmented by new members from the outside, they would resort to some ritual or fiction to fit the outsiders into the kinship structure. The essential institutions were biologically self-perpetuating; so marriage could hardly be optional. A grown man in good standing was bound to settle down with a wife and raise children. Not to do so was as bad as ignoring a call to arms when an enemy attacked. But if God withheld children from a married couple, it was a most grievous frustration. A man might have recourse to polygamy in certain societies, or to adoption in others, or to divorce and remarriage; for a childless man was considered as unhappy as a cripple.

So widely prevalent and substantially uniform was this type of society that it must have had a decisive advantage over

any competing type in the early period of civilization. For one thing it succeeded in disciplining men as well as women to a life of steady, useful work instead of just gratifying their own needs or desires. The virtue of a society based upon the family made possible an expanded population and progressive development, but that very process introduced new conditions which in turn made men less amenable to family life. Many towns grew to the point that people felt they had practically reached their economic limit and were haunted by fears of impoverishment.

In the golden age of Greece it had already become usual in Athens for a man to postpone marriage until he was past thirty. Thus in the very years when the sexual motive would have most powerfully inclined men to marry, it was diverted; and although they married eventually, they did so because (as Socrates told his friend Crito) it was the custom of the community for a man to take a wife and procreate (*Crito*, 50d). In the following century we hear of a few bachelors living in retirement out of the public eye. One of them was the philosopher Plato, who asserted in his famous *Symposium* that men of creative intellect are public benefactors greater than anyone can be through bodily procreation (209c-e). However, any sort of contribution to the general welfare was on the decline. Citizen armies became practically obsolete in the same period when celibacy began to be an observed phenomenon. Both changes were aspects of individualism, not as an organized ideology but simply a withdrawal from traditional duties.

The Hellenistic age, from the fourth century B. C. on, was marked by an increase in the number of cities. Many of the old cities, however, were depleted as their people reproduced too meagerly, and the more ambitious or dissatisfied ones drifted off to places of opportunity in Egypt or Asia. Whereas Greek colonization until the fifth century B. C. had resulted from internal growth that approached the bursting point and the colonies had reconstituted the same civic and family life as the metropolis which had sent them out, the new Greek colonies of the Hellenistic period were, on the contrary, set up by foreign monarchs, and the settlers were men individually lured away or exiled from the dwindling cities of Greece. Old-fashioned civic institutions were founded somewhat artificially; and while the urban architecture was magnificent, it could not re-create the vital sense of a well-rooted, hereditary local community, so that a man would feel fully at home. It seemed easy to move casually from place to place in the οἰκουμένη, the whole civilized world. The result of such an environment, in biological terms, was that a considerable part of the adult population would not breed. They were like sociable animals or birds astray or estranged from their old home ground and reluctant to go through the mating and nesting ritual. A brief but eloquent document is the epitaph of an obscure man, written by an unknown Hellenistic poet and included in the Greek Anthology (7.309 Stadtmueller):

ἑξηκοντούτης Διονύσιος ἐνθάδε κεῖμαι Ταρσεύς, μὴ γήμας· αἴθε δὲ μηδ' ὁ πατήρ.

"Here I lie, Dionysius of Tarsus, sixty years old, having never married; I wish my father hadn't either." The point of the last phrase is clear: Dionysius wishes he

had never been born. The few words express distaste for life, ingratitude to parents for having given it, unwillingness to repeat the pattern on to a new generation. It is an interesting coincidence, if nothing more, that St. Paul came from the same city, and he had the genius to recognize that the secular trend away from marriage could not be reversed under any foreseeable circumstances, and the genius to turn celibacy to advantage as a new basis for social organization.

In this he was wiser than the Roman emperors. Rome before the Christian era had ceased in actuality to be an old-fashioned state in which the citizens were mustered for war and marriage was universal. Unlike Greek states Rome continued to thrive by drawing in plenty of soldiers and new citizens from other peoples. The turnover replenished even the upper classes with capable, well acculturated young men whose fathers were prosperous although rustic or undistinguished and whose grandfathers were unknown. Nevertheless, as so many prominent families decayed at the same time, it was felt to be an intolerable, inexcusable loss, due to their own frivolity. Neither conservatives nor reformers would give up the idea that hereditary status is essential. When Cicero, who was himself a *novus homo,* wrote a philosophic treatise *On Laws,* he provided that "the censors shall classify the offspring of knights and infantry, and shall stop men from being bachelors" (*caelibes esse prohibento,* 3.3[7]). Under the emperor Augustus specific laws were passed to penalize bachelors, widowers, and even married men and women who were childless, while those with three or more children received certain privileges. The

historian Tacitus observed, "Marrying and raising children did not thereby become more common, as the unencumbered state was far too advantageous. But the number of those in trouble with the law did grow" (*Ann.,* 3.25). The harassment was sporadic, annoying but ineffective. Many influential violators of the laws obtained from the emperor an exemption known as *ius trium liberorum* (Pliny, *Epist.,* 10.2). The laws amounted to an official gesture of protest against social changes which could not be undone.

The antique sacramental basis of Roman marriage, the ritual called *confarreatio,* had in fact all but disappeared. The office of *flamen Dialis,* the priest who performed the ceremony along with his wife, went vacant when an incumbent died, and could not be filled at all except by waiving some of the rules. Out of a huge citizen body scarcely one couple was eligible for this priesthood, since of course both the husband and the wife had to be born of a sacramental marriage and the husband had to be a patrician. The priest was restricted to the city of Rome (Tacitus, *Ann.,* 3.71, 4.16), while by now Roman citizenship, including the Roman laws of marriage, was widespread among the privileged classes throughout the empire. The upshot was that for practically all Romans matrimony was simply contractual in form, not sacramental, and could even be quite informal. The motive for it was assumed to be purely ethical and voluntary.

But the rulers of Rome would not face the corollary that people had the option of abstaining from marriage. This was first asserted cogently by St. Paul. The relevant texts in the New Testament are familiar; I have only to point out the sociological

significance of them. Although Paul was a Jew and a Roman citizen, he got out from under the weight of both heritages which insisted upon the continuity of endless generations. He escaped not only in actuality (which was easy enough in the Hellenistic diaspora), but also in principle, because he was emancipated by the startling prophecy that the last days of the world were coming soon (1 Thess. 4:15-17; 1 Cor. 15:51-54). Too much exegesis has gone into showing how this could have been a reasonable expectation in the first century of the Christian era. I suggest that the terms of any prophecy are rather to be explained by what it gives people the nerve to do. The function of an oracular message, unlike sound, level-headed advice, is to release a man from the inhibitions of conventional morality and common sense when these only embarrass his unconquerable yearnings. The prophecy of the end of the world deserves to be judged pragmatically valid, inasmuch as nothing less would have sufficed to drive home the point that the biological chain of reproduction is not paramount, nor must the present and future remain like the past.

Consider the famous antithesis in 1 Corinthians 7:32-33: "The bachelor worries about the Lord's concerns, how he shall please the Lord. But the married man worries about worldly concerns, how he shall please his wife." In sociological terms, the bachelor can give his full time to the organization — as Paul added, ἀπερισπάστως ("without distraction"), 7:35. It was a stroke of administrative genius, even if he did not foresee its long-term value. For it established what an unfriendly commentator nowadays would call a *hard core*, working ceaselessly to convert and indoc-

trinate, while resisting all adversaries. The ancient Christian authors spoke of the *militia Christi* ("Christ's army"). The implied comparison to the army of Caesar was apt and altogether to the credit of the Christians. In the citizen armies of previous times the exercise of the rights of citizenship was temporarily in abeyance; and when Rome changed over to a professional army, a soldier had to abstain from marriage and other aspects of citizenship until he was discharged. To be sure, he could cohabit with women; but it was *contubernium*, not *matrimonium* — the women were there on sufferance and could not make extraneous demands, as though they were wives. The experience of Roman commanders had proved that men immersed in family life were undependable in the shifting exigencies of long military service. The imperial legions, with their limitations, were more or less equal to the task of defending vast stretches of frontier. But the army of Christ was not only as well disciplined but also more successful in its territory, continually enlisting more recruits. The Pauline doctrine was the first statement that whether you are single or married is your own business, except that you can serve the cause better if single. Plenty of converts of both kinds came in, and of both sexes too. Paul's teaching on divorce was consistent: he would not dissolve a marriage unless an unbelieving spouse objected to living with the other party who had joined the Christian brotherhood.

The most permanently useful innovation of Paul's organizing genius was leadership through God-given ability, not through a man's background (1 Cor. 12:8; Gal. 1:1, etc.). Civilized society was being

forced in that direction anyhow, but reluctantly, as it had an age-old preference for hereditary authority. Time and again it was clear that a distinguished man would have undistinguished sons. Yet a system based on merit seemed to rely too much upon fallible opinions; so the ancient world, by and large, accepted it only for temporary offices. An unimaginative compromise between traditional and progressive methods enjoyed a vogue in Roman times: a man in power would choose an able successor and by Roman law adopt him as a son. It was still a sort of inheritance; the adopted son, in order to be chosen, was virtually bound to have an unprogressive outlook and be insensitive to opportunities for new development along lines that had not occurred to his predecessor.

St. Paul, on the other hand, set the church on the path of continuous expansion and change, by his example as well as his doctrine. His zeal was expressed in arguments and achievements alike, which compelled the original Christians of Palestine to ratify his apostolate to the Jews of the diaspora and their Gentile sympathizers — he himself being from a Hellenistic Jewish settlement and not one of Jesus' own disciples. But he knew his way around Jerusalem, where a good fundraiser is always respected. Let's not underestimate his sagacity in detecting the weaknesses of his rivals and opponents so that he could disarm them. Thanks to him, a pattern was initiated which continually brought new leaders to the fore, men converted in their adult years after a profound struggle within each individual soul. They were marginal members of the church as it had been up to their time. The church welcomed them although it had some doubts about what they were up to; Paul too had gone through this. The off-center leaders were eager to take the Gospel into other social strata and other countries as yet untouched or indifferent, and they figured out how to adapt or interpret it so as to make headway. For centuries thereafter the church had plenty of leaders without breeding them, just as it drew in enough money without seeking an income from investments.

Through St. Paul the Christian church accomplished a revolution or what we might call in journalistic jargon *a major breakthrough in social engineering.* He discovered how to capitalize on the widespread aversion to marriage and how to attract capable men, with no prejudice for or against them on account of their origin. So the church freed itself from the outworn fabric of ancient civilization, which the world around it still clung to; and the church outlived that civilization. But it still kept the Old Testament and so could resume the primeval principles of an hereditary, ethnic community in later times, whenever they were needed.

The divine truths which a theologian recognizes are seen by a sociologist as ideological necessities for a community in a certain predicament, but are no less sublime for all that.

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