

Dark Religion, De Revolutione (On Government)

BOOK TWO

THAT ROMAN WORLD-RULE WAS ACQUIRED BY RIGHT

1

Both human reason and divine authority show that the Roman Empire existed by right.

We marvel at a novel effect when its cause is not apparent to us, and so those who know the cause despise and deride those who marvel. There was a time when I too marvelled at the way the Roman people made itself pre-eminent throughout the world without resistance, for in my superficial view I thought that they obtained this power by force of arms and without right. But now that my mind's eye penetrates more deeply and I see the most evident sign of divine Providence behind this process my marvelling ceases, and with derision I now look down upon those nations whom I know to have raved and upon those peoples whom I see meditating vain things, as I myself used to do, and I grieve at the sight of kings and princes who can agree only in opposing their Lord and his Roman prince. And so in derision, but not without grief, I can cry out in behalf of the glorious people and of Caesar in the words of him who cried out in behalf of the Prince of heaven: "Why have the nations raged and the peoples devised vain things? The kings of the earth stood up and the princes met together against the Lord, and against his Christ."¹ But as love naturally does not permit derision to endure, and as the summer sun in his rising scatters the morning mists and bathes all in light, so I cease deriding and prefer to throw a correcting light upon the clouds of ignorance, to free from such clouds those raving kings and princes and to reveal a mankind freed

¹Psalm II:1-2.

from the yoke of such rulers, and as I embark on the following argument I exhort myself in the words of the Holy Prophet: "Let us burst their chains and cast their yoke from us!"

Both of these aims will be achieved, when I have completed the second part of my inquiry and tell the truth concerning this question. For in showing that the Roman Empire existed by right I shall not only remove the clouds of ignorance from the eyes of those kings and princes who are usurping the public authority and believe falsely that it was the Roman people who was the usurper, but I shall show all mortals that they are free from the yoke of these usurpers. Now this truth will be revealed not only by the light of human reason, but also by the rays of divine authority. When these two agree, heaven and earth must necessarily assent. Holding, therefore, to the faith which I have avowed and trusting in the joint testimony of reason and authority, I proceed to unravel the second question.

2

The will of God is the basis of right.

Now that we have investigated sufficiently, as far as the nature of the matter permits, what the true answer to the first question is, we must look for the truth concerning the second question, namely, whether the Roman people acquired its dignity of empire by right. Here again we must begin our inquiry by seeing what truth it is that may serve as its principle, on which the relevant arguments are grounded.

The first fact to note in this connection is that, as any artist exists in a threefold manner—in the artist's mind, in the technique and in the medium—so we must view nature as threefold. For nature is in God as its prime mover, then in the celestial bodies, which are his instruments and by which the image of his eternal goodness is manifested in the material flux or medium of his art. Given a perfect artist with perfect instruments, if the work is imperfect the fault must lie in the medium alone. Thus, since God achieves the highest perfection, and since his instruments, the heavens, are without defects (as we learn in

philosophizing about them), only one alternative remains: any defect in things here below must be due to a defect in God's raw material, and must be external to the intention of the God of creation and of heaven. On the other hand, if we find something good here below, we can not refer it to the material itself, since the raw material is only potential art, and we must attribute any good primarily to the divine artist and secondarily to the heavenly bodies which are the instruments of God's art, commonly called nature. From this we can now infer that the right, since it is a good, exists primarily in the mind of God; and since whatever is in God's mind is God himself (according to the saying, "What was made, was life in Him"), and since God is the chief object of his own will, it follows that the right, being in God, is willed by Him. And since the will and its object are identical in God, it follows further that God's will is itself the right. Moreover it follows that whatever right exists in things is nothing other than the image of God's will. Hence, whatever does not agree with the divine will can not be right, and whatever does agree with it is right. Therefore, when we ask whether anything happens by right, we merely mean whether it happens according to the will of God, whatever other words we may use. We must accordingly suppose that whatever in human society God really wills, must be regarded as truly and genuinely right. In this connection we ought to recall what the Philosopher teaches in the beginning of his *Nicomachean Ethics*: "We must not expect to find the same kind of certainty in all subjects, but according to what the nature of the subject permits." Thus our arguments will be sufficiently well grounded on the principle which we have stated, if we base the right possessed by this glorious people on the evidence of clear signs and the authority of the wise: for in itself God's will is invisible, but through visible events the mind is able to see the invisible things of God. Just as a wax impression gives clear evidence of what seal made it, though the seal itself is never seen, so we should not wonder that we must look for the divine will by visible signs, for even our human wills can be detected by others only through signs.

Roman rule was for the common good.

Whoever is mindful of the good of the commonwealth is *ipso facto* mindful of the purpose of right. The truth of this proposition is proved as follows: The definition of right given in the *Digests of Law*, namely, "Right is a real and personal bond between man and man whose preservation preserves society and whose corruption corrupts society," is not a definition of the essence of right, but a description of its utility. If this definition is nevertheless a good account of what right is in practice and what it comprises, and if the purpose of any society is the common good of its members, the purpose of right must be to promote the common good and nothing that fails to promote it can possibly be right. Cicero says this very well at the beginning of his *Rhetoric*: "Laws should always be so interpreted as to promote the good of the commonwealth." For if laws are not useful to those who are governed by them, they are laws only in name, not in fact. Laws should bind men together for their mutual benefit, as Seneca said very truly in his book *On the Four Virtues*: "Law is the bond of human society." Hence it is clear that to be mindful of the good of the commonwealth is to be mindful of the purpose of right. Now if the Romans actually pursued the good of the commonwealth, it is true to say that they were faithful to the right. That the Roman people did pursue this good when they made the whole earth subject to them is proved by their deeds, for putting aside all greed as always incompatible with the commonwealth, and seeking universal peace with liberty, this holy, pious, and glorious people seemed to neglect its own interests in order to promote the public interest for the salvation of mankind. Hence it is truly said: "The Roman Empire springs from the fountain of piety." But since it is impossible to examine the intentions of a conscious agent directly, but only through external signs, and since, as I said, we must be guided by the nature of our subject, we shall

² Chapters 3 and 4 are omitted. See analysis of contents, p. vi.

instance, that none, however perfect in moral and intellectual virtues, in character and in deed, can be saved without faith, though he never even heard of Christ; for to human reason alone this cannot appear just, but when aided by faith it may appear so. For in the letter to the Hebrews it is written "without faith it is impossible to please God"; and in Leviticus, "Any man of the house of Israel who shall slay an ox or a sheep or a goat in the camp or outside the camp, and shall not bring it as an oblation to the Lord at the door of the tabernacle, shall be guilty of blood." The door of the tabernacle is a figurative expression for Christ, who is the door of our eternal dwelling, as the Gospels say. The slaying of animals is a figurative expression for human deeds in general.

A hidden judgment of God is one which cannot be grasped by human reason, by natural law, or by scriptural law, but only by some special grace. This may happen in various ways, which are all instances either of simple revelation or of revelation through ordeal. Simple revelations are of two kinds: spontaneous acts of God or answers to prayer. Spontaneous acts of God are of two kinds: either explicit (as the revelation against Saul to Samuel), or by sign (as the signs given to Pharaoh of Israel's deliverance). Answers to prayer are defined by the writer of II Chronicles: "When we know not what we should do, this only have we left, to turn our eyes to thee." Revelation through ordeals is of two kinds: by lot or by contest, for a contest is a kind of testing. By lot God's judgment is occasionally revealed as when Matthew was substituted.⁵ Contests for deciding God's judgment are of two kinds: either combats of men (as duels between champions or competitions of men, when several rivals strive to win a set goal) as in the races of athletes.

It is important to note the difference between these two kinds of contest: in combat the contenders may without doing wrong take any advantage they can, whereas in competitions the rules of fair play may not be violated, for athletes may not foul. . . .⁶

Now with these distinctions in mind we can develop two ar-

⁵Acts I:26.

⁶A few lines omitted containing illustrations from Roman literature.

guments in behalf of our thesis: one, based on athletic competitions, the other on combats between champions. To these we now turn.

It was by divine will that the Romans prevailed in the athletic contest for world-rule.

The people which won over others in the athletic contest for world power won by divine judgment. For God cares more about the outcome of a universal contest than of a special contest, and if in these special contests the athletes may be supposed to win by divine judgment (according to the proverb: "To whom God grants victory let Peter add a blessing"), there can be no doubt that God's judgment is followed in the outcome of athletes contending for world-rule. The Roman people won the prize of the world-rule in athletic contest. To make this clear we must review the various contenders and consider the prize or goal. . . .⁷

These considerations prove that it was in a real athletic contest that Rome won over other peoples, that it therefore won as a result of divine judgment, and that it had a right to its victory.

Rome won world-rule by ordeal, and hence by right.

But what is won in [non-athletic] combat, may also be won *de jure*. For when human judgment is lacking either because it is shrouded in the darkness of ignorance or because there is no judge to preside, it becomes necessary, lest justice be forfeited, to have recourse to someone who so loves the demands of justice that he will pay the price with his blood and life. Hence the psalm, "Just is the Lord, and deeds of justice hath he loved." This takes place when, with the free consent of the parties con-

⁷The passage omitted is a review of the various contenders.

cerned, not in hatred but for love of justice, the divine judgment is sought by gathering the powers of mind and body in a mutual test of strength. Such a clash is usually called a duel, because it first took the form of letting two combatants fight. But we must heed the warning that, as in warlike disputes, all possible means of settling the dispute by discussion must first be tried, and that battle is only a last resort. On this subject Cicero in *De Officiis* and Vegetius in *Re Militari* agree. And as in medicine all other remedies are tried before steel and fire, which are a last resort, so in disputes all possible other ways of getting judgment must be exhausted before we finally resort to this remedy, as if we were forced to it by the need for justice.

A combat, then, has two formal characteristics: first, as we have just said [it is a last resort], and second, as we said above, it is waged neither out of hatred nor love, but only out of a zeal for justice, and by common consent should both contenders or duelists enter the field. On this subject Cicero has spoken well: "When wars are waged for the crown of empire they should be waged less bitterly." Now, if the formal requisites of a combat are adhered to (otherwise a struggle is not a combat), and men are gathered in need of justice and by common consent in order to show their zeal for justice, are they not gathered in the name of God? And if so, is not God in their midst, as he has promised us in the Gospel? And if God be present, is it not impossible to believe that justice may not be done by one who loves it so much (as above explained)? And if justice can not be suppressed in such combat, are not the fruits of the combat acquired *de jure*? This is a truth acknowledged even by the gentiles before the trumpet of the Gospel had sounded for they sought a judgment in the fortunes of combat. . . . By their appeal to Hera they meant to appeal to fortune, which cause we more properly and justly call divine providence.

In view of these considerations, let fighters beware before they agree to champion a cause for money; they thus transform an ordeal into a market where blood and injustice are bought and sold. And let them not suppose that it is God who sits in judgment over them, but rather that same ancient enemy who

incited them to strife. . . . It is now sufficiently clear how what is acquired by combat can be acquired by right.⁸

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11

By single combat the Romans rightly won "the crown of righteousness."

Now who can be so dull-witted as not to see that by ordeal the glorious people won for itself by right the crown of the whole world? Well might a Roman have said what the apostle said to Timothy, "There is laid up for me a crown of righteousness"—laid up, that is, in the eternal providence of God. Let the presumptuous lawyers now see how far they are below the look-out tower of human reason, whence these principles can be viewed. Let them be silent and mind their own business of interpreting the meaning and decisions of the law.

We have now shown that the Roman people acquired empire by ordeal and hence by right, which is the proposition to be proved in this book. So far our proof has rested on rational principles chiefly; now we shall prove our proposition by the principles of Christian faith.

12

That Rome enjoyed divine authority is shown by Christ's birth . . .

For they have been the first to rage and meditate vain things against Roman authority who call themselves the defenders of the Christian faith. Not only have they no pity for Christ's poor, whom they defraud with their ecclesiastical revenues, but they plunder daily the patrimony of the Church itself and the Church is impoverished. While they simulate justice, they exclude those who would do justice. Such impoverishment does not escape divine judgment, for the ecclesiastical funds are

⁸The passage omitted here gives instances of Roman combat.

neither used for the relief of the poor, to whom they rightly belong, nor are they accepted gratefully as gifts from the emperor who grants them. Let them return whence they came! They came well, they return ill. For they were well given and badly invested. But why should such shepherds care? What is the wasting away of the Church's substance, so long as their own kin flourish! But perhaps we had better return to our subject, and in devout silence await our Saviour's help!

So I maintain that if the Roman Empire did not exist *de jure*, Christ's birth implies an injustice. The consequence is false, therefore the contradictory of the antecedent is true, for of contradictory propositions one is true and the other false. It is needless to prove the falsity of the consequent to the faithful, for anyone who is faithful will admit the falsity of that proposition. If not, he is unfaithful. And if he is not of the faith, he will have no interest in this proof. The argument runs as follows: Anyone who voluntarily submits to an edict, proves by his deed that he regards the edict as just, for since deeds are more powerful arguments than words (as the Philosopher says toward the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*), his act was a better evidence than if he had approved it in words. But Christ, as his scribe Luke testifies, willed to be born of the Virgin Mary under an edict of Roman authority in order that he, the Son of God, made man, might register in that extraordinary register of mankind as a man; thus he recognized its legality. Of course, a more devout way of putting this would be that by a divine decision the edict was given by Caesar, in order that he who had been awaited for ages to appear in the society of mortals might associate himself with mortals. Therefore Christ signified by his coming that the edict given by Augustus, under the authority of the Romans, was just. And since the issuing of an edict justly implies the jurisdiction of its author, Christ recognized Caesar's jurisdiction, for a just edict must be issued *de jure*. We might note that this argument for refuting the above consequence is valid in any form, but it seems to have more force when put in the second [negative] figure of the syllogism, instead of as above in the first figure, thus:

All unjust deeds give false evidence
Christ did not give false evidence
Christ did not give evidence of anything unjust

whereas in the first figure it was:

All unjust deeds give false evidence
Christ did something unjust
Christ gave false evidence.

And by Christ's submission to Roman law.

Had the Roman Empire not existed *de jure*, Adam's sins would not have been punished in Christ. But this is false. Therefore the contradictory of the antecedent is true. The falsity of the consequent is clear from the following considerations: By Adam's sin we are all sinners, as the Apostle says: "As by one man sin entered into this world, and by sin death; and so death passed upon all men, in whom all have sinned."⁹ Now, if satisfaction for this sin had not been made by the death of Christ, we would still be sons of wrath by nature, that is, by our depraved nature. But this is not the case, for the Apostle writing to the Ephesians says of the Father that "He hath predestinated us unto the adoption of children through Jesus Christ unto himself: according to the purpose of his will: Unto the praise of the glory of his grace, in which he hath graced us in his beloved son. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the remission of sins, according to the riches of his glory, which hath superabounded in us."¹⁰ And Christ himself, as he endured the punishment, said, according to John, "It is consummated." If consummated, nothing more needs to be done.

To understand the meaning of this we must know that punishment is not merely the infliction of an injury, but an injury inflicted by someone who has penal jurisdiction. Hence a penalty inflicted by an unqualified judge is not punishment, but

⁹Romans V:12.

¹⁰Eph. 1:5-8.