The Historical Origin of the Early Recreation Attitude of the Christian Church

THE FIRST FIVE CENTURIES*

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Primitive Christianity was marked by great chiliastic enthusiasm. By chiliasm is meant the belief that Christ was to return to earth and reign visibly for a period of one thousand years. That return was usually held to be in the not too distant future. This belief was one of the great ethical motivating forces in apostolic and post-apostolic periods.

The moral conduct demanded of the Christians was conduct becoming a people whose citizenship was in another world. The Christians believed that they were an elect people of God, chosen from among the peoples of the earth to be his own peculiar possession. "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people." Clement[1] speaks of the all-seeing God who chose the Lord Jesus Christ and us through him for a peculiar people. This sense of being God's specially chosen people provided a tremendous motive for righteousness. To many Christians the highest ambition was to live worthily of their calling, and as befitted the chosen of God.

"As the elect people of God the Christians were heirs of the kingdom, citizens of another world than this, and their lives must be lived so as to fit them for life there."[2] The meaning of this is well stated in the *Shepherd*:

> He says to me, 'you know that you who are the servants of God dwell in a strange land: for your city is far away from this one. If, then,' he continues, 'you know your city in which you are to dwell, why do ye here provide lands, and make expensive preparations, and accumulate dwellings and useless building? He who makes such preparations for this city cannot return again to his own. Oh foolish, and unstable, and miserable man! Dost thou not understand that all these things belong to another, and are under the power of another? For the lord of this city will say, 'I do not wish thee to dwell in my city; but depart from this city, because thou obeyest not my laws.' . . . Have a care, therefore: as one living in a foreign land, make no further preparations for thyself than such merely as may be sufficient. . . . Instead of lands, therefore, buy afflicted souls, according as each one is able, and visit widows and orphans, and do not overlook them; and spend your wealth and all your preparations, which ye received from the Lord, upon such lands and houses. For to this end did the Master make you rich, that you might perform these services unto Him; and it is much better to purchase such lands, and possessions, and houses, as you will find in your own city, when you come to reside in it.[3]

The attitude of detachment, nurtured by the realization of belonging to another world instead of this, was strengthened by the belief in the speedy return of Christ when all of this world would be done away with. The Epistle of James declares, "The friendship of the world is enmity with God." First John states, "If any man love the world the love of the Father is not in him." The author of Clement after reiterating the statements of Jesus, "No man can serve two mas-

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ters" and "what profit is it if one gain the whole world and lose one's own soul?" continues:

> Now this age and the future are enemies. The one speaks of adultery and corruption and avarice and deceit, the other bids these things farewell. We cannot therefore be friends of both, but must bid farewell to the one and hold companionship with the other. We reckon that it is better to hate the things that are here, for they are small and short-lived and corruptible, and to love the things that are there, for they are good and incorruptible.[4]

St. Augustine, commenting upon the loss sustained by the Christians as the result of the destruction of Rome, states what he considers to be the true wealth of Christians.

> They, then, who lost their worldly all in the sack of Rome, if they owned their possessions as they had been taught by the apostle who himself was poor without, but rich within—that is to say, if they used the world as not using it,—could say in the words of Job, heavily tried, but not overcome. Like a good servant, Job counted the will of the Lord his great possession.[5]

The chiliastic ideal was less the thought of reforming the world, as it was escaping from it. So long as chiliastic expectations were the basis of the Christian's hope and largely determined his relation to the order of this present world, the Christian felt himself to be but a stranger and a pilgrim in the world, and that his real home was the kingdom of Christ, soon to be established on earth. Such a view would naturally have a tendency to cause a Christian to define his relation to the world as being in it, yet not of it. The present life was thought of as a mere probation for the life to come, (not in the Messianic hope of life here, but life in heaven), without value in itself and possessing meaning only because in it rewards are laid up for the life beyond the grave. The faithful of the first century expected to enter the Messianic kingdom directly. By the time of Augustine, the chiliastic ideal had been reinterpreted in terms of the Church visible, as embodying that ideal. Thus, the phrase "life beyond the grave" became significant. Otherworldliness was all controlling in the life of the early church. The chief good lay not in this life but in another. So to live as to inherit the reward prepared for the saints in heaven should be the chief concern of every man. Being a citizen of heaven, the Christian must govern himself accordingly. Possessed of this hope and the virtue of humility, the Christian may pass safely through all the perils of the present life, sure of his eternal reward in heaven.

The church and the world. The church thought of itself as a separate unit from the state, and as set off by itself from the world. The antagonism to the world during the first four centuries A. D. was very present, and it was only with much difficulty that the church came to view civilization as a unity. The shift began early in the fourth century, after Constantine.

The world was defined as all those social institutions which existed outside of the church, and as a natural result that viewpoint determined, to a large extent, the Christian's attitude toward the social institutions which are classified as the kingdom of Satan. Genuine Christians viewed the world with its institutions of property, labor, force, and law as the result of sin. Harold Reed states:

> When the Christian community grew to a larger dimension, it was forced to come to grips with the problems of the world or that which was regarded as secular. As a result, a dual morality developed within the church, namely, monasticism for the clergy with its high standards, and a lower standard for the laity. Monasticism was considered to be the ideal rule of life for the clergy while the laity were forced to make a living but remain from the world as far as possible. . . . Thus, the heroism of the gospel ethic plus an enlarged church, resulted in an austere and rigorous abstention from indulgence in pleasure. This discipline was for the sake of reaching high spiritual attainments.[6]

Morality of the Christians. The Christians separated themselves from

the secular life. To them, love of the world was sinful and foolish, inasmuch as the world was not only damned, but doomed. Society was a burned out crater. Its days were numbered and the end might come at any moment. An expectant Christian of the early fourth century could write:

> The men famous for goodness before Moses lived when human life was just beginning and organizing itself. We live when it is near its end. They, therefore, were anxious for the increase of their descendants, and that the race might grow and flourish. But these things are of very little interest to us, who believe the world to be perishing and running down and nearing its last end. . . . while a new creation and the birth of another age is foretold at no distant time.[7]

The Christian morality was largely motivated by the expectation of Christ's Second Coming. It is to be expected that a heavy emphasis would be made on purity, chastity, piety, and separation from all deeds, things, places, and persons that might tend to cool off the Christian's zeal or cause him to waver in his loyalty to Christ, as thus conceived.

The Epistle to Diognetus, anonymous and date uncertain, is referred to as a choice piece of Ante-Nicene literature. The main themes of the epistle are the faith and manners of the Christians. Thus Mathetus writes:

> The Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked by singularity. . . . They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign country is to them their native land, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry as do all; they beget children; but they do not commit abortion. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are the citizens of heaven.[8]

Athenagoras, an Athenian philosopher and Christian, pleads with the emperors Marcus Aurelius Anoninus and Lucius Aurelius Commodus that justice be shown the Christians. His defense of the Christians' morality is one of contrast with the prevailing non-Christian morality.

> 1. Elevated morality of the Christians.
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> It is, however, nothing wonderful that they should get up tales about us such as they tell of their own gods, of the incidents of whose lives they make mysteries. But it behoved them, if they meant to condemn shameless and promiscuous intercourse, to hate either Zeus, who begat children of his mother Rhea and his daughter Koré, and took his own sister to wife, or Orpheus, the inventor of these tales, which made Zeus more unholy and detestable than Thyestes himself: . . . But we are so far from practicing promiscuous intercourse, that it is not lawful among us to indulge even a lustful look. 'For,' saith He, 'he that looketh on a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery already in his heart. Those, then, who are forbidden to look at anything more than that for which God formed the eyes, which were intended to be a light to us, and to whom a wanton look is adultery, the eyes being made for other purposes, and who are to be called to account for their very thoughts, how can any one doubt that such persons practice self-control?[9]
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> 2. Christian chastity. Quoting Theophilus to Antolycus:
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> And concerning chastity, the holy word teaches us not only to sin in act, but even in thought, not even in the heart to think of any evil, nor look on another man's wife with our eyes to lust after her. Solomon, accordingly, who was a king and a prophet, said: 'Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee: make straight paths for your feet.'[10]
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> 3. Vindication of Christian women.
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> ". . . all our women are chaste, and the maidens at their distaffs sing of divine things (such as, the Magnificat of the Virgin, the Twenty-third Psalm, or the Christian "Hymn for Eventide"), more nobly than that damsel of yours. Therefore be ashamed, you who are professed disciples of women yet scoff at those of the sex who hold our doctrine, as well as at the solemn assemblies they frequent.[11]
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> 4. On eating.
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> Some men, in truth, live that they may eat, as the irrational creatures, 'whose life is their belly, and nothing else.' But the Instructor enjoins us to eat that we may live. For neither is food our business, nor is pleasure our aim, but both are an account of our life here, which the Word is training up to immortality. . . . And it (food) is to be simple, truly plain, suiting precisely simple and artless children—as ministering to life, not to luxury.[12]

5. On drinking.

. . . the natural, temperate, and necessary beverage, therefore, for the thirsty is water. This was the simple drink of sobriety, which, flowing from the smitten rock, was supplied by the Lord to the ancient Hebrews (Ex. XVII; Numbers XX). It was most requisite that in their wanderings they should be temperate. . . .

. . . For it is not right to pour into the burning season of life the hottest of all liquids—wine—adding, as it were, fire to fire. For hence wild impulses and burning lusts and fiery habits are kindled; and young men inflamed from within become prone to the indulgence of vicious propensities.[13] . . .

Condemnation of the prevailing amusements. Far more sweeping was their condemnation of some of the most prominent of the prevailing amusements.

It is, of course, a commonplace that among the outstanding popular forms of entertainment of the pre-Christian Roman Empire were the theatre, gladiatorial combats, and contests between beasts and men. The theatre and the amphitheatre were characteristic architectural features of the typical Roman city.[14]

In Rome, itself, which set the fashions for the rest of the Empire, and for especially the West, some of the shows were on a prodigious scale. It is stated that after his Dacian Victories Trajan sent down ten thousand gladiators into the arena. Even the noble-minded Marcus Aurelius, conforming with what was expected of one in his position, gave gladiatorial contests and attended them.

For gladiatorial combats and the theatre, many of the leading Christians (Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine) had nothing but condemnation. Lecky states that the fact that gladiatorial games "continued for centuries, with scarcely a protest, is one of the most startling facts in moral history."[15] There was a time when the church refused to receive for baptism a professional gladiator, unless he promised to surrender his calling, and excluded from the communion those of its membership who attended the games.

In the cruel sports of the arena and the impurities of the stage the Christian fathers recognized that paganism had its strongest and most enduring hold on the people. Tertullian explained fairly fully the reasons, as he understood them, for the prohibition to Christians of attendance at the public spectacles. Said he, "idolatry was the mother of the games." Diana presided over the hunting scenes, the God of War was the patron of the gladiatorial combats. When the bloody conflict had ended, a figure, representing the power of the world, gave the finishing stroke to the wretches who were still lingering.

The Romans, under the most Christian Emperors, Theodosius and Honorius, were still gloating over spectacles which their ancestors established to do honor to the names of departed relatives.[16]

Because of their connection with the non-Christian faiths which Christianity so vigorously fought, they were, therefore, improper for the faithful. Then, too, in contrast with the calm, the gentleness, and the peacefulness which are presumably the fruits of the Spirit, the shows, so Tertullian stated, stirred up rage, bitterness, and grief, and those who engaged in betting were too much agitated.[17]

Cyprian condemned the gladiatorial contests on the ground that "man is slaughtered that man may be gratified" and "crime is not only committed, but taught." Clement of Alexandria denounced the theatre, the race course, and others of the public spectacles. Tatian called the gladiatorial show "a cannibal of the soul."

I have seen men weighed down by bodily exercise, and carrying about the burden of their flesh, before whom rewards and chaplets are set, while the adjudicators cheer them on, not to deeds of virtue, but to rivalry in violence and discord; and he who excels in giving blows is crowned. These are the lesser evils; as for the greater, who would not shrink from telling them? Some, giving themselves up to idleness for the sake of profligacy, sell themselves to be killed; and the indigent barters himself away, while the rich man buys others to kill him. And for these

the witnesses take their seats, and the boxers meet in single combat, for no reason whatever, nor does any one come down into the arena to succor. Do such exhibitions as these redound to your credit? . . . You slaughter animals for the purpose of eating their flesh, and you purchase men to supply a cannibal banquet for your soul, nourishing it by the most impious bloodshedding. The robber commits murder for the sake of plunder, but the rich man purchases gladiators for the sake of their being killed.[18]

Minucius Felix denounced such contests as inculcating murder, objected to the theatre as picturing vice and as exciting the spectators to it, and opposed the chariot races.

St. Augustine reflects the prevailing official attitude of the church regarding the gladiatorial fights in the following:

. . . The gods enjoined that games be exhibited in their honor to stay a physical pestilence; their pontiff prohibited the theatre from being constructed, to prevent a moral pestilence. If, then, there remains in you sufficient mental enlightenment to prefer the soul to the body, choose whom you will worship.[19]

The theatres and the shows were likewise condemned by the leaders of the church. Tertullian disapproved the theatre because of its characteristic lewdness, its simulation of love, wrath, fear, and sorrow. His attitude toward the prevailing shows is well stated in the following:

We renounce all your spectacles, as strongly as we renounce the matters originating with them, which we know were conceived of superstition, when we give up the very things which are the basis of their representations. Among us nothing is ever said, or seen, or heard, which has anything in common with the madness of the circus, the immodesty of the theatre, the atrocities of the arena, the useless exercises of the wrestling-ground.[20]

Again he writes in an inclusive manner in regard to the sins of the world:

. . . For such is the power of earthly pleasures, that, to retain the opportunity of still partaking of them, it continues to prolong a willing ignorance, and bribes knowledge into playing a dishonest part. In fact, you will find not a few whom the imperiling of their pleasures rather than their life holds back from us.

For we did not get eyes to minister to lust, and the tongue for evil with, and ears to be the receptacle of evil speech, and throat to serve the vice of gluttony, and the belly to be gluttony's ally, . . . and the hands for deeds of violence, and the feet for an erring life; or was the soul placed in the body that it might become a thought-manufactory of snares, and fraud, and injustice![21]

Cyprian had no use for the theatres, saying that they portrayed the parricide of the old days and that "adultery is learned while it is seen." In answer to an inquiry concerning an actor's status in the church, he replies as follows:

Cyprian to Euchratus his brother, greeting. From our mutual love and your reverence for me you have thought that I should be consulted, dearest brother, as to my opinion concerning a certain actor, who, being settled among you, still persists in the discredit of the the same art of his . . . the destruction of boys. . . . You ask whether such a one ought to communicate with us. This, I think, neither befits the divine majesty nor the discipline of the Gospel, that the modesty and credit of the Church should be polluted by so disgraceful and infamous a contagion.[22]

Apparently the church sometimes supported converted actors until they could find other occupations, but was inclined to forbid them to continue even to teach their profession.

St. Augustine had this to say about the influence of the stage. "Stage-plays also drew me away, full of representations of my miseries and of fuel to my fire." Commodianus, a North African bishop, in writing on *"The Worldly Things Are Absolutely To Be Avoided,* writes as follows:

If certain teachers, while looking for your gifts or fearing your persons, relax individual things to you, not only do I not grieve, but I am compelled to speak the truth. Thou art going to vain shows with the crowd of the evil one, when Satan is at work in the circus with din. Thou persuadest thyself that everything that shall please thee is lawful. Thou are the offspring of the Highest, mingled with the sons of the devil.[23]

Tertullian, in the following, gives a lengthy and descriptive analysis of his views regarding the theatre, shows, pleasure, and the relationship of the

Christian to the world. There is a strong other-worldly emphasis in his exhortation.

> For as there is a lust of money, or glory, so there is also a lust of pleasure. . . . I think then, that under the general designation of lusts, pleasures are included; in like manner, under the general idea of pleasures, you have a specific class the 'shows'. . . . There is in all of them the taint of idolatry. . .
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> Our banquets, our nuptial joys, are yet to come. We cannot sit down in fellowship with them, as neither can they with us. . . . Let us mourn, then, while the heathen are merry, that in the day of their sorrow we may rejoice; lest, sharing now in their gladness, we share then also in their grief. Thou art too dainty, Christian, if thou wouldst have pleasure in this life as well as in the next: nay, a fool thou art, if thou thinkest this life's pleasures to be really pleasures.[24]

How far this official attitude of the church and these condemnations by leading Christians proved a factor in bringing to an end the amusements is not clear. It is certain that many Christians abstained from attendance. The strong convictions of the leadership of the church imply such. However, it is also clear that many Christians did not conform to these viewpoints. Tertullian deplored the attendance of some Christians: ". . . some among you are allured by the views of the heathens in this matter (amusements)." Constantine patronized the amphitheatre for at least a decade after his toleration of the church had begun.

There is the story that in Rome the gladiatorial shows were brought to an end when, in the reign of Honorious, the monk Telemachus went into the arena to arrest the combatants and was killed by an angry mob, who objected to having their pleasures thus interrupted. Another probable factor in terminating the gladiatorial combats was the diminishing supply of possible victims. An impovershed society no longer able to recruit the arena with war captives and beasts, would probably, even without Christianity, have been deprived of the lavish amusements of a more prosperous age. Dill believes that economy rather than virtue was the chief factor in the termination of the theatre and the circus in the west.[25]

Many of the leading Christians not only laboured to keep the faithful from attending the theatre and the arena; they also battled what they thought to be excesses of some of the spectacles, which long survived the gladiatorial combats. Thus, John Chrysostom waged war against the horse-races and against popular farces and pantomimes. If the church found these too deeply entrenched to be uprooted, even from a nominally Christian society, it, at least, found it possible to modify and, in some instances, to abolish the pagan feasts.

One of the seven questions which Latourette asks in his volume, *The First Five Centuries*, is, "What effect has Christianity had upon its environment?" In answer to his question he states: "Upon its environment Christianity has had varying results." As previously stated, the early Christians had no plan of a thorough reconstruction of society by human effort. There was considerable tension between the individual Christian and his immediate environment. "Christians objected vigorously to certain features of the life about them, especially to most of the prominent amusements." In their abolishment Christianity had a part. The standards it enjoined were in sharp contrast to the practice of the majority. These standards the Christian community sought to enforce. "In altering the ethical tenor of men's lives Christianity proved one of the most powerful agencies which the race had thus far known." However, it must be noted that a difference between pronouncement and practice did exist.

> Even in the most exemplary, however, a frank failure to attain fully the ideals was sometimes acknowledged, and for the masses of Christians the disparity between profession and practice was even more marked. This lack of accord between goal and attainment was, however, due in part to the vast differ-

ence between the objectives and the prevailing customs. Nor does it argue an entire lack of effect. Changes in habits were wrought in thousands of instances.[26]

Christianity proved an effective force in altering the lives of men and institutions. The attitude of the early Christians toward recreation was negative and prohibitive. Although this attitude is rooted in chiliastic expectation, there is a virility and effectiveness about it which had much to do with the elevation of the prevailing mores.

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