

CHAPTER III.

THE POLITICS OF RELIGION.

A DAY or two afterward, Eusebius again sought audience of the emperor, and in a long interview, during which Constantine, with his own hand, kept copious and accurate memoranda of the conversation, the bishop carefully explained the nature of the church controversy respecting the observance of Easter, and also the nature of the abstract and peculiar ideas involved in the dispute concerning the Deity; and in the whole interview the emperor manifested the perfect thoroughness with which his calm, grand intelligence was accustomed to go to the very bottom of every matter which once secured his interest, grasping all possible aspects and relationships of the subject—the evidence upon which alleged facts might be founded, the authority upon which each opinion might rest—so that at the close of the long and studious interview he was as well informed upon the subjects discussed as were the most learned ecclesiastics of his generation.

“I perceive,” he said to Eusebius, “that thou art an advocate of the opinion of Arius the Libyan, concerning what Hosius calleth the Holy Trinity?”

“Yea!” answered the bishop; “for neither do the Gospels teach me, nor can the aid of reason enable me to understand that three are one any more than that one is three; nor can I evade the fact that ‘Father,’ and ‘Son’ are terms which of necessity imply that the Father antedates the Son; nor can I believe that God the Father lived in our flesh and died upon the cross. So that, whenever the ‘Arian heresy,’ as they call it, shall be heard before a general council, I shall be numbered among the heterodox, if it is indeed possible that any council shall ever condemn the grand Libyan’s doctrines!”

“I regret much,” replied the emperor, “that thy conscience leadeth thee in that direction, although the fact must never become a cause of difference between thee and me. For, while I would yield cheerful acquiescence to thy superior learning about all merely religious questions, I perceive already that the political aspects of this controversy will make it politic for me to maintain the opinions of Hosius and his party.”

“What possible political significance can exist in such an abstract dispute about matters of theological faith and doctrine?”

Constantine laughed pleasantly, and answered: “Of course, a pious and learned bishop would sooner perceive the minutest ramifications of the theological roots of any question than to grasp its most palpable political outgrowth. I will tell thee, bishop, but the communication is for thee alone. As to the paschal controversy, it is a mere matter of sentiment or feeling between those who do not

wish to follow the Jews in fixing the time of its observance, and desire to have some period assigned by the Christian authority, on the one hand ; and, on the other, those who are unwilling to depart from the practice of three centuries for any reason—but these differences can be easily reconciled. But, as to this other controversy, it is of an essentially different kind. Thy statement of it revealed to me the salient fact that the doctrine of Arius is that of the Eastern Church, the doctrine of Hosius that of the Western ; and a geographical line might almost be run through the faith upon this question—Arius and his party upon one side, Hosius and his upon the other—and along the line itself many who are not the partisans of either opinion. Thou seest, therefore, that it is really a question between two empires, and, whenever it shall be determined, a proper regard for the prestige of mine own empire requires me to see that the decision shall be in favor of the Western Church. Dost thou now perceive one plainest and least important point of its political bearings ?”

“ Yea, verily,” answered Eusebius. “ But it had not occurred to me before !”

“ After the matter shall have been accomplished,” said Constantine, “ many others shall also see it, but not just yet ; for it is the business of him who is fit to rule not only to see, but to foresee, whatever may concern his empire !”

“ Thou alone hast seen it yet,” replied the bishop. “ But what other political significance can the controversy possibly possess ?”

“ Ah ! bishop,” said the emperor, “ it is the great ques-

tion of our age. It involves in itself the whole field of controversy between the old civilizations and the new ; between paganism and Christianity ; between Jesus Christ and the rulers of mankind. The doctrines of Arius are the utterances of that primitive Christianity which proclaimed the fraternity of all men, condemned war, slavery, and private-property rights. It maintaineth Jesus as the king of a kingdom established in the world ; a real and actual government among the Christian communities, which may yield obedience to laws that do not fetter conscience, but does not acknowledge allegiance to any human emperor or king. Its universal prevalence would speedily render all government over the people ridiculous and unnecessary ; for Christ would be the only king, and all men brethren, free and equal, as was the case in Mœsia, under the apostolical Ulfilas, until I was constrained to send an army thither and force the Goths to give up their communal organization, and adopt the Roman laws and customs. The system of Arius, primitive Christianity, dear bishop, would leave no room for Constantine on earth. But the doctrine of Hosius, by elevating Jesus to actual Godhead, leaveth his earthly career a mere manifestation, or appearance, of the divine in human flesh ; and, since the God hath returned to his former ineffable condition, it leaveth his kingdom to be only a pure and lofty spiritual phantasm—and leaves mankind for Constantine to govern. Thou seest that there can be no rivalry between the Christianity of Hosius and the sovereigns of this world, while the faith of Arius would soon subvert all human governments, and dethrone every prince on earth. Beyond any

question, the emperors, from Nero to my own times, sought only to preserve the empire by persecuting the Christians, and properly described Christianity as ‘a baleful and malignant superstition,’ ‘a criminal association,’ ‘a new society that departed from the laws and ceremonies of our fathers, inventing a new government for itself inconsistent with the imperial laws and rights.’ They understood that Roman sovereignty could not maintain itself against a rapidly increasing association that proposed to abolish war, slavery, private rights of property, offices, rank, and prerogative; and they tried to stamp it out of existence. These emperors strove to defend the empire by exterminating the Christians; if they had been greater men, they would have adopted the new religion, pruned it of all doctrines that might menace the imperial authority, translating Jesus to the highest heaven, and taking for themselves his place upon the earth—as I have done. I am, therefore, the champion of the Holy Trinity, as Hosius hath defined it; and at the right time Arius must be condemned as a heretic. For I will no more suffer him to build up the churches of the East upon this basis of primitive Christianity than I would suffer Ulfilas to accomplish a similar purpose among the Gothic tribes. Dost thou now perceive the political significancy of this Arian heresy, my dear bishop?”

But Eusebius stood before the emperor pale and trembling, the cold perspiration standing in great drops upon his pallid brow. For a moment an awful mist of horror enveloped his struggling soul. Had he, then, made a terrible mistake in using his own large abilities and influence

to place the persecuted saints under the protection of the grand and humane emperor? Had he betrayed the Church of Christ, and lost his own soul, in bringing about that union of ecclesiastical and imperial authority which made the kingdom of heaven an appanage of the Roman emperor, and had secured safety, peace, and glory, for the Christians by giving to Constantine the place that should belong only to Jesus Christ? Had he indeed been overreached and manipulated by this most able of mankind for his own political purposes, even while he thought himself to be using Constantine for the glory of God and for the edification of the Church? Sick, doubtful, terrified, he faintly answered: "But the things which thou sayest the doctrines of Arius would accomplish are precisely the triumph which our Lord did promise to the Church, and which he pledged his divinity to achieve! Surely Arius must be right! War, slavery, and mammon-worship, must be banished out of the world! Mankind must become brethren in the Lord! The Church must triumph, and Christ must be the only king!"

"Not in my time!" said Constantine, with the calmness and firmness of mature and deliberate conviction; "not while I live! The empire shall be mine own. I will yield my right to no man, human or divine! Let the Church grow and prepare for future triumph over earthly sovereignty when the scepter shall be held by some more weak and nerveless hand than mine. I will govern while I live, both church and state, in spite of gods or demons!"

The bishop made no answer. A terrible error into which he had gone with glad heart and exuberant hope

seemed palpably revealed to him. He was utterly cowed and humbled. With a crushing sense of self-abasement, shame, mortification, repentance, almost crime, he realized the fact that, compared with that colossal man, who amused himself by playing with the loftiest emotions of the human soul as he did with his ever-victorious legions—a man who, under his calm, grand bearing, concealed a devil of ambition that was ready to mock at all that men hold sacred, and even to hurl his phalanx against Christ himself—he felt like a child, a pygmy.

With ashy lips he murmured: “Almost thou hast defied the Son of God! Beware!”

Then, with a singular smile that had in its beauty and light something of lofty mournfulness, the emperor answered: “And if I should do so, dear bishop, what then? Jesus hath no power against me except through thaumaturgy, and thou dost know that thaumaturgy faded out when the Church abandoned that communal system upon which Arius insisteth yet so manfully. I have made my choice, and will abide the issue, bishop. Thou knowest that I never was baptized. I might have been a Christian, but I preferred to reign over the Roman Empire; and I will reign until the end.”

Ah! for him, then, with all the glad assurance born of utter ignorance that such a being could exist among mankind, the bishop had carefully freighted “the old ship Zion” with the godless furniture of Roman law and custom, its statutes of slavery, its laws and usages of war and conquest, its idolatrous system of private-property rights, titles, prerogatives, political and social class distinctions

between those whom God made to be brethren, out of which idolatry the sorrow of the world had grown, from all of which Jesus had died to ransom a fallen race. He had unwittingly launched the freighted ship upon the troubled sea of earthly politics. Thinking that he would win the Roman Empire for the Church, he had betrayed and sold the cause of Christ to Constantine. Thinking that he guided and controlled the emperor, he had labored with all diligence to make himself the master's slave. He knew it now only too well—he knew that Constantine had always known it; and, appalled by the vast resources of that greatest of mankind, crushed by the sense of his amazing genius, he seemed unto himself to grow small, contemptible, and weak.

And the ship of the Church? Would she go down forever in the troubled waters, amid the stormy strife for worldly gains and power? Or would she yet, somehow, sometime, somewhere, outride the tempests, and in some unknown and distant clime reach into a safe haven? "Not in my time," said Constantine; "not while I live!" When, then?

These bitter meditations were broken by the calm, sweet voice of Constantine: "Bishop, thou must perceive for thyself that the radical polity of the primitive Christianity to which Arius cleaves unswervingly, and which Ulfilas founded among the Goths so firmly that I had to send the legions thither to uproot it, was somewhat fanatical, or at least premature, and not suited to the every-day life of selfish and wicked men. Thou must perceive, also, with equal clearness, that the splendid ecclesiasticism

which I have established throughout the Western Empire in place of the primitive religion is vastly better for mankind than any system ever before attempted, and that it should be speedily extended over all the East. What future, grander developments await the Church, no mortal can foretell. For the present, I desire of thee to seek means whereby to fan the flame of this Arian controversy : it must not die out until it can be summoned before an imperial council, and receive formal condemnation at the mouths of all the bishops called into a synod by the Emperor of the west !”

“ And if, when the council shall have been convened, its members shall sustain Arius, what then ? ”

“ A religious war, perhaps,” answered Constantine, “ or a return unto the pagan gods ; both dreadful alternatives, which the Church and the empire should regard with equal horror. But the council will never so decide. I answer for its action ; only keep thou the flame of controversy burning until the proper hour arrives ! ”

“ I will contrive means that shall not fail to do so,” answered Eusebius, and, bowing low, at a sign from the emperor he withdrew, overwhelmed with the perception of that calm, relentless, almost superhuman sagacity which Constantine had permitted him to see.

“ Yea ! ” murmured Eusebius, “ I will fan this flame of controversy ! It shall blaze throughout the Church ! And it may even happen that Constantine, although the greatest of the human race, is not a match for God. Who knows ? Thaumaturgy may be restored to the Church, or, even if, as Constantine asserteth, the kingdom of our Lord

was prematurely established, the spiritual truth of the gospel will sometime educate mankind up to the ultimate reception of its socialism and politics. And to this end it shall be my task before I die to organize within the bosom of the Church sacred brotherhoods, bound by holy ties of chastity, obedience, and poverty, to keep alive forever the memory of that communal system upon which Christ founded his kingdom. At all events, there is no possibility of going backward now; and more than ever do I desire to see Constantine obtain the sovereignty of the East. And now for Nicomedia!"

That very day the bishop set out upon his dangerous mission, to concert measures by which to neutralize the naval power of the Emperor Licinius.