

François-René de Chateaubriand

Translation

**GENIUS OF CHRISTIANITY OR THE  
SPIRIT AND BEAUTY OF THE  
CHRISTIAN RELIGION**

Translated by Charles I. White  
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## Book III

### HISTORY

#### Chapter I

### OF CHRISTIANITY AS IT RELATES TO THE MANNER OF WRITING HISTORY

If Christianity has so greatly conduced to the advancement of philosophical ideas, it must of course be favorable to the genius of history, which is but a branch of moral and political philosophy. Whoever rejects the sublime notions of nature and her Author which religion inspires willfully deprives himself of an abundant source of images and ideas.

He, in fact, will be most intimately acquainted with man who has long meditated on the designs of Providence; he will be best able to fathom human wisdom who has penetrated into the depths of the divine intelligence. The designs of kings, the vices of cities the unjust and crooked measures of civil policy, the restlessness of the heart from the secret working of the passions, those long agitations with which nations are at times seized, those chances of power from the kind, to the subject, from the noble to the plebeian, from the rich to the poor,—all these subjects will be inexplicable to you if you have not, as it were, attended the council of the Most High, and considered the spirit of strength, of prudence, of weakness, or of error, which he dispenses to the nations whose salvation or whose ruin he decrees.

Eternity, therefore, should be the groundwork of the history of time, every thing being referred to God as the universal cause. You may extol, as much as you please, the writer who, penetrating into the secrets of the human heart, deduces the most important events from the most trivial sources: a God watching over the kingdoms of the earth; impiety, that is to say, the absence of moral virtues becoming the immediate cause of the calamities of nations; this, in our opinion, is an historical foundation far more noble and far more solid than the other.

The French revolution will afford an illustration of this remark. Were they any ordinary causes, we would ask which in the course of a few years perverted all our affections and banished from among us that simplicity and greatness peculiar to the heart of man? The spirit of God having withdrawn from the people, no force was left except that of original sin, which resumed its empire as in the days of Cain and his race. Whoever would have followed the dictates of reason felt a certain incapability of good; whoever extended a pacific hand beheld that hand suddenly withered; the bloody flag waved over the ramparts of every city; war was declared against all nations; then were fulfilled the words of the prophet: “They shall cast out the bones of the kings of Judah, and the bones of the princes thereof, and the bones of the priests, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, out of their graves.”<sup>1</sup> Streams of blood flowed in all quarters:

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culpable in regard to the past, fanaticism swept away the old institutions; culpable in regard to the future, it founded nothing new for posterity; the tombs of our ancestors and the rising generation were alike profaned. In that line of, life which was transmitted to us by our ancestors, and which it is our duty to prolong, beyond our own existence, each confined his views to the present, and, consecrating himself to his own corruption as to an abominable worship, lived as if nothing had preceded and as if nothing was to follow him.

But, while this spirit of destruction was internally devouring France, a spirit of salvation was protecting her against external injury. She had neither prudence nor greatness except on her frontiers; within all was devastation without all was triumph. The country no longer resided in the homes of her children; it exists in a camp on the Rhine as in the time of the Merovingian dynasty. You would have imagined that you beheld the Jewish nation expelled from the land of Gessen, and subduing the barbarous nations in the desert.

Such a combination of things has no natural principle in human events. The religious writer alone can here discover the profound counsels of the Most High. Had the combined powers attempted only to put an end to the excesses of Robespierre, and then left France entire to repair her calamities and her errors, they had, perhaps, gained their point. But God beheld the iniquity of courts, and said to the foreign Soldier, "I will break the sword in thy hand, and thou shall not destroy the people of St. Louis."

Thus religion seems to lead to the explanation of the most incomprehensible facts in history. There is, moreover, in the name of God something sublime, which imparts to the style a certain wonderful power, so that the most religious writer is almost invariably the most eloquent. Without religion, it is possible to have wit, but very difficult to possess genius. Add to this, you perceive in the Christian historian the tone, we had almost said the taste, of an honest man, which renders you disposed to give implicit credit to all that he relates. On the contrary, you mistrust the sophistical historian; for, as he almost always represents society in an unfavorable light, you are inclined to look upon him as a deceiver.

## Chapter II

### OF THE GENERAL CAUSES WHICH HAVE PREVENTED MODERN WRITERS FROM SUCCEEDING IN HISTORY

#### *First Cause—The Beauties of the Ancient Subjects.*

A powerful objection here occurs: If Christianity is favorable to the genius of history, how happens it that modern writers are in general inferior to those of antiquity in this profound and important department of literature?

In the first place, the fact assumed in this objection is not strictly true, since one of the most beautiful historical monuments that exist among men—the *Discourse on Universal History*—was dictated by the spirit of Christianity. But, deferring for a moment our considerations on that work, let us inquire into the causes of our inferiority in history, if that inferiority actually exists. These causes are, in our opinion, of two kinds; some belonging to *history*, and others to the *historian*.

Ancient history presents a picture which has no parallel in modern times. The Greeks were particularly remarkable for the Greatness of men—the Romans for the greatness of things. Rome and Athens, setting out from a state of nature and attaining the highest degree of civilization, traversed the entire scale of the virtues and the vices, of ignorance and the arts. You observe the growth of man and of his intellect. At first a child, then the sport of all the passions in youth, strong and wise in maturer years, infirm and corrupt in his old age. The state follows the man, passing from the royal or paternal government to the republican constitution, and then sinking with decrepitude into despotism.

Though modern nations exhibit, as we shall presently have occasion to observe, some interesting epochs, some celebrated reigns, some brilliant portraits, some illustrious actions, yet it must be confessed that they do not furnish the historian with that combination of things, that sublimity of lessons, which make ancient history a complete whole and a finished picture. They did not begin with the first step. They did not form themselves by degrees. They were suddenly transported from the recesses of forests and the savage state into the midst of cities and civilization. They are but young branches engrafted upon an aged trunk. Thus their origin is involved in darkness. You perceive there at the same time the greatest virtues and the greatest vices; gross ignorance and gleams of light; vague notions of justice and of government; a confused medley in manners and in language. These nations have not passed either through that state in which good manners make the laws, or that in which good laws make the manners.

These nations having established themselves upon the ruins of the ancient world, another phenomenon strikes the historian. Every thing suddenly assumes a regular appearance, a uniform aspect. He discovers monarchies on every side, while the petty republics intermixed with them are either converted principalities or absorbed by the neighboring kingdoms. At the same time, the arts and sciences are developed; but in silence and obscurity. They separate themselves, as it were, from the destinies of man.

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They cease to influence the fate of empires. Confined to a small class of citizens, they become rather an object of luxury and curiosity than an additional element of national life.

Thus every thing is consolidated at once. A religious and political balance keeps all the different parts of Europe upon a level. None of them is now liable to destruction. The most insignificant modern state may boast of a duration equal to that of the empire of a Cyrus or a Caesar. Christianity is the sheet-anchor which has fixed so many floating nations and kept them in port; but their ruin is almost certain if they come to break the common chain by which religion holds them together.

Now, by diffusing over nations that uniformity, and, if we may so express it, that monotony of manners which the laws produced in ancient Egypt, and which they still occasion in India and China, Christianity has of course rendered the colors of history less vivid. Those general virtues of all ages and of all countries, such as humanity, modesty, charity, which it has substituted instead of the doubtful political virtues, have also less scope on the theatre of the world. As they are genuine virtues, they shun the glare of light and the clamor of fame. Among the modern nations there is a certain silence in affairs which disconcerts the historian. Far be it from us to complain of this! The moral man among us is far superior to the moral man of the ancients. Our reason is not perverted by an abominable religion. We adore no monsters. Obscenity walks not forth with unblushing face among Christians. We have neither gladiators nor slaves. It is not very long since the sight of blood thrilled us with horror. Ah! Let us not envy the Romans their Tacitus if it be necessary to purchase him with a Tiberius!

### Chapter III

## THE SAME SUBJECT, CONTINUED

### *Second Cause—The Ancients Exhausted all the Historical Styles except the Christian Style*

**T**o this first cause of the inferiority of our historians, arising from the very nature of the subjects, must be added a second, originating in the manner in which the ancients wrote history. They exhausted all its colors, and if Christianity had not furnished a new order of reflections and ideas, the doors of history would have been forever closed against the moderns.

Young and brilliant in the time of Herodotus, she held forth to the view of Greece natural pictures of the birth of society and the primitive manners of men. The historian of those days enjoyed the incalculable advantage of writing the annals of fable while writing those of truth. He needed but to paint, and not to reflect. The vices and virtues of nations were as yet only in their poetical age.

Other times brought with them other manners. Thucydides was deprived of those admirable delineations of the cradle of the world; but he entered a hitherto uncultivated field of history. He traced with energy and gravity the evils occasioned by political dissensions, leaving to posterity examples by which it never profits.

Xenophon, in his turn, discovered a new path. Without becoming dull, or sacrificing any portion of Attic elegance, he took a pious view of the human heart, and became the father of moral history.

Placed on a more extensive state, and in the only country where two species of eloquence—that of the bar and that of politics—flourished, Livy transfused them both into his worlds. He was the orator, as Herodotus was the poet, of history.

Finally, the corruption of mankind—the execrable reigns of a Tiberius and a Nero—gave birth to the last species of history, the philosophical. The causes of events—which Herodotus had sought in the gods, Thucydides in political constitutions, Xenophon in morals, and Livy in the concurrence of all these different circumstances combined—Tacitus discovered in the depravity of the human heart.

We would not, however, be understood to assert that these great historians shine exclusively in the characters which we have taken the liberty to assign to them; but it appears to us that these are the distinctive features of their works. Between these primitive characters of history there are tints which were seized by historians of an inferior rank. Thus, Polybius takes his place between Thucydides the politician and Xenophon the philosophic soldier. Sallust partakes at once of the respective manners of Tacitus and Livy; but the former surpasses him in energy of thought, and the latter in beauty of narration. Suetonius wrote biography without reflection and without reserve. Plutarch added morality to it. Velleius Paterculus learned to generalize without distorting history. Florus produced a philosophical epitome of it. Lastly, Diodorus Siculus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Cornelius Nepos, Quintus Curtius, Aurelius Victor,

Ammianus Marcellinus, Justin, Eutropius, and others whom we forbear to mention or whose names have slipped our memory, conducted history down to the period when it fell into the hands of Christian authors, —a period when a total change took place in the minds and in the manners of men.

Between truths and illusions the case is widely different. The latter are inexhaustible, and the circle of the former is confined. Poetry is ever new, and this it is that constitutes its charm in the eyes of men. But in morals and in history you are limited to the narrow sphere of truth. Do what you will, you cannot avoid the repetition of known observations. What historical field, then, was left for the moderns which had not been previously explored? They could do no more than imitate; and in these imitations several causes prevented their attaining to the elevation of their originals. As poetry, the origin of the Catti, the Tencteri, the Mattiaci, in the depths of the Hercynian Forest, displayed nothing of that brilliant Olympus, of those cities reared by the sounds of the lyre, and of the whole enchanted infancy of the Hellenes and of the Pelasgi, planted on the banks of the Achelous and the Eurotas. In politics, the feudal system forbade important lessons. As to eloquence, there was only that of the pulpit. As to philosophy, the nations were not yet sufficiently miserable or sufficiently corrupt for it to begin to make its appearance.

Imitations were, however, produced with more or less success. Bentivoglio in Italy copied Livy, and would be eloquent were he not affected. Davila, Guicciardini, and Fra Paolo, had more simplicity, and Mariana, in Spain, displayed considerable talents; but this fiery Jesuit disgraced a department of literature whose highest merit is impartiality.<sup>1</sup> Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon, have more or less followed Sallust or Tacitus; but the latter historian has produced two writers not inferior to himself, —Machiavel and, Montesquieu.

Tacitus, however, should not be chosen for a model without great caution. The adoption of Livy is liable to fewer inconveniences. The eloquence of the former is too peculiarly his own to be attempted by any one who is not possessed of his genius. Tacitus, Machiavel, and Montesquieu, have formed a dangerous school, by introducing those ambitious expressions, those dry phrases, those abrupt turns, which, under the

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<sup>1</sup> Mariana, a native of Spain, flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Our author very probably borrowed his opinion of Mariana's historical merit from the Abbé Mably's work on the manner of writing history. Mably, however, admits that his knowledge of Mariana was not derived from his own personal reading. What rendered Mariana obnoxious to the French was not the defect of his style as the historian of Spain, but his fierce denunciation of tyranny and fearless advocacy of democratic principles in his work, *De Rege et Regis institutione*. To men who, like Chateaubriand, had just emerged from the horrors of the French revolution, an author like Mariana might well have appeared fiery, though teaching the simple truth. The character of doctrines depends much upon the times in which they appear. The fact is, the Jesuits have had a difficult position amid the inconsistencies of the human mind. When they have vindicated the rights of authority in defending the fundamental principles of order and law, they have been condemned as the friends of tyranny; and when, pursuing the same line of truth, they have denounced despotism and advocated the rights of the people, they have been held up as the enemies of social order! Thus, when John the Baptist came, neither eating bread nor drinking wine, the Jews declared that he had a devil; and when Christ appeared, eating and drinking, the same Jews pronounced him, a glutton. The Jesuits, therefore, will always answer the world as he answered the Jews: "And wisdom is justified by all her children." Luke vii. T.



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appearance of brevity, border on obscurity and bad taste.

Let us, then, leave, this manner to those immortal geniuses who, from different causes, have created a peculiar style; a style which they alone can support, and which it is dangerous to imitate. Be it remembered that the writers of the most brilliant eras of literature were strangers to that studied conciseness of ideas and language. The ideas of Livy and Bossuet are copious, and strictly concatenated; with them, every word arises out of that which goes before it, and gives birth to the word which is to follow. Great rivers, if we may be allowed to use this simile, flow not at intervals in a right line; their currents, slowly rolling from their distant sources, are continually increasing; they take a large and circuitous sweep in the plains, embracing cities and forests with their mighty arms, and discharging into the ocean streams of water capable of filling its deepest caverns.



## Chapter IV

### OF THE REASONS WHY THE FRENCH HAVE NO HISTORICAL WORKS, BUT ONLY MEMOIRS

**H**ere is another question, which relates exclusively to the French: —Why have we nothing but memoirs instead of history, and why are almost all of these memoirs excellent?

The Frenchman, in all ages, even while yet a barbarian, was vain, thoughtless, and sociable. He reflects little upon objects in general, but he is an inquisitive observer of details, and his eye is quick, penetrating, and accurate. He must always be upon the stage himself, and even in the quality of an historian he cannot make up his mind to keep entirely out of sight. Memoirs leave him at full liberty to follow the bent of his genius. There, without quitting the theatre, he introduces his observations, which are always intelligent and sometimes profound. He is fond of saying, *I was there, and the king said to me—The prince informed me—I gave my advice, I foresaw the benefit or the mischief.* In this manner his vanity gratifies itself; he makes a display of his wit to the reader; and his solicitude to gain credit for ingenious ideas often leads him to think well. In this kind of history, moreover, he is not obliged to renounce his passions, from which he finds it difficult to part. He is an enthusiast in this or that cause, in behalf of this or that person; and, sometimes insulting the adverse party, at others jeering his own, he at once indulges his revenge and gives vent to his spleen.

From the Sire de Joinville to the Cardinal de Retz, from the memoirs of the time of the League to those of the time of the Fronde, this character is everywhere conspicuous; it betrays itself even in the grave Sully. But when you would transfer to history this art of details, the whole scene is changed; for weak tints are lost in large pictures, like slight undulations on the surface of the ocean. Compelled in this case to generalize our observations, we fall into the spirit of system. Add to this that, being prevented from speaking openly of ourselves, we appear behind all the characters of our history. In the narrative we become jejune, prolix, and circumstantial, because we chat much better than we relate; in general reflections we are trivial or vulgar, because we are intimately acquainted with him only with whom we associate.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the private life of the French is, perhaps, another circumstance unfavorable to the genius of history. Tranquility of mind is necessary for him who would write well upon men. Now our *litterati*, living in general without families, or at least out of their families, their passions restless and their days miserably devoted to the gratification of vanity, acquire habits which are directly at variance with the gravity of history. This

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<sup>1</sup> We know that there are exceptions, and that some French writers have distinguished themselves as historians; we shall presently do justice to their merit. But it seems to us that it would be unfair to found an objection upon this fact, which could not affect the truth of our general assertion. Otherwise, there would be no truth in criticism. General theories partake not of the nature of man, in which the purest truth contains always some mixture of error. Truth in man is like a triangle, which can have but one right angle, as if nature had wished to impress an image of our defective virtue upon the very science which alone we consider certain.

practice of confining our whole existence within a certain circle must, of course shorten our sight and contract our ideas. Too attentive to a nature that is but the creature of compact, genuine nature eludes our observation; we scarcely ever reason upon it, except by an extraordinary effort, and, as it were, by accident; and when we happen to be right, it is the result of conjecture more than of judgment.

We may therefore safely conclude that to the revolution in human affairs to different order of things and of times, to the difficulty of striking out new tracks in morals, in politics, and in philosophy, we must ascribe the inferiority of the moderns in history; and as to the French, if they have in general good memoirs only, it is in their peculiar character that we must seek the reason of this singularity.

By some, it has been referred to political causes; if, say they, history has not risen among us to the standard of antiquity, it is because her independent genius has always been fettered. This assertion seems to be flatly contradicted by facts. In no age, in no country, under no form of government, was greater freedom of thought enjoyed than in France during the time of the monarchy. Some acts of oppression, some severe or unjust proceedings of the censors of the press, may, no doubt, be adduced; but would they counterbalance the numberless contrary examples? Turn to our memoirs, and in every page of them you will find the severest and often the most offensive truths leveled against kings, priests, and nobles. The Frenchman has never bowed with abject servility to the yoke; he has always indemnified himself by the independence of his opinion for the constraint imposed upon him by monarchical forms. The *Tales* of Rabelais, the treatise on *Voluntary Slavery* by La Beotie, the *Essays* of Montaigne, the *Morals* of Charron, the *Republics* of Bodin, all the works in favor of the League, the treatise in which Mariana even goes so far as to defend regicide, are sufficient proofs that the privilege of unlimited discussion belong to other times as well as to the present. If the citizen rather than the subject constituted the historian, how happens it that Tacitus, Livy himself, and among us the Bishop of Meaux and Montesquieu, gave their severe lessons under the most absolute masters that ever reigned? Never did they imagine, while censuring dishonorable actions and praising the virtuous, that the liberty of writing consisted in abusing governments and shaking the foundations of duty. Had they made so pernicious a use of their talents, Augustus, Trajan, and Louis would most assuredly have compelled them to be silent; but is not this kind of dependence a benefit rather than an evil? When Voltaire submitted to a lawful censure, he gave us *Charles XII* and the *Age of Louis XIV*; when he broke through all restraint, he produced only the *Essay on Manners*. There are truths which prove the source of the greatest disorders, because they inflame all the passions; and yet, unless a just authority closes our lips, it is precisely these that we take the highest pleasure in revealing, because they gratify, at one and the same time, the malignity of our hearts corrupted by the fall, and our primitive propensity to the truth.

## Chapter V

### EXCELLENCE OF MODERN HISTORY

**I**t is now but just to consider the reverse of the picture, and to show that modern history is still capable of being highly interesting, if treated by some skilful hand. The establishment of the Franks in Gaul, Charlemagne, the crusades, chivalry, a battle of Bouvines, the last branch of an imperial family perishing at Naples on a scaffold, a battle of Lepanto, a Henry IV in France, a Charles I in England, present at least memorable epochs singular manners, celebrated events tragic catastrophes. But the grand point to be seized in modern history is the chance produced by Christianity in social order. By erecting morals on a new basis, it has modified the character of nations, and created in Europe a race of men totally different from the ancients in opinions, government, customs, manners, arts, and sciences.

And what characteristic traits do the new nations exhibit! Here are the Germans, a people among whom the radical corruption of the higher classes has never extended its influence to the lower; where the indifference of the former toward their country has never prevented the latter from being sincerely attached to it; a people among whom the spirit of revolt and of fidelity, of slavery and of independence, has never changed since the days of Tacitus.

There you behold the laborious Batavians, whose information comes from their good sense, their ingenuity from industry, their virtues from coldness, and their passions from reason.

Italy, with her hundred princes and magnificent recollections, forms a strong contrast to obscure and republican Switzerland.

Spain, cut off from other nations still presents a more original character to the historian. The kind of stagnation of manners in which she lies will, perhaps, one day prove of advantage to her, and, when all the other European nations will have been exhausted by corruption, she alone will be able to appear with lustre upon the stage of the world, because there the ground-work of morals will still subsist.

A mixture of German and French blood, the English nation displays in every thing, its double origin. Its Government, a compound of royalty and aristocracy; its religion, less pompous than the Catholic, but more brilliant than the Lutheran; its soldiers, at once robust and active; its literature and its arts; finally, the language, the very features and persons, of the English, partake of the two sources from which they are descended. With German simplicity, sedateness, good sense, and deliberation, they combine the fire, impetuosity, levity, vivacity, and elegance of mind, which distinguish the French.

The English have public spirit, and we have national honor; our good qualities are rather the gifts of divine favor than the effects of a political education. Like the demigods, we are more nearly allied to heaven than to earth.

The French, the eldest sons of antiquity, are Romans in genius and Greeks in character. Restless and fickle in prosperity, constant and invincible in adversity; formed for all the arts; polished even to excess during the tranquility of the state; rude and savage in

political commotions; tossed, like ships without ballast, by the vehemence of all the passions, —one moment in the skies, the next in the abyss; enthusiasts alike in good and in evil, doing the former without expecting thanks and the latter without feeling remorse; remembering neither their crimes nor their virtues; pusillanimously attached to life in time of peace, prodigal of their blood in battle; vain, satirical, ambitious fond at once of old fashions and of innovations; despising all mankind except themselves; individually the most amiable, collectively the most disagreeable of men; charming in their own country, insupportable abroad; alternately more gentle, more innocent than the lamb submitting to the knife, and more merciless, more ferocious than the tiger springing, upon his prey:—such were the Athenians of old, and such are the French of the present day.

Having thus balanced the advantages and the disadvantages of modern history and of ancient history, it is time to remind the reader that, if the historians of antiquity are, in general, superior to ours, this truth is nevertheless liable to great exceptions. We shall now proceed to show that, thanks to the spirit of Christianity, French genius has almost attained the same perfection in this noble department of literature as in its other branches.

## VOLTAIRE CONSIDERED AS AN HISTORIAN

“Voltaire,” says Montesquieu, “will never compose a good history; he is like the monks, who write not for the sake of the subject of which they treat, but for the glory of their order. Voltaire writes for his convent.”

This opinion, applied to the *Age of Louis XIV* and the *History of Charles XII*, is far too severe, but perfectly accurate in regard to the *Essay on the Manners of Nations*.<sup>1</sup> Two authors, in particular, were formidable to those who combated Christianity, Pascal, and Bossuet. These, then, it was necessary to attack, and to endeavor, indirectly, to destroy their authority.

Hence the edition of Pascal with notes, and the *Essay*, which was held up in opposition to the *Discourse on Universal History*. But never did the anti-religious party, in other respects too successful, commit a grosser error or afford Christianity a greater triumph. It is scarcely conceivable how Voltaire, with so much taste and discrimination, should not have understood the danger of a conflict, hand to hand, with Bossuet and Pascal. The observation which applies to all his poetical works holds good in regard to his historical productions: while he declaims against religion, his finest pages are inspired by Christianity. Witness the following portrait of St. Louis: —

“Louis IX.,” says he, “appeared to be a prince destined to reform Europe, if Europe could have been reformed, to polish France and render her triumphant, and to be in all things a pattern to mankind. His piety, which was that of an anchorite, took from him none of the virtues of a king. A wise economy lessened not his liberality. He knew how to combine profound policy with strict justice, and perhaps he is the only monarch who deserves that encomium. Prudent and firm in council, intrepid in battle without being rash, compassionate as though he had all his life been unfortunate, it is not given to man to carry virtue, to a higher pitch... Seized with the plague before Tunis, he was, by his own command, laid upon ashes, and expired, at the age of fifty-five years, with all the piety of a monk and all the fortitude of a truly great man.”

Was it the design of Voltaire, in this portrait, which is so elegantly drawn, to depreciate his hero by introducing an anchorite? It can scarcely be denied that such was his intention; but how egregious was the mistake! It is precisely the contrast between the religious and the military virtues, between Christian humility and royal grandeur that constitutes the pathos and the beauty of this picture.

Christianity necessarily heightens the effect of historical delineations, by making the characters start, as it were, from the canvas, and laying the warm colors of the passions on a cold and tranquil ground. To renounce its grave morality would be to reject the only new method of eloquence which the ancients have left us. We have no doubt that

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<sup>1</sup> An unguarded word in Voltaire's *Correspondence* shows what was his design, and what the historical truth he aimed at, in writing the *Essay*. “I have made a burlesque of the whole world: it is a good hit.”—*Corresp. Gen.*, tome v. p. 94.

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Voltaire, had he been religious, would have excelled in history. He wants nothing but seriousness; and notwithstanding his imperfections, he is perhaps, with the exception of Bossuet, the best historian that France has produced.

## Chapter VII

### PHILIP DE COMMINES AND ROLLIN

A Christian eminently possesses the qualities which one of the ancients, requires in an historian—"a quick perception of the things of the world, and a pleasing way of expressing himself."

As a biographer, Philip de Commynes bears an extraordinary resemblance to Plutarch; his simplicity is even more unaffected than that of the ancient writer, who frequently has no other merit than that of being simple. Plutarch loves to run after ideas, and in many of his artless turns he is but a very agreeable impostor.

It must indeed be admitted that he is better informed than Commynes; and yet this old French gentleman, with the gospel and his confidence in the hermits has, notwithstanding his ignorance, left memoirs replete with instruction. Among the ancients, erudition was indispensably necessary for a writer; among us, an illiterate Christian, whose only study has been the love of God, has often produced an admirable volume. For this reason it is that St. Paul observes, "Though I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and have not charity, I am nothing."

Rollin is the Fénelon of history, and, like the latter, has embellished Egypt and Greece. The first volumes of the *Ancient History* are fraught with the spirit of antiquity: the narrative of this virtuous author is full, simple, and tranquil; and Christianity, inspiring his writings, has imparted to him something that deeply affects the mind. His works denote that *good man, whose heart*, according to the admirable expression of Scripture, is *a continual feast*. Rollin has diffused over the crimes of men the serenity of a conscience void of reproach, and the grace and charity of an apostle of Christ. Shall we never witness the return of those times, when the education of youth and the hopes of posterity were entrusted to such hands?



## Chapter VIII

### BOSSUET CONSIDERED AS AN HISTORIAN

But it is in the *Discourse on Universal History* that the influence of the genius of Christianity over the genius of history appears eminently conspicuous. Political like Thucydides, moral like Xenophon, eloquent like Livy, as profound and graphic as Tacitus, the Bishop of Meaux has, moreover, that solemnity and elevation of style of which no example is to be found except in the admirable exordium of the book of Maccabees.

Bossuet is more than an historian; he is a father of the Church, an inspired priest, on whose brow oft plays a lambent flame as on that of the legislator of the Hebrews. What a survey has he taken of the earth! He is in a thousand places at once! A patriarch under the palm-tree of Tophel, a minister at the court of Babylon, a priest at Memphis, a legislator at Sparta, a citizen at Athens and at Rome, he changes time and place at pleasure; he passes along with the rapidity and the majesty of ages. With the rod of the law in hand, and with irresistible authority, he, drives before him *pêle-mêle* both Jews and Gentiles to the grave; he brings up the rear of the funeral procession of all generations, and, supported by Isaias and Jeremias, he raises his prophetic lamentations amid the ruins and the wrecks of the human race.

The first part of the *Discourse on Universal History* is admirable for the narration; the second, for sublimity of style and lofty metaphysical ideas; the third, for the profundity of its moral and political views. Have Livy and Sallust any observations on the ancient Romans superior to these words of the Bishop of Meaux?

“The groundwork of a Roman, if we may be allowed the expression, was the love of his liberty and of his country: one of these principles caused him to love the other; because he loved his liberty, he also loved his country, as a mother that brought him up in sentiments equally generous and free.

“Under this name of liberty, the Romans as well as the Greeks figured to themselves a state in which no individual was subject to any power but the law, and in which the law was stronger than any individual.”

In hearing people declaim against religion, you would suppose that a priest is necessarily a slave, and that before our times no one ever spoke worthily on the subject of liberty; but read the observations of Bossuet on the Greeks and Romans. Who has excelled him in treating of the virtues and vices? Who has formed a juster estimate of human things? Some of those strokes from time to time escape him which have no parallel in ancient eloquence and which originate in the very spirit of Christianity. For example, after speaking of the pyramids of Egypt, he adds, “But, in spite of all the efforts of men, their insignificance is invariably apparent: these pyramids were tombs. Nay, more, the kin” by whom they were erected had not the satisfaction of being interred in them, and consequently did not enjoy their sepulchres.”

In this passage we know not which to admire most, the grandeur of the idea or the boldness of the expression. The term *enjoy* applied to a *sepulchre* at once proclaims the

magnificence of that sepulchre, the vanity of the Pharaohs by whom it was erected, the rapidity of our existence,—in a word, the inconceivable nothingness of man, who, incapable of possessing any real good here below except a tomb, is sometimes deprived even of that barren inheritance.

Tacitus, be it observed, has treated of the Pyramids, but all his philosophy suggested to him nothing to be compared to the beautiful reflection with which religion inspired Bossuet. A striking example of the influence of Christianity on the mind of a great man!

The most finished historical portrait in Tacitus is that of Tiberius; but it is eclipsed by the portrait of Cromwell, for in his *Funeral Orations* also Bossuet is an historian. What shall we say of the exclamation of joy that escapes from Tacitus when speaking of the Bructarii who slaughtered one another within view of a Roman camp? “By the favor of the gods,” says he, “we had the pleasure to behold this conflict without taking any part in it. Merely spectators, we witnessed (and an extraordinary sight it was) sixty thousand men cutting each other's throats for our amusement. May the nations not in amity with us continue to cherish in their hearts these mutual animosities!”

Now let us hear Bossuet: —“After the deluge first appeared those ravagers of provinces denominated conquerors, who, impelled by the thirst of dominion, have exterminated so many innocent people... Since that period, ambition has known no bounds in sporting with human life and to this point are men arrived that they slaughter without hating one another. This business of mutual destruction is even deemed the height of glory and the most excellent of all the arts.”

It is difficult to forbear adoring a religion which causes so wide a difference between the morality of a Bossuet and that of a Tacitus.

The Roman historian, after relating that Thrasyllus had predicted the elevation of Tiberius to the empire, adds: —“From these circumstances, and some others, I cannot tell whether the affairs of life be subject to an immutable necessity or whether they depend on chance alone.” Then come the opinions of the philosophers, which Tacitus gravely repeats, at the same time giving the reader clearly to understand that he believes in the predictions of astrologers.

Reason, sound morality, and eloquence, are also, in our opinion, on the side of the Christian prelate. “This long chain of particular causes which create and dissolve empires is dependent on the secret decrees of Divine Providence. From the heaven of heavens God guides the reins of every kingdom; all hearts are in his hand. Sometimes he curbs the passions; at others he relaxes the bridle, and thereby agitates the whole human race... He knows the extent of human wisdom, which always falls short in some respect or other; he enlightens it, he extends its views, and then abandons it to its ignorance. He blinds, he urges it on, he confounds it; it is involved, it becomes embarrassed in its own subtleties, and its very precautions prove a snare in which it is entrapped... He it is who prepares these effects in the most remote causes, and who strikes these mighty blows, the rebound of which is felt so far... But let not men deceive themselves; God, when he pleases, can restore the bewildered mind; he who exults over the infatuation of others may himself be plunged into the thickest darkness, and it often requires no other instrument to derange his understanding than long prosperity.”

## GENIUS OF CHRISTIANITY

How does the eloquence of antiquity shrink from a comparison with this Christian eloquence!<sup>1</sup>

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Source : Chateaubriand, François-René de, *The Genius of Christianity or the Spirit and Beauty of the Christian Religion* (c1856), transl. by Charles I. White, New York, Howard Fertig, 1976, Book III, p. 417-436.

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<sup>1</sup> It seems almost superfluous to add to this detailed recital of the beauties of Bossuet. But there is *one* passage in his *Universal History* so remarkable for simple and sublime energy that we wish to treat the reader with the perusal of it. Speaking of the extent of the Roman empire under Augustus, Bossuet says, “Their mountains cannot defend the Rhaeti from his arms; Pannonia acknowledges and Germany dreads him; victorious by sea and by land, he shuts the temple of Janus. The whole earth lives in peace under his power, and *Jesus Christ comes into the world.*”