Introduction

The story of the successful Christian revolution against the Roman Empire has often been told. In their hour of triumph in the fourth century Christian writers and preachers looked back to the persecutions as the heroic age of the Church. Few doubted the providential nature of its victory. The 'ten persecutions' had been prefigured in the Bible by the ten plagues of Egypt or by the ten horns of the beast in the Apocalypse, and the Roman emperors and their officials were painted in colours befitting the servants of Antichrist.[1] The confessors, according to the brief description of Sulpicius Severus, circa 380, had rushed into battle desiring martyrdom with the same eagerness as clerics of his day engaged in the pursuit of bishoprics.2 The saga of their deeds, especially in the Great Persecution under Diocletian and Galerius sustained the Eastern Churches through their struggles against Islam. Among the last written remains even of the Church in Nubia were homilies on the legend of St. Mercurius and God's judgment on Julian the Apostate. These littered the floor of the great church at Q'asr Ibrim, silent and deserted since the fourteenth century.3 In the West, the persecutions formed an essential part in a Providential philosophy of history represented by Lactantius and Paulus Orosius which influenced European political thought throughout the Middle Ages. The triumph of the Church over the Empire in the fourth century guaranteed its victory in later but still barbarous days.

In view of the amount of hagiographical and devotional literature which grew up around the persecutions it would have been astonishing if these had not formed a major theme for research since the Reformation. On the one hand, the question could be asked how far Divine Providence used the sufferings of the Christians to vindicate the truth of the Gospel message, and did not the discomfiture of Satan in one period by the blood of the Church's martyrs point to the discomfiture of the Reformers

by the same means? On the other hand, it might be argued that the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire was explicable on historical grounds to which the rules of critical study could be applied. Were the martyrs as few as H. Dodwell suggested in his pioneer study 'De Paucitate Martyrum' (Dissertationes Cyprianicae), Oxford, 1684, Dissertatio xi, or were they as numerous as the recent work of a Jesuit scholar Fr. L. Hertling has claimed?[4] Or does, perhaps, the number of authentic martyrs oscillate between those included in Dom Ruinart's *Acta Primorum* Martyrum sincera et *selecta*, Amsterdam, 1713, and those selected by Knopf and Krüger in their *Ausgewählte* Martyrerakten, Tiibingen, 1929?

The existence, however, of rival ecclesiastical viewpoints has if anything, spurred on research. Today, Le Nain de Tillemont's massive *Mémoires pour servir* de *l'histoire* ecclesiastiques des six premiers *siècles* (16 volumes, 1693–1712) remain a valuable starting-point, especially for work on the Great Persecution. In Mosheim's first volume of Ecclesiastical History (Eng. tr. A. Maclaine, Dublin, 1767) the basic reasons for the unpopularity of the Christians in the Roman Empire have been given as they might be given today, 'the abhorrence felt by the Christians for the other religions of the Empire', while 'the simplicity of their worship' made them appear 'as a sort of Atheist, and by the Roman laws those who were chargeable with atheism were declared pests of human society' (pp. 48–9). This is perfectly true. Atheism was the real, damning charge against the Christians. Later in the century, Gibbon's sixteenth chapter of the Decline and Fall remains one of the finest summaries of the history of the relations between the primitive Church and the Empire ever written. In the sentence 'The Jews were a people which followed, the Christians a sect which deserted the religion of their fathers', Gibbon puts his finger on the central weakness of the Christian position in the first three centuries.

The growth of the study of the Church as an historical movement in the latter part of the nineteenth century caused less advance in this aspect of Church history than in many others. Too much time was spent in attempting to define the exact legal situation of the Christians and the precise nature of the charges levelled against them. Studies became hopelessly bogged down as one source after another was subjected to searching examina-

tions in detail by the disciples and the opponents of Mommsen and Harnack. On the other hand, the school of French Roman Catholic ecclesiastical historians, represented by Aubé, Allard and Batiffol in their zeal to controvert the German Protestants were too often inclined to accept the ***Acta Martyrurn*** as they stood, and thereby to turn Church history into pious romance.

In all these controversies of the past the major limiting factor has been the nature of the evidence. Quite apart from coming to terms with Eusebius, the historian of the early Church has been confronted by two serious obstacles. His study of the whole range of Jewish apocrypha and pseudepigrapha and of the New Testament and sub-apostolic literature has been obstructed by the lack of a firm chronological framework in which to place these works. The chronological footnote it has been necessary to write (see below, p. 72 note 70) regarding for instance, iv Maccabees, is an instructive commentary on the situation. It has been a case of every historian and every commentator for himself. It must, however, be perfectly obvious that on the accurate dating of these documents depends the solution of many of the problems connected with the organization and mission of the primitive Church. If iv Maccabees proved to be a work of an Alexandrian Jew of the second century A.D., rather than of an Antiochene Jew contemporary with Jesus its value as one of the sources of inspiration of Christian ***Acta Martyrurn*** would have to be re-assessed, and so also, the historian's view of the relations between the Jewish and Christian synagogues in the first two centuries. Similar problems are raised by the dating of Revelation, the Pastoral Epistles, i and ii Peter, and the various Jewish or Jewish-Christian apocryphal narratives.

Even more difficult, however, has been a rational assessment of the ***Acta Martyrurn.*** Hundreds of these ***Acta*** were composed in the fourth and fifth centuries in honour of martyrs the anniversaries of whose deaths were celebrated in the Churches.[5] Each of the great provincial sees had its list of martyrs who were to be honoured by a eucharist and sermon which recorded for edification the circumstances of their deaths.[6] The Martyrology of Carthage contained no less than eighty-six entries, for each of which some record of arrest, trial and execution of the saint would have been compiled. Some of these, such as Augustine's sermons on St.

Perpetua and her companions, Crispina of Thagora, or on the Forty Martyrs, have survived, and the historian's task is to decide whether any kernel of truth underlies these stereotyped and florid discourses. The task is facilitated somewhat by the existence of the contemporary or near-contemporary *Acta* on which Eusebius drew, and others acknowledged to be contemporary such as the *Acta Scillitanorum* and *Acta Perpetuae*, or by Cyprian's letters written during the persecutions of Decius and Valerian, all of which serve as a check on the later versions of similar events. Despite the work, however, of H. Delehaye and the Bollandists7 in attempting to apply rules for assessment and categories of verisimilitude to each *Acta Martyrurn*, the historian has still to decide each case for himself. On his verdict for instance, on the value of the *Acta Crispinae* may depend his attitude on the question whether the Fourth Edict in the Great Persecution was ever enforced in the West, or not. Was the proconsul's command that the hair of the accused be shaved the result of dark imaginings by an hagiographer, or was it intended as a final warning to Crispina, designed to shame her into surrender before she compelled the imposition of the death-penalty for refusal to sacrifice as commanded? In such cases, one has to search for analogies, weigh up probabilities and make up one's own mind. Similarly, the *Acts* of *Trypho* may contain some valuable evidence about the Decian persecution in Rome despite its gross errors in its narrative of the reigns of Gordian and Philip with which it opens. Each source has required and still requires detailed study.

These problems of evidence remain and will continue to make the study of the persecutions a complicated one. Since the turn of the century, however, the historian has received constant and continuous help from the archaeologist. The latter, while not answering his questions in detail, has added a new dimension to his research. Christianity came up from below. It influenced in the main the lower orders of Greco-Roman society, people who have left little mark on the Classical literature of the time, but whose remains in the form of cemeteries, burial inscriptions and buildings, have been discovered by the archaeologists. To the great finds, like the Dead Sea scrolls, which have contributed to the establishment of a firm chronology for apocalyptic literature, one must add the constant accumulation of humbler objects

enabling the historian to trace better the progress of the Christian communities and their penetration of pagan society. The *Antike und Christenturw* school on the Continent has made possible a new assessment of the first four centuries of Christian history. The persecutions and the whole field of Church–State relations in this period have become ripe for re-examination.

In this work, while not neglecting the legal and administrative problems raised by the early Christians in the Roman Empire, I have attempted to study the rise of Christianity as a social movement and made full use wherever possible of the evidence of archaeology. The canvas has had to be a wide one. In point of time, the Maccabean revolt against Hellenism whether Syrian or Jewish, was the obvious beginning. Here was the first great revolutionary outbreak against what became the values of the Greco-Roman world. From then on, I have traced the successive phases of the triangular struggle which developed between that world on the one hand, the Jews and Christians who were prepared at a price to work with it, and the irreconcilables on the other. The domination of Western theology by the last-named has been one of the most important events in European history. The psychology of the Two Cities, of the gathered Church with its martyrs and saints, and its hope of Millennia1 triumph have sustained some of western Christianity's greatest epics as well as some of its greatest inhumanities and tragedies. For Christian optimism, for the hope of salvation for all, and for the reconciliation of rival political and social systems as differing aspects of the Eternal Word of God, one must turn to Philo and to the Alexandrian School of Christian theology. To strike a balance between these forces against the background of the Roman Imperial scene is the object of 'From the Maccabees to Donatus'.

NOTES

[1] **See J. Vogt, 'Die Zahlung der Christenverfolgung–im romischen Reich',** *La Parola del Passato,* **ix, 1954, 5–15.**

[2] Sulpicius Severus, ***Chronicon*** **(ed. C. Halm,** ***CSEL.,*** **i)** ii.32.4, **'quippe** certatim **gloriosa in certamina ruebatur rnultoque avidius turn martyria gloriosis mortibus quaerebantur quam nunc episcopatus pravis arnbitionibus appetuntur'.**

[3] Found by Rev. Professor J. M. Plumley and the writer during their excavation of the church at Q'asr Ibrim (Primis) in Nubia. To be published, under the auspices of the Egypt Exploration Society.

[4] L. Hertling, 'Die Zahl der Märtyrer bis 313', *Gregorianum* xxv, 1944, 103–29. 100,000 executions 'possible'.

[5] Note Augustine's warning to his flock 'that these Acta should not be placed on the same level as Scripture 'Nec scriptura ista canonica est'. *De Natura et Origine Animae* 1.10 (*CSEL.*, lx, 312).

[6] A useful work on the Martyrologies is R. Aigren, *L'hagiographie, ses sources. ses méthodes, son histoire,* Paris, 1953, and see also, H. Lietzmann (ed.), *Die drei ältesten Martyrologien* (Kleine Texte für theologische und philologische Vorlesungen und Übungen = Kleine Texte) ii, Bonn, 1911. Lists the *Depositiones* of the Chronograph of 354, the Carthage Martyrology and the Syrian Martyrology. The classic still remains H. Achelis, 'Die Martyrologien, ihre Geschichte und ihr Wert', *Abhandlungen Göttingen,* iii, 1900.

[7] H. Delehaye, *Les Passions des Martyrs et les Genres littéraires,* Brussels, 1921 (a fundamental study).