

her Divine Founder. Our Saviour was compelled day after day to expostulate with His enemies, to appeal to their honesty and reason, to ask them calmly if they had any good argument wherewith to convict Him of sinful life or false teaching. "*Quis ex vobis arguet me de peccato?*"<sup>1</sup> And how did they answer this dispassionate appeal? With reviling and blasphemy. *Samaritanus es tu et dæmonium habes.* "Thou art a Samaritan and hast a devil." Our religious editors would do well to consider what an unholy pattern they have set up (unconsciously, we trust) for imitation.

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## THE CHURCH AND CREMATION.

*Cremation and Other Modes of Sepulture.* By R. E. Williams, A.M.  
 "Omnes homines terra et cinis," Ecclesiasticus, xvii., 31. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co. 1884. 12mo.

WE were just on the point of making the above mentioned book, sent us by a friend for perusal, a peg on which to hang some observations on the attitude of the Church to the modern theory of cremation, when we received the following letter from one of our readers in Buffalo, N. Y., which will answer our purpose as well. Whether the writer be Catholic or Protestant, does not appear from the letter itself. But it makes no difference; and in either case we accord him the same impartial hearing.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC QUARTERLY REVIEW.

DEAR SIR:

I take it that your REVIEW sets forth the tendency of the best thought of the Catholic Church in this country. Even by its enemies it must be conceded that the belief of the Catholic Church is eminently logical and consistent and that its deductions are, for the most part, drawn with common sense. As a believer in the expediency of cremation, I am sorry to see any tendency on the part of the Church to commit itself to opposing this sensible reform.

With the first part of Dr. Brann's article on cremation in your October issue, I have nothing to do. It simply sets forth the belief, not only of Catholics but of all Christian people, that the human body, even in death, is a sacred thing and should be the object of tender and solemn respect. That in the process of cremation the body itself

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<sup>1</sup> John viii., 46.

is subjected to any indignity, is no more true than that it is degraded by the process of inhumation.

The objection that cremation would interfere with the resurrection of the body has been so often and so thoroughly refuted; that it scarcely needs the repetition of the old and often stated argument which almost casts ridicule on the man who takes this position. The simple question, "Is it any more of a miracle for the Divine Power to resurrect the body from the ashes which are the result of cremation, than to resurrect the body from the dust which is the result of inhumation?" seems to me most thoroughly to dispose of this question. It would seem that the anxiety with early Christians to be inhumated, to which Dr. Brann refers, showed less faith in the power of God than does the belief of the modern Christian, that so far as the day of judgment is concerned, it matters little what is the present disposition of his material body.

When the learned Doctor argues against the sanitary conditions of cremation, he shows that he has not thoroughly investigated his subject. He prefaces his plea for inhumation by the condition, "if proper precautions are taken." The unfortunate fact is, that proper precautions are hardly ever taken. In most large cities in America very little fault is to be found with the location of cemeteries in their effect on water supply and other channels of infection, but in small towns little if any care is shown in this particular, and even where the utmost care is taken as to location, both in cities and towns, the other conditions which make inhumation harmless, are seldom given the scrutiny their importance deserves.

But I had not meant to combat or attempt to combat the Doctor's reasoning. Long ago abler pens than mine have furnished thorough refutation for every argument he advances. I had only meant to ask that those who represent the most advanced thought in the Catholic Church should hold their hands until the public at large has gained a little more thorough understanding of the subject, and until its more general adoption shall render patent to the many what is well known to the few, that there is nothing objectionable to the most religious mind in the modern practice of cremation. Ere long the Catholic Church will speak officially on the subject, and its utterance will be the result of that mature thought which characterizes all its decrees. That the actual practice of cremation, modified to suit the liturgy and ritual of the Catholic Church, with crematories consecrated to its service, with the final deposit of ashes taking the place of the final deposit of the body, whether in tomb or in grave, I have no doubt the decision of the Church will be that a good Catholic may let his views as a good citizen, wishing the good of his fellow-men, permit him to direct that his mortal remains shall be disposed of by the cleanly and innocuous process of cremation, and do this excellent thing with the full sanction of his Church.

I am, with all respect,

Yours,

JAMES S. METCALFE.

With the general tenor of Mr. M.'s letter we can have no fault to find. There is, however, at the close of its third paragraph, a statement which cannot be allowed to pass unnoticed. "The anxiety of the early Christians to be inhumated to which Dr. Brann refers" would seem, in the opinion of Mr. Metcalfe, to argue "less faith in the power of God than does the belief of the modern Christian that, so far as the day of judgment is concerned, it matters little what is the present disposition of his material body."

Now this misconception, on the part of Mr. Metcalfe, would seem due to the fact that the writer of the article in the October number of the *QUARTERLY*, though quoting correctly enough the substance of what is found in Eusebius, has introduced it by words some-

what ambiguous, and which, to some extent, do not allow the reader to see the exact value of the quotation from the Greek historian. "Eusebius (Hist. Eccles., v. 1)," says the writer, "gives a reason for the Christian aversion to cremation which still holds good, because 'they (the Pagans) did this (cremate) to show that they could conquer God and destroy the resurrection of the bodies, saying, now let us see if they will arise.'"

This passage offers ground for a few remarks. In the first place, Eusebius does not pretend to give any reason why Christians are on principle opposed to cremation. Secondly, it is not Eusebius who speaks at all. The language occurs in an old and valuable document which Eusebius, like a faithful historian, has transcribed *ad literam*. He considered it so precious because of its antiquity and because written by eye witnesses, and so edifying in its style that he preferred to give it whole and entire to posterity rather than condense the narrative in words of his own. It is the letter of the Church of Lyons and Vienne to their brethren in Asia and Phrygia, one of the most precious and touching monuments, as a Protestant historian<sup>1</sup> remarks, that has come down to us from Christian antiquity.<sup>2</sup> The authors of the letter, who write with the sanction and in the name of the Church, were those who waited upon the holy martyrs Vettius, Blandina, Pothinus (bishop of Lyons), Attalus, and a host of others, and were eye-witnesses of the torments they endured from the hour of their arrest to that of their martyrdom.

Now, what say these writers? They do not put forth opinions nor give reasons of any kind about the practice of inhumation or cremation or other form of burial; they merely deal with the facts of which they had been witnesses. Naturally they mourn over their unavailing efforts to rescue or ransom for burial the limbs of some of the martyrs, thrown to be devoured by the dogs of the street. But with such jealous, malignant care were these remains watched by the Pagan soldiery, that the shades of night could not aid their pious purpose; nor could fervent entreaties, nor the proffer of gold move to pity those wicked men, as if they counted it great gain to prevent the burial of those holy relics.

"Nos gravissimo interim dolore premebatur quod humare cada-

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Scaliger.

<sup>2</sup> It may be found in the edition of Eusebius by Valesius, Paris, 1687, and in the 1st chapter of Book V., where a Latin translation accompanies the Greek original. This is not the best edition of Eusebius, but it is the only one to which the writer has access. The same document is given, but only in a Latin version, by Ruinart in his *Acta Martyrum*, Verona, 1731. The ordinary reader will find its substance in Alban Butler's *Lives of the Saints*, in his account of St. Pothinus (June 2). St. Irenæus was his successor in the See of Lyons.

vera<sup>1</sup> nobis non liceret nam neque noctis tenebræ nos juvare, neque auri vis flectere neque preces ullæ animos eorum commovere potuerunt; sed omni studio atque industria cadavera custodiebant, quasi ingens lucrum facturi, si sepultura caruissent."<sup>2</sup>

But why did these clients of the holy martyrs so ardently wish to recover their sacred remains? It was not only to rescue them from profanation and give them due honor of Christian sepulture, but to rejoice with holy joy in the possession and safe-keeping of those venerable relics, which they counted "a priceless treasure," "surpassing in worth all fine gold and costly gems."<sup>3</sup> They were, besides, moved to just indignation when they saw the ashes of the martyrs, which they longed to possess, cast into the rapid waters of the Rhone, that all hope of their recovery might be lost. And, what heightened their indignation, was the blasphemous reason alleged by the persecutors for so doing. "They acted thus," says the Lyonnese letter, "as if they were superior (in power) to God, and could deprive them (the martyrs) of their resurrection, saying forsooth: All hope of their rising again has vanished; let us see if their God by His help can bring them again to life and deliver them out of our hands." Here is Ruinart's version of the original Greek, which we have not literally translated, but faithfully condensed:

"Igitur martyrum corpora postquam omni genere contumeliæ traducta et sub dño per sex dies exposita jacuerunt, tandem cremata atque in cineres redacta in præterfluentis Rhodani alveum sparsa sunt ab impiis, ne ullæ deinceps eorum reliquiæ in terris superessent. Atque id agebant prorsus, quasi Deo superiores esse et resurrectionem illis adimere possent; ut, quemadmodum ipsi dicebant, ne spes quidem ulla resurgendi eis relinqueretur. . . . Videamus nunc an sint resurrecturi, et utrum adesse ipsis Deus suus ac de manibus nostris ipsos eripere valeat."<sup>4</sup>

One, therefore, may be reasonably astonished how any one could see in this document of Eusebius any "reason" or principle on which the early Christians refused to adopt or follow the practice of cremation. All that can be legitimately deduced from the above, or similar individual cases, is that the primitive Christians objected to the burning of their martyrs by the Pagan enemy, who thus robbed them of "inestimable treasures," and to this robbery added

<sup>1</sup> This is a generic term, comprising the "membra partim laniata, partim ambusta," and the "capita cum ipsis corporum truncis" of which the writer speaks a few lines before.

<sup>2</sup> Ruinart, *Acta Martyrum*, ed. cit., p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> "Θησαυρός ἀτιμητος." "Τα τιμιώτερα λίθων πολυτελών και δοκιμώτερα υπέρ χρυσίου." Ruinart, op. cit., in Act. Pass. St. Ignatii, p. 19; S. Polycarpi, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59, § 16.

the impious, blasphemous intent of thereby making it impossible for the Almighty Power to raise them with whole bodies on the last day. And we may confidently ask Mr. Metcalfe where, in all these accounts, can he detect a shadow of proof, or even of suspicion, that the faith of the early Christians in God's power was less strong than that of the Christians of our own day. Or in what century did the horror aroused in a Christian breast by hearing the blasphemous denial of God's attributes first begin to be held by the tribunal of history as constructive acquiescence in the truth of the blasphemy?

We have in the Acts of the martyrs very many instances where these champions of the Faith, when threatened with death by fire, which would destroy all hope of their resurrection in the body, would only smile at the impotent threat and say nothing, while waiting with calm joy their final sentence. Others would indignantly rebuke the blaspheming judge, and warn him that the God whom the Christians worshipped was Almighty, and that no power in the world, either visible or invisible, could thwart His will or make void His promises. Of one<sup>1</sup> it is recorded that, when condemned to the flames, after a short prayer, with the air of an inspired prophet of Israel, and in words as far above the ordinary fashion of human speech as the heavens are above the earth, declared himself willing and anxious to be cast into the devouring flames as a proof of the final resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

Coming now to note specially another point of Mr. M.'s letter, it is evident that he honestly believes cremation to be necessary for public health. Should this be demonstrated in such way that public opinion will have to yield to the evidence, there is little doubt that the Church will find no difficulty in accommodating

<sup>1</sup> St. Pionius, priest of Smyrna. *Vid.* Ruinart, *Acta SS. Pionii et Socior.*, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> *Haec me ducit causa, haec me potissimum ratio compellit ad mortem, ut populus omnis intelligat resurrectionem futuram esse post mortem.* *Ibid.*, p. 127.

See also Evodius, Assemani, "*Acta Martyrum Orientalium et Occidentalium.*" Rome, 1748, 2 vols. in one, fo. The confidence of the martyrs in the resurrection of their bodies, even when consumed by fire, is expressed so often that it would be hard to select from such a mass of testimony. It is enough to refer the reader to the word *Resurrectio* in the indices of both volumes.

Speaking of the Acts of St. Pionius, there is extant in them a testimony to the substantiality of the Father and the Son, which, we regret to see, is seldom, if ever, quoted in theological courses. St. Pionius and St. Theodota had already confessed their belief in the "Supreme God, creator of heaven and earth." St. Asclepiades, being called on immediately after, and asked in whom he believed, replied, "In Christ." "What! (asked Polemon, the judge) Is that another God?" "No (said Asclepiades); He is the same whom they have just now confessed." This unstudied utterance shows the habitual thought of the Christian people in the century that preceded the Council of Nice, and in one sense is more valuable than a passage from a professed controversial writer.

herself to the practice. She has adhered to inhumation because when she appeared on earth she found it the received usage of God's chosen people, to whose inheritance she had succeeded, and her Divine Founder had condescended to be entombed in the earth. Had she found, when she came into the world, the practice of cremation prevalent everywhere, she would have made it her own. She did not find any Divine command to the contrary; for the passages that are often cited as such (Gen. xv., 15, and Deut. xxi., 23) do not exactly command burial in the earth, but rather presuppose it as an existing usage. She would have adopted it, as she did so many other practices of the Pagan world, purifying it first from every vestige of Pagan contamination. She would have framed her Ritual accordingly, and drawn many a fitting reflection from the upward tendency of the flame, the dross-consuming, purifying influence of fire, etc.

But is this necessity of cremation demonstrated *ad evidentiam*? Mr. Metcalfe thinks so; but there are not a few physicians and scientists, both inside and outside of the Church, who think very differently. Some even in our country go to the length of asserting that it might prove dangerous and become a source of infection. We do not pretend to decide the question; but it looks hard to suggest any action by the Church, positive or negative, until the question is decided. It was the mistake of Galileo, who insisted that the Church should explain the Scriptures in accordance with his new theory. But Cardinal Bellarmine very properly told him that this could not be done as long as it was a mere theory. It would be time enough when the theory had reached the point of demonstration.

Another reflection, and we have done. The Church has little faith in the good intentions of the men who are urging the theory and practice of cremation. In the mind of Mr. M. and a few like him there reigns no un-Christian sentiment, but a *bona fide* scientific opinion, whether well-founded or not matters little. But these are only the few. The great army of cremationists in Europe is made up of Atheists and infidels, professed enemies of God and His revelation. It is clear enough that, though some of them advance scientific pretexts for their purpose, most of them argue on irreligious grounds, and re-echo the spirit, if not the words, of the Pagan crowds who burnt the martyrs. Could the Church be supposed to listen with any confidence or respect to such men and their theories? And of some men of doubtful faith amongst ourselves it may well be asked: If they are so intent upon benefiting the public and averting infection, why is it that they have ever on their lips cremation, and cremation only? Why is it that they do not champion the cause of pure water and good drainage. The

water men drink in our big cities is an abomination. Drainage was perfectly understood two thousand years ago and more;<sup>1</sup> it is now one of the lost arts. Bad water and bad drainage are daily slaying thousands. Where is the loud cry of our benevolent philosophers?

We entertain well-grounded fears that the day will come when cremation will be forced upon unwilling peoples by law. It will begin in Europe, where the worst elements of society are fast growing into power. It will not be done with the benevolent view of providing for public health, though this pretence may be put forward. Or perhaps they may be cynical enough to incorporate in the law their true motives, just as the French Republic attempted a hundred years ago to abolish by law the immortality of the soul. As to our own country, it will be done much later, if ever; though we are filled with misgivings, when we remember what has happened within the last forty years. One thing is certain. Should cremation ever be made compulsory by the civil power, the Church will yield obedience to the law, and adapt her prayers and funeral rites to the new method of incineration. So we are distinctly told on high authority, that of Professor Sanguinetti, in his "Institutes of Canon Law" (*Cap. De Sepulturis*) printed at Rome (with ecclesiastical *imprimatur*) no later than two years ago, in 1884.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Card. Wiseman's Essay entitled, *Sense vs. Science.*