

Fall 2016 History & Heritage — #6

(A Seasonal Catechism for the Study of American and Western Civilization)

Dueling Philosophers -- (Shelley; Church History in Plain Language; pp. 84-93)

This description highlights the battle royal in the 2nd and 3rd centuries (100's & 200's AD) between two sets of professed Christian theorists: Alexandrians and Gnostics? The Alexandrians led by Clement (d. 215) and Origen (d. 254) mimicked Gnostics like Valentinus in dress, terminology, and the kinds of questions they raised about life itself. They were not of a mind to dismiss pagan insights, but unlike Gnostics offered orthodox answers to queries and upheld holy character as philosophy's true companion and end.

Diocletian's Bad Press -- (Shelley; Church History in Plain Language; pp. 95-104)

This headline observes what is mostly a negative report of historians on the reign of Diocletian (r. 284-305) despite his impressive imperial achievements? The former Dalmatian slave turned commander infused administrative order into a vast chaotic territory by dividing it into four regions under four heads: two Augusti and two Caesars. On the dark side, however, he initiated for reasons not readily apparent the severest Roman persecution of Christians ever in the last two years of his reign (304-305).

Laying Her Scepter Down -- (Shelley; Church History; pp. 95-104)

This figurative image, employed in the verse of Englishman Matthew Arnold, captures the astonishing conversion of imperial Rome to Christianity in the 4th century AD? After Constantine subdued Maxentius in 312 and seized the throne with what he believed was help from Christ's cross, faith in the Savior rose from the catacombs and found a home in palaces. As Shelley put it, a sect that began the century as a "persecuted minority" ended it as "the established religion of the empire."

Constantine's Christianity—(Shelley; Church History in Plain Language; 95-104)

This conviction, private and public, of Emperor Constantine's religious outlook has generated controversy and contention among scholars of all stripes for centuries? Some say his faith was compromised by retention of the Roman state cult title "Pontifex Maximus" and by politically motivated conspiracies and even killings. But others can point to many acts on behalf of his family and kingdom, including a ban on execution by crucifixion, that bore witness clearly to his embrace of Christian doctrines and ideals.

Devout Scholars -- (Shelley; Church History in Plain Language; pp. 84-93)

This description characterizes the lives and labors of brilliant Alexandrians like Origen (d. 254) the pupil of Clement (d. 215), who was himself the pupil of Pantaenus (d. 190)? With the aid of seven scribes, Origen in particular bequeathed a virtual library in biblical and theological studies prompting Jerome years later to ask, "Who could ever read all that Origen wrote?" His threefold hermeneutic (literal, allegorical, moral) and his attention to "the whole counsel of God" rather than isolated proof texts inspired many.