Comparison of Greek and Latin Christianity

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COMPARISON OF GREEK AND LATIN CHRISTIANITY

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by

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I Introductory.

The importance of such a study as this proposes to be lies in the fact that Greek and Latin Christianity of the past are vitally connected with Christian thought of to-day. Perhaps no people have influenced the world in so many different ways as have the Greeks and Latins. In law and language, in music and art, in thought and literature, the Greeks and the Latins have guided the world. Their civilization is at the foundation of all civilization. So in Christian thought they have taken the lead. Their seal is stamped upon modern theology. Each has contributed something and their views permeate modern Christian thought. The task, then, shall be to compare Greek Christianity with Latin Christianity, to show the origin and development of each and to trace results. We shall thus be enabled to see how national characteristics influence Christian thought as well as to determine the Greek and Latin element in our own theology.

II Development:

1 General Remarks.

The early church fathers were not given to the use of the pen. Their observations, their church practices, their thoughts were not recorded on paper. How the church grew and progressed is not told. They were so filled with energy and zeal for the rapid advancement of that in their charge that they thought not of the future and so neglected to write. Therefore much that we would like to know of the early growth of Christianity has been lost. From the fall of Jerusalem until the middle of the second century very little is known of the doings of the church. Darkness shrouds it all. Those living then might have left us much but they
left us next to nothing. A few fragments of writing have been preserved of that early day. These, while throwing little light upon church discipline, yet show how each nation put its peculiarities of inherited culture into Christian thought and doctrine. An epistle to a certain Diognetus shows Hellenic culture and almost outlines what Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Athanasius afterwards worked out. Justin shows how the Greeks connected their philosophy to Christianity making their philosophers be for them what the prophets were for the Hebrews. There are still other indications that in this early day people were putting into Christianity their peculiar views and states of mind -- or in other words Christianity was conforming itself to what it found. Christianity was not so much destructive as it was constructive. This great fact explains the existence of what may be termed a Greek and a Latin Christianity. On this account there arose a division between the eastern and western branches of the church resulting in the Roman Catholic church and the Greek church.

2. Comparison of Greek and Latin National Peculiarities.

Let us now compare the national peculiarities and characteristics of the Greeks and the Latins.

The Greek was an investigator. He thought and thought deeply and enjoyed thinking. He wanted to know and to understand which made him a philosopher. The Greeks congregated in the market places and discussed and debated, told and heard new things. They could think in the abstract. They were looking for the truth and were not disinclined to give up a theory when it was proven to be wrong and accept another which bore with it a greater weight of evidence. Some claim on this account that they were unstable and vacillating, with no depth of purpose or mind; that
they believed with the last man who spoke and were convinced of the
truth of anything by the flow of eloquence. However true this may
have been of some of the common people, it surely was not true of
the representative men who were beyond a doubt sincere and thought-
ful in their philosophy. They were also a beauty loving, an ar-
tistic people. This is shown in their literature and in their art.
They thought great thoughts, dreamed great dreams, loved great beau-
ty. Moreover they were a passionate, sensuous people. There were
possibilities within them of being vicious and low. They loved vice
until it became hideous when their taste for the beautiful caused
them to renounce it. Their religion was polytheistic. It seems
that a people's temperament is always expressed in their religion.
In the religion of the Greeks their philosophy, their love for the
beautiful, their sensuous tendency are evinced and expressed.
Many of their myths about their gods show great philosophy, they
all show the touch of an artist and too many of them show the vi-
cious tendency. In Greece the individual was paramount. He had
a right to his views and his opinions. There was breadth and
latitude given to him in thought and action. He had room in which
to develop his intellectual and artistic abilities.

Now the Latin presented a sharp contrast to the Greek.
One was the antithesis of the other. They were different in thought
and in life. The Latin was extremely practical. He could not
carry on any long line of deep speculation, neither could he phil-
osophize or theorize but the paramount thing with him was action,
practice and fact. He was incapable of abstract thought; every-
thing must be concrete. He was not a scholar but a man of business;
he was not an artist but a warrior; he was not a philosopher but a
man of common sense. The Romans led the world in government and law. They looked upon the state as an institution to be supported and maintained whatever the cost. Therefore the individual suffered. All surrendered their rights to the right of the state. Rule, power, authority and law were words which held their attention, their respect and their reverence. They were conquerors and empire builders. Their religion was simple and their family life pure. They had the Lares or household gods which they worshiped and the worship was such that it tended to bind the members of the family close together and the family in turn to the state. So their religion, it is seen, conformed to their passion of rule, law and order. In the days when Christianity began to spread it is true that Greek thought and culture had permeated Roman society and had somewhat changed the old Latin character but enough of it remained inherent to influence Christian thought.

Such in brief are the national characteristics into which Christianity was to weave itself and out of which great results were to grow. It was impossible for the Latin to make the same kind of a Christian as the Greek. Christianity did not take away man's individuality, it glorified it just as an electric light does not change the color of the bulb surrounding it but only makes the color more manifest.

3. - Comparison of Greek and Latin Christianity as represented (a) in thought and (b) in practice.

Clement and his pupil and follower, Origen, were the fathers of Greek theology. They lived in Alexandria. Alexandria was a cultured and cosmopolitan city. All nationalities were represented but the Greeks were in the majority. Here it
soon became necessary to found schools of theology because of heresies arising from the mingling of Jewish prophecy with heathen philosophy and because of the cosmopolitan nature of the city. Thought was free and skepticism was in the air. Alexandria justly deserved her name 'the mother of heresies.' No doubt the intellectual atmosphere of this place had much to do with the way in which Clement and Origen developed their theology. It must be remembered, also, that Christian thought had not as yet crystallized into a system and therefore the Greek mind was untrammeled and free to adjust Christianity in its own grooves.

Clement's mind was occupied with great thoughts. He did not stoop to quibble over small matters. He looked at Christianity in the manner of a philosopher. First of all he associated Greek philosophy with Hebrew prophecy and thought one as divine and as truly inspired as the other. Christ was the culmination of all philosophy just as he was the culmination of all prophecy. He was the leader into truth and larger life. Plato had said "We must wait for one be it God or God inspired who will teach us our religious duties and take away the darkness from our eyes." Naturally Christ's miracles did not appeal to Clement nearly so much as Christ's life and teachings. One writer says "The idea of life as an education under the superintendence of a divine instructor who is God himself indwelling in the world constitutes the central truth in Clement's theology." Clement was never troubled with such questions as the nature and origin of sin. He seemingly knew nothing of Adam's fall. His idea of Christ's redemptive work was, therefore, characteristic. Christ came not to adjust or restore a broken relationship but to make manifest a relationship always existing. Punishment was not to appease the wrath of God; it was
entirely corrective and remedial. Of the Trinity Clement said nothing. He either avoided it or thought it of no consequence.

Origen, following Clement, espoused his theology and added much of value especially in regard to the Trinity. Origen was without doubt the greater man of the two. He was more versatile and withal deeply spiritual. In his discussion of the Trinity he battles against tritheism. He holds to the eternal sonship of Christ and regards the Holy Spirit as a personal heavenly agent distinct from the Father and the Son. Like Clement he believed in or at least hoped for the final restoration of all men. The fallen spirits, Satan included, might repent and be saved. This doctrine, however, he only advanced in private for, said he, it would free the common people from a wholesome fear which kept them from sinning.

Thus we are led to see that the Greeks were characterized in Christian thought by liberal views, wide culture and a daring freedom in speculation all tempered by a deep spirituality. Later Greek theology as represented by Athanasius, Basil and the two Gregories did not depart widely from that laid down by Clement and Origen.

Let us turn now to Latin thought as represented in the theology of Augustine. We at once find that we are in an entirely different atmosphere. We turn from wide and liberal thought to narrow and bigoted dogmatism. We turn from freedom of speculation to systemized, regulated, cut and dried theology. The main characteristic of Augustine's theology is the corrupt nature of man brought about by Adam's sin. Humanity is considered as a compact mass, a collective body and altogether saturated with the sin of
Adam. He believed in infant baptism for the remission of sins inasmuch as the child was full of sin brought about by the universal fall of man. By Adam's transgression man forfeited his freedom of will and can will only to do evil. If man wills and does good it is the work of grace. Augustine can be said to be the father of predestination. From the foundation of the world some were elected to be saved and some to be damned. Christ came and died for the elect alone. Those not of the elect have no part nor hope in salvation. Christ in some way rescued the elect from the hands of Satan. There was a solidarity in Adam but not in Christ.

This in brief is the theology of Augustine and the Latin way of thinking. In contrast with Greek thought it will be seen that whereas the Greeks placed to their thought no bounds nor limits but allowed their minds to wander at will, the Latins always tended toward legality and system. The Greek was the abstract, the Latin was the concrete; the Greek was the large and beautiful, soul inspiring and grand, the Latin the narrow, circumscribed and angular; the Greek was the spiritual, the Latin the legal; the Greek was the dreamer, the Latin awake to reality. It will be seen that these diverging tendencies of thought were along the line of the national peculiarities of each and could not have been otherwise. A sentence from Fisher is suggestive: - "Among the Latins there were no such heated disputes on abstruse points of metaphysical divinity as one might have heard in the fourth and fifth centuries, even from tradesmen and mechanics, in the Greek speaking cities of the East. This difference was mainly owing to the native diversity of the Greek and Roman character."

In practice also the two tendencies are seen and soon
cause a division of the church into the Eastern and the Western or
the Greek and the Latin. It will be to our purpose to note how
this came about. The growth of ecclesiasticism was a natural growth
and developed in the East as well as in the West up to a certain
point. Gradually the Bishops of the larger cities came to be recog-
nized as having authority and to them were referred all matters of
importance. In a short time there were only two chief bishops, the
Bishop of Rome and the Bishop at Constantinople. Between these two
there was great rivalry. In the East, however, the matter had gone
as far as possible. The Eastern people were not ready to make one
supreme or infallible. They were not of the right temperament
to give virtue or power to a mere office. They were too wide in
thought, too independent and not enough inclined to look for the
miraculous. They exalted Christ and could think of him as being
present and ruling in a spiritual sense. For them it was not nec-
essary for Christ to have a concrete representative on earth. As
will be seen it was the old difference of thought, the abstract and
the concrete. Naturally the Bishop of Rome kept gaining in eminence,
respect and influence. He was soon called Pope. The legal minded
Latin must have a supreme head for the church. The Greeks were
ever less inclined to exalt the Bishop of Rome than they were to
exalt the Bishop of Constantinople. So thus early in Church his-
tory the inevitable breach began to widen and the increasing years
only caused a greater divergence. In the West much virtue was
given to the forms and the ceremonies. The service of the priests,
the saying of mass, the granting of indulgences and the pardon of
sins had paramount importance. In the East, however, greater promi-
nence was given to preaching. A good thought clothed in rhetorical
language was received with applause. The topics of interest were also different. An Eastern Christian and a Western Christian could not have interested each other at all in conversing along religious lines. The Greek would talk fluently of the mystical union of Christ with believers and the Latin with equal fluency would discourse upon original sin and the law of grace. Great controversies assisted the process of division. It was as impossible then as it is now to force large thoughts into small minds or to compel great minds to content themselves with small thoughts. People will not think alike. Especially is this true of people of different national prejudices. The Latins looked upon the church as a visible organization. The Greeks looked upon it as an invisible bond of union.

The thing, however, which actually caused the rupture, the bone which caused the fight, the straw which broke the camel's back was a controversy in regard to the use of images and the celibacy of the clergy. The love of the Latins for the concrete led them to make images and pictures before which they offered their prayers and bowed in worship. The image of Christ upon the cross was in all the churches and wherever met the people offered their prayers before it. There were even pictures of God in some of the churches and other equally absurd things. Against all this the Greek mind rebelled. A council at Constantinople passed a canon permitting the marriage of the priests and declaring against the use of images. Early in the eleventh century the Bishop of Constantinople and the Pope of Rome mutually excommunicated each other and the Greek and Latin churches permanently divided.

It is needful for us, also, to take another view of
their divergence in Christian practice by considering the rise and development of Monasticism. As one might suspect Monasticism arose in the East. Who else but the philosophical Greek would desire to separate himself from all worldly influences in an attempt at more free and peaceful thought? Socrates had taught that all limitations to the soul, all boundaries to the mind of man were placed by the body, the carnal flesh in which the mind was encased. The desire to draw nearer God, to know more, to increase and augment the powers of the spirit, to let the soul be free, to reduce the hold of the flesh was the cause of Monasticism. It was Greek through and through. So it spread and flourished in the East. The Latins were slow to adopt the system. It appealed little to them at first. But finally its possibilities for organized work dawned upon them. The practical side of it was forced upon their attention and Monasticism gradually began to grow in the West. But in the West it was used for a mighty purpose, withal though in later days it became a tool of Satan. This purpose was to spread the Gospel. In the East, however, it was merely an extravagance, an insane thought of a mind too much given to thinking.

Thus in thought and practice we find that the Greeks and the Latins developed two distinct types of Christianity. Like water and oil the two nations would not mix but Christianity was soluble in each.

4.- The influence of Greek and Latin Christianity upon Christian thought of to-day.

It is no hard matter to see the trend of Christian thought and practice in this day. Our Christianity came directly through the Latins and of course has much of the Latin tendency in it yet. But our theology more and more resembles Greek theology.
and our Christian practice is drifting always toward Grecian simplicity and informality. The question may well be put where is the Greek church to-day and well may it be answered that it has not grown and progressed like its Latin sister. But the Greek spirit, the Greek liberality of thought and spirituality of conception could not be confined by boundaries of any kind. It was universal. The real Greek church is living wherever deep and broad thought and consecrated spirituality is encouraged. It is alive in England and America at the present time.

(a) Notice the liberality in thought. Never before has the search light of all kinds of criticism been turned upon the Bible as in these later times. New views have been advanced. The age much resembles the philosophical age of the Greeks.

(b) Notice the simplicity of worship and church government. The Sunday service in most churches has all the simplicity of the early church. Church machinery is discon-tenanced. The Greeks were always friends of the laity. Ecclesiasticism was not their stronghold. As an usual thing the layman of to-day enjoys perfect liberty and every privilege. The Methodist Church, the most closely organized church among protestants, is continually having trouble from the frequent appeals made by the laymen for liberty and privileges of representation. This shows present day tendency.

(c) Notice the exaltation of the love and mercy of God. The Greeks never held the idea as did the Romans that so much good work on our part entitled us to so much mercy from God. That was the outcome of Latin legality. At present we hold, it is true, to human duty but not so much as to make it a thing of barter for God's mercies. We exalt as did the Greeks the love and mercy of God.
(d) Notice, also, that our conception of God is spiritual. We owe much to the metaphysical thought of the Greeks. The Latin tendency was to think of God as a great being set on a throne away off somewhere. They would make Him concrete. The Greeks thought of God always as a spirit, His presence was with them. We, who think that He knows the thoughts of men and hears the least whisper of a prayer, have the Greek idea which undoubtedly is the correct one.

So leaving Augustine we are drifting back to Origen. Clement and Origen representing Grecian Christianity are as prophets of the Christianity of to-day. The second century and the nineteenth century have joined hands. To the Alexandrian thinkers is due the possibility of an universal religion. But drifting toward Grecian thought there is danger of going to the extreme. Somewhere between the broad liberaliy of Clement and Origen and the narrow churchiness of Augustine is to be found the happy mean after which we seek. Along with the preponderance of Greek thought which we have we must still hold to a little of the Latin conservatism and legality. To Clement and Origen give their due; to Augustine, also, should credit be given. Above all we must bow with reverence before the spirit of Christ which actuated the three.

Conclusion.

A study such as we have tried to make presents one great fact which in conclusion must be noticed. This fact is the power of Christianity to adapt itself to men of different nations, to all kinds and conditions of men, to liberal thinkers and narrow thinkers, to men of intellectual gifts and men of simple minds, to the one on the throne and the one in the ditch. And in thus adapting
it does not become degenerated but exalts and glorifies that
to which it adapts itself. It was not contaminated by Greek phil-
osophy but gives to Greek philosophy a new purpose and impetus.
Roman legality did not contaminate it whatever may be said of the
Catholic Church. Those who believe that "through the ages one
eternal purpose runs" can see that Latin legality was made to serve
a grand purpose by guarding Christianity from the inroads of agnos-
tic heresies and superstitions. To the new conditions now existing
in the world Christianity is adapting itself. "The gates of hell
shall not prevail against it."

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