

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Copyright 2003 John W. Robbins Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692

Email: Jrob1517@aol.com

Website: www.trinityfoundation.org

Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

Christmas

Alexander Smith (1862)

This is Christmas Day, the anniversary of the world's greatest event. To one day all the early world looked forward; to the same day the later world looks back. That day holds time together. Isaiah, standing on the peaks of prophecy, looked across ruined empires and the desolations of many centuries, and saw on the horizon the new star arise, and was glad. On this night eighteen hundred years ago, Jove was discrowned, the Pagan Heaven emptied of its divinities, and Olympus left to the solitude of its snows. On this night, so many hundred years bygone, the despairing voice was heard shrieking on the Aegean, "Pan is dead! Great Pan is dead!" On this night, according to the fine reverence of the poets, all things that blast and blight are powerless, disarmed by sweet influences.

The flight of the Pagan mythology before the new faith has been a favorite subject with the poets; and it has been my custom for many seasons to read Milton's "Hymn to the Nativity" on the evening of Christmas Day. The bass of Heaven's deep organ seems to blow in the lines, and slowly and with many echoes the strain melts into silence. To my ear the lines sound like the full-voiced choir and the rolling organ of a cathedral, when the afternoon light streaming through the painted windows fills the place with solemn colours and masses of gorgeous gloom. Tonight I shall float my lonely hours away on music:

"The oracles are dumb,

No voice or hideous hum

Runs through the arched roof in words
deceiving:

Apollo from his shrine

Can no more divine

With hollow shriek the steep of Delphos
leaving.

No nightly trace or breathed spell

Inspires the pale-eyed priest from the
prophetic cell.

"The lonely mountains o'er,

And the resounding shore,

A voice of weeping heard and loud
lament:

From haunting spring, and dale

Edged with poplars pale,

The parting genius is with sighing sent:

With flower-enwoven tresses torn

The nymphs in twilight shades of tangled
thickets mourn.

"Peor and Baalim

Forsake their temples dim
 With that twice-batter'd god of Palestine,
 And mooned Ashtaroth
 Heaven's queen and mother both,
 Now sits not girt with tapers' holy shine!
 The Lybic Hammon shrinks his horn,
 In vain the Tyrian maids their wounded
 Thammuz mourn.
 "And sullen Moloch, fled,
 Hath left in shadows dread
 His burning idol, all of blackest hue:
 In vain with cymbals' ring
 They call the grisly king
 In dismal dance about the furnace blue;
 The brutish gods of Nile as fast
 Isis, and Orus, and the dog Anubis haste.
 "He feels from Juda's land
 The dreaded Infant's hand
 The rays of Bethlehem blind his dusky
 eye:
 Nor all the gods beside
 Dare longer there abide,
 Not Typhone huge ending in snaky twine.
 Our Babe to show his Godhead true
 Can in His swaddling bands control the
 damned crew."

Strangely enough, the next noblest dirge for the unrealmed divinities which I can call to remembrance, and at the same time the most eloquent celebration of the new power and prophecy of its triumph, has been uttered by Shelley, who cannot in any sense be termed a Christian poet. It is one of the choruses in "Hellas," and perhaps had he lived longer amongst us, it would have been the prelude to higher strains. Of this I am certain, that before his death the mind of that brilliant genius was rapidly changing – that for him the cross was gathering attractions round it – that the wall which he complained had been built up between his heart and his intellect was being broken down, and that rays of a strange splendour were already streaming upon him through the interstices. What a contrast between the darkened glory of "Queen Mab" – of which in after-life he was ashamed, both as a literary work and as an expression of opinion – and the intense, clear, lyrical light of this triumphant poem!

"A power from the unknown God,
 A Promethean conqueror came:
 Like a triumphal path he trod
 The thorns of death and shame.
 A mortal shape to him
 Was like the vapour dim
 Which the orient planet animates with
 light.
 Hell, sin, and slavery came,
 Like bloodhounds mild and tame,
 Nor prev'd until their lord had taken flight.
 The moon of Mahomet
 Arose, and it shall set;
 While blazon'd, as on Heaven's immortal
 noon,
 The Cross leads generations on.
 "Swift as the radiant shapes of sleep,

These verses, as if loath to die, linger with a certain persistence in mind and ear. This is the "mighty line" which critics talk about! And just as in an infant's face you may discern the rudiments of the future man, so in the glorious hymn may be traced the more majestic lineaments of the "Paradise Lost."

From one whose dreams are paradise,
 Fly, when the fond wretch wakes to weep,
 And day peers forth with her blank eyes:
 So fleet, so faint, so fair,
 The powers of Earth and air
 Fled from the folding star of Bethlehem.
 Apollo, Pan, and Love,
 And even Olympian Jove,
 Grew weak, for killing Truth had glared
 on them.
 Our hills, and seas, and streams,
 Dispeopled of their dreams,
 Their waters turn'd to blood, their dew to
 tears,
 Wail'd for the golden years."

For my own part, I cannot read these lines without emotion – not so much for their beauty as for the change in the writer's mind which they suggest. The self-sacrifice which lies at the centre of Christianity should have touched this man more deeply than almost any other. That it was beginning to touch and mould him, I verily believe. He died and made *that* sign. Of what music did that storm in Spezia Bay rob the world!

"The Cross leads generations on." Believing as I do that my own personal decease is not more certain than that our religion will subdue the world, I own that it is with a somewhat saddened heart that I pass my thoughts around the globe, and consider how distant is yet that triumph. There are the realms on which the Crescent beams, the monstrous many-headed gods of India, the Chinaman's heathenism, the African's devil-rites. These are, to a large extent, principalities and powers of darkness with which our religion has never been brought into collision, save at trivial and far-separated points, and in these cases the attack has never been made in strength. But what of our own Europe – the home of

philosophy, of poetry, and painting? Europe, which has produced Greece, and Rome, and England's centuries of glory; which has been illumined by the fires of martyrdom; which has heard a Luther preach; which has listened to Dante's "mystic unfathomable song"; to which Milton has opened the door of Heaven – what of it? And what, too, of that younger America, starting in its career with all our good things, and enfranchised of many of our evils? Did not the December sun now shining look down on thousands slaughtered at Fredericksburg, in a most mad, most incomprehensible quarrel? And is not the public air which European nations breathe at this moment, as it has been for several years back, charged with thunder? Despots are plotting, ships are building, man's ingenuity is bent, as it never was bent before, on the invention and improvement of instruments of death; Europe is bristling with five millions of bayonets: and this is the condition of a world for which the Son of God died eighteen hundred and sixty-two years ago!

There is no mystery of Providence so inscrutable as this; and yet, is not the very sense of its mournfulness a proof that the spirit of Christianity is living in the minds of men? For, of a verity, military glory is becoming in our best thoughts a bloody rag, and conquest the first in the catalogue of mighty crimes, and a throned tyrant, with armies, and treasures, and the cheers of millions rising up like a cloud of incense around him, but a mark for the thunderbolt of Almighty God – in reality poorer than Lazarus stretched at the gate of Dives. Besides, all these things are getting themselves to some extent mitigated. Florence Nightingale – for the first time in the history of the world – walks through the Scutari hospitals, and "poor, noble, wounded, and sick men," to use her Majesty's tender phrases, kiss her shadow as it falls on them. The Emperor Napoleon does not make war to employ his armies, or to consolidate his power; he does so for the sake of an "idea" more or less generous and disinterested. The soul of mankind would revolt at the blunt, naked truth; and the taciturn emperor knows this, as he knows most things. This imperial hypocrisy, like every other hypocrisy, is a homage which vice pays to virtue. There cannot be a doubt that when the political crimes of kings and governments, the sores that fester in the heart of

society, and all "the burden of the unintelligible world," weigh heaviest on the mind, we have to thank Christianity for it. That pure light makes visible the darkness. The Sermon on the Mount makes the morality of the nations ghastly. The Divine love makes human hate stand out in dark relief.

This sadness, in the essence of it nobler than any joy, is the heritage of the Christian. An ancient Roman could not have felt so. Everything runs on smoothly enough so long as Jove wields the thunder. But Venus, Mars, and Minerva are far behind us now; the Cross is before us; and self-denial and sorrow for sin, and the remembrance of the poor, and the cleansing of our own hearts, are duties incumbent upon every one of us. If the Christian is less happy than the Pagan, and at times I think he is so, it arises from the reproach of the Christian's unreached ideal, and from the stings of his finer and more scrupulous conscience. His whole moral organization is finer, and he must pay the noble penalty of finer organizations.