

Napoleon Bonaparte - On the Divinity of Jesus Christ, at Saint Helena - 1820



“I know men; and I tell you that Jesus Christ is not a man. Superficial minds see a resemblance between Christ and the founders of empires, and the gods of other religions. That resemblance does not exist. There is between Christianity and whatever other religions the distance of infinity...”

“The Bible is no mere book, but a Living Creature, with a power that conquers all that oppose it.”

“Time, the great destroyer, is powerless to extinguish this sacred flame; time can neither exhaust its strength nor put a limit to its range. This is it, which strikes me most; I have often thought of it. This it is which proves to me quite convincingly the Divinity of Jesus Christ.”

“If you do not perceive that Jesus Christ is God, very well, then I did wrong to make you a general.”

Editors Note: Napoleon expressed the following thoughts while he was exiled on the rock of St. Helena. There, the conqueror of civilized Europe had time to reflect on the measure of his accomplishments. He called General Bertrand (Count Montholon) to his side and asked him, “Can you tell me who Jesus Christ was?” The General declined to respond. Napoleon said:

The Divinity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,

By Henry Parry Liddon

Well, then, I will tell you. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I myself have founded great empires; but upon what did these creations of our genius depend? Upon force. Jesus alone founded His empire upon love, and to this very day millions would die for Him I think I understand something of human nature; and I tell you, all these were men, and I am a man: none else is like Him; Jesus Christ was more than man. ... I have inspired multitudes with such an enthusiastic devotion that they would have died for me, .. but to do this it was necessary that I should be visibly present with the electric influence of my looks, of my words, of my voice. When I saw men and spoke to them, I lighted up the flame of self-devotion in their hearts. ... Christ alone has succeeded in so raising the mind of man towards the Unseen, that it becomes insensible to the barriers of time and space. Across a chasm of eighteen hundred years, Jesus Christ makes a demand which is beyond all others difficult to satisfy; He asks for that which a philosopher may often seek in vain at the hands of his friends, or a father of his children, or a bride

of her spouse, or a man of his brother. He asks for the human heart; He will have it entirely to Himself. He demands it unconditionally; and forthwith His demand is granted. Wonderful In defiance of time and space, the soul of man, with all its powers and faculties, becomes an annexation to the empire of Christ. All who sincerely believe in Him, experience that remarkable supernatural love towards Him. This phenomenon is unaccountable; it is altogether beyond the scope of man's creative powers. Time, the great destroyer, is powerless to extinguish this sacred flame; time can neither exhaust its strength nor put a limit to its range. This is it which strikes me most I have often thought of it. This it is which proves to me quite convincingly the Divinity of Jesus Christ"¹

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The conversation at St. Helena very frequently turned upon the subject of religion. One day Napoleon was speaking of the Divinity of Christ, General Bertrand said :

I can not conceive, Sire, how a great man like you can believe that the Supreme Being ever exhibited himself to men under a human form, with a body, a face, mouth, and eyes. Let Jesus be whatever you please—the highest intelligence, the purest heart, the most profound legislator, and, in all respects, the most singular being who has ever existed. I grant it. Still he was simply a man, who taught his disciples, and deluded credulous people, as did Orpheus, Confucius, Brahma. Jesus caused himself to be adored, because his predecessors, Isis and Osiris, Jupiter and Juno, had proudly made themselves objects of worship. The ascendancy of Jesus over his time, was like the ascendancy of the gods and the heroes of fable. If Jesus has impassioned and attached to his chariot the multitude—if he has revolutionized the world— see in that only the power of genius, and the action of a commanding spirit, which vanquishes the world, as so many conquerors have done—Alexander, Caesar, you, Sire, and Mohammed with a sword.”

Napoleon replied :

“I know men, and I tell you that Jesus Christ is not a man. Superficial minds see a resemblance between Christ and the founders of empires and the gods of other religions. That resemblance does not exist. There is between Christianity and whatever other religion the distance of infinity.

“We can say to the authors of every other religion, ‘You are neither gods nor the agents of the Deity. You are but missionaries of falsehood, moulded from the same clay with the rest of mortals. You are made with all the passions and vices inseparable from them. Your temples and your priests proclaim your origin.’ Such will be the judgment, the cry of conscience, of whoever examines the gods and the temples of paganism.

“Paganism was never accepted, as truth, by the wise men of Greece ; neither by Socrates. Pythagoras, Plato, Anaxagoras, or Pericles. On the other side, the loftiest intellects, since the advent of Christianity, have had faith, a living faith, a practical faith, in the mysteries and the doctrines of the gospel ; not only Bossuet and Fenelon, who were preachers, but Descartes and Newton, Leibnitz and Pascal, Corneille and Racine, Charlemagne and Louis XIV.

“Paganism is the work of man. One can here read but our imbecility. What do these gods, so boastful, knew more than other mortals? These legislators, Greek or Roman, this Numa, this Lycurgus, these priests of India or of Memphis, this Confucius, this Mohammed? Absolutely nothing. They

have made a perfect chaos of morals. There is not one among them all who has said any thing new in reference to our future destiny, to the soul, to the essence of God, to the creation. Enter the sanctuaries of paganism. You there find perfect chaos, a thousand contradictions, war between the gods, the immobility of sculpture, the division and the rending of unity, the parceling out of the divine attributes mutilated or denied in their essence, the sophisms of ignorance and presumption, polluted fetes, impurity and abomination adored, all sorts of corruption festering in the thick shades, with the rotten wood, the idol, and his priest. Does this honor God, or does it dishonor him? Are these religions and these gods to be compared with Christianity?

“As for me, I say no. I summon entire Olympus to my tribunal. I judge the gods, but am far from prostrating myself before their vain images. The gods, the legislators of India and of China, of Home and of Athens, have nothing which can overawe me. Not that I am unjust to them! No; I appreciate them, because I know their value. Undeniably princes, whose existence is fixed in the memory as an image of order and of power, as the ideal of force and beauty, such princes were no ordinary men.

“I see in Lycurgus, Numa, and Mohammed only legislators, who, having the first rank in the State, have sought the best solution of the social problem; but I see nothing there which reveals divinity. They themselves have never raised their pretensions so high. As for me, I recognize the gods and these great men as beings like myself. They have performed a lofty part in their times, as I have done. Nothing announces them divine. On the contrary, there are numerous resemblances between them and myself; foibles and errors which ally them to me and to humanity.

“It is not so with Christ. Every thing in him astonishes me. His spirit overawes me, and his will confounds me. Between him and whoever else in the world there is no possible term of comparison. He is truly a being by himself. His ideas and his sentiments, the truths which he announces, his manner of convincing, are not explained either by human organization or by the nature of things.

“His birth, and the history of his life; the profundity of his doctrine, which grapples the mightiest difficulties, and which is of those difficulties the most admirable solution; his gospel, his apparition, his empire, his march across the ages and the realms—every thing is, for me, a prodigy, a mystery insoluble, which plunges me into a reverie from which I can not escape—a mystery which is there before my eyes—a mystery which I can neither deny nor explain! Here I see nothing human.

“The nearer I approach, the more carefully I examine, every thing is above me—every thing remains grand, of a grandeur which overpowers. His religion is a revelation from an intelligence, which certainly is not that of man. There is there a profound originality, which has created a series of words and of maxims before unknown. Jesus borrowed nothing from our sciences. One can absolutely find nowhere, but in him alone, the imitation or the example, of his life. He is not a philosopher, since he advances by miracles, and from the commencement his disciples worshiped him. He persuades them far more by an appeal to the heart than by any display of method and of logic. Neither did he impose upon them any preliminary studies, or any knowledge of letters. All his religion consists in believing.

“In fact, the sciences and philosophy avail nothing for salvation; and Jesus came into the world to reveal the mysteries of heaven and the laws of the spirit. Also, he has nothing to do but with the soul, and to that alone he brings his gospel. The soul is sufficient for him, as he is sufficient for the soul. Before him the soul was nothing. Matter and time were the masters of the world. At his voice every thing returns to order. Science and philosophy become secondary. The soul has reconquered its sovereignty. All the scholastic scaffolding falls, as an edifice ruined, before one single word—Faith.

“What a master, and what a word, which can effect such a revolution! With what authority does

he teach men to pray! He imposes his belief. And no one, thus far, has been able to contradict him; first, because the gospel contains the purest morality, and also because the doctrine which it contains of obscurity, is only the proclamation and the truth of that which exists where no eye can see, and no reason can penetrate. Who is the insensate who will say No to the intrepid voyager who recounts the marvels of the icy peaks which he alone has had the boldness to visit Christ is that bold voyager. One can doubtless remain incredulous. But no one can venture to say, It is not so.

“Moreover, consult the philosophers upon those mysterious questions which relate to the essence of man, and the essence of religion. What is their response? Where is the man of good sense who has ever learned any thing from the system of metaphysics, ancient or modern, which is not truly a vain and pompous ideology, without any connection with our domestic life, with our passions Unquestionably, with skill in thinking, one can seize the key of the philosophy of Socrates and Plato. But to do this, it is necessary to be a metaphysician and moreover, with years of study, one must possess special aptitude. But good sense alone, the heart, an honest spirit, are sufficient to comprehend Christianity.

“The Christian religion is neither ideology nor metaphysics, but a practical rule, which directs the actions of man, corrects him, counsels him, and assists him in all his conduct. The Bible contains a complete series of facts and of historical men, to explain time and eternity, such as no other religion has to offer. If this is not the true religion, one is very excusable in being deceived; for every thing in it is grand and worthy of God. I search in vain in history to find the similar to Jesus Christ, or any thing which can approach the gospel. Neither history, nor humanity, nor the ages, nor nature offer me any thing with which I am able to compare it or to explain it. Here every thing is extraordinary. The more I consider the gospel, the more I am assured that there is nothing there which is not beyond the march of events, and above the human mind. Even the impious themselves have never dared to deny the sublimity of the gospel, which inspires them with a sort of compulsory veneration. What happiness that book procures for those who believe it! What marvels those admire there who reflect upon it!

“All the words there are imbedded and joined one upon another, like the stones of an edifice. The spirit which binds these words together is a divine cement, which now reveals the sense, and again veils it from the mind. Each phrase has a sense complete, which traces the perfection of unity and the profundity of the whole. Book unique, where the mind finds a moral beauty before unknown, and an idea of the Supreme superior even to that which creation suggests. Who, but God, could produce that type, that idea of perfection, equally exclusive and original?

“Christ, having but a few weak disciples, was condemned to death. He died the object of the wrath of the Jewish priests, and of the contempt of the nation, and abandoned and denied by his own disciples.

“They are about to take me, and to crucify me, said he. I shall be abandoned of all the world. My chief disciple will deny me at the commencement of my punishment. I shall be left to the wicked. But then, divine justice being satisfied, original sin being expiated by my sufferings, the bond of man to God will be renewed, and my death will be the life of my disciples. Then they will be more strong without me than with me; for they will see me rise again. I shall ascend to the skies; and I shall send to them, from heaven, a Spirit who will instruct them. The spirit of the cross will enable them to understand my gospel. In fine, they will believe it; they will preach it; and they will convert the world.

“And this strange promise, so aptly called by Paul the ‘foolishness of the cross,’ this prediction of one miserably crucified, is literally accomplished. And the mode of the accomplishment is perhaps more prodigious than the promise.

“It is not a day, nor a battle which has decided it. Is it the lifetime of a man? No! It is a war, a long

combat of three hundred years, commenced by the apostles and continued by their successors and by succeeding generations of Christians. In this conflict all the kings and all the forces of the earth were arrayed on one side. Upon the other I see no army, but a mysterious energy; individuals scattered here and there, in all parts of the globe, having no other rallying sign than a common faith in the mysteries of the cross.

“What a mysterious symbol! The instrument of the punishment of the Man-God. His disciples were armed with it. ‘The Christ,’ they said, ‘God has died for the salvation of men.’ What a strife, what a tempest these simple words have raised around the humble standard of the punishment of the Man-God! On the one side, we see rage and all the furies of hatred and violence. On the other, there is gentleness, moral courage, infinite resignation. For three hundred years spirit struggled against the brutality of sense, conscience against despotism, the soul against the body, virtue against all the vices. The blood of Christians flowed in torrents. They died kissing the hand which slew them. The soul alone protested, while the body surrendered itself to all tortures. Every where Christians fell, and every where they triumphed.

“You speak of Caesar, of Alexander; of their conquests, and of the enthusiasm which they enkindled in the hearts of their soldiers. But can you conceive of a dead man making conquests, with an army faithful and entirely devoted to his memory. My armies have forgotten me, even while living, as the Carthaginian army forgot Hannibal, such is our power! A single battle lost crushes us, and adversity scatters our friends.

“Can you conceive of Caesar as the eternal emperor of the Roman senate, and from the depths of his mausoleum governing the empire, watching over the destinies of Rome? Such is the history of the invasion and conquest of the world by Christianity. Such is the power of the God of the Christians; and such is the perpetual miracle of the progress of the faith and of the government of His church. Nations pass away, thrones crumble, but the church remains. What is then the power which has protected this church, thus assailed by the furious billows of rage and the hostility of ages? Whose is the arm which, for eighteen hundred years, has protected the church from so many storms which have threatened to engulf it?

“Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and myself founded empires. But upon what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ alone founded his empire upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for him.

“In every other existence but that of Christ, how many imperfections? Where is the character which has not yielded, vanquished by obstacles? Where is the individual who has never been governed by circumstances or places, who has never succumbed to the influence of the times, who has never compounded with any customs or passions? From the first day to the last he is the same, always the same; majestic and simple, infinitely firm and infinitely gentle.

“Truth should embrace the universe. Such is Christianity, the only religion which destroys sectional prejudice, the only one which proclaims the unity and the absolute brotherhood of the whole human family, the only one which is purely spiritual; in fine, the only one which assigns to all, without distinction, for a true country, the bosom of the Creator, God. Christ proved that he was the son of the Eternal, by his disregard of time. All his doctrines signify one only, and the same thing, Eternity.

“It is true that Christ proposes to our faith a series of mysteries. He commands, with authority, that we should believe them, giving no other reason than those tremendous words, ‘I am God.’ He declares it. What an abyss he creates, by that declaration, between himself and all the fabricators of religion.

What audacity, what sacrilege, what blasphemy, if it were not true! I say more; the universal triumph of an affirmation of that kind, if the triumph were not really that of God himself, would be a plausible excuse, and the proof of atheism.

“Moreover, in propounding mysteries Christ is harmonious with nature, which is profoundly mysterious. From whence do I come? Whither do I go? Who am I? Human life is a mystery in its origin, its organization, and its end. In man and out of man, in nature, every thing is mysterious. And can one wish that religion should not be mysterious? The creation and the destiny of the world are an unfathomable abyss, as also is the creation and the destiny of each individual. Christianity at least does not evade these great questions. It meets them boldly. And our doctrines are a solution of them for every one who believes.

“The gospel possesses a secret virtue, a mysterious efficacy, a warmth which penetrates and soothes the heart. One finds, in meditating upon it, that which one experiences in contemplating the heavens. The gospel is not a book; it is a living being, with an action, a power, which invades every thing which opposes its extension. Behold it upon this table, this book surpassing all others (here the Emperor deferentially placed his hand upon it); I never omit to read it, and every day with the same pleasure.

“Nowhere is to be found such a series of beautiful ideas, admirable moral maxims, which pass before us like the battalions of a celestial army, and which produce in our soul the same emotion which one experiences in contemplating the infinite expanse of the skies, resplendent in a summer’s night, with all the brilliance of the stars. Not only is our mind absorbed, it is controlled, and the soul can never go astray with this book for its guide. Once master of our spirit, the faithful gospel loves us. God even is our friend, our father, and truly our God. The mother has no greater care for the infant whom she nurses.

“What a proof of the divinity of Christ! With an empire so absolute, he has but one single end, the spiritual melioration of individuals, the purity of conscience, the union to that which is true, the holiness of the soul.

“Christ speaks, and at once generations become his by stricter, closer ties than those of blood; by the most sacred, the most indissoluble of all unions. He lights up the flame of a love which consumes self-love, which prevails over every other love. The founders of other religions never conceived of this mystical love, which is the essence of Christianity, and is beautifully called charity. In every attempt to effect this thing, namely, to mate himself beloved, man deeply feels his own impotence. So that Christ’s greatest miracle undoubtedly is, the reign of charity.

“I have so inspired multitudes that they would die for me. God forbid that I should form any comparison between the enthusiasm of the soldier and Christian charity, which are as unlike as their cause.

“But, after all, my presence was necessary; the lightning of my eye, my voice, a word from me; then the sacred fire was kindled in their hearts. I do indeed possess the secret of this magical power, which lifts the soul, but I could never impart it to any one. None of my generals ever learnt it from me. Nor have I the means of perpetuating my name and love for me, in the hearts of men, and to effect these things without physical means.

“Now that I am at St. Helena; now that I am alone chained upon this rock, who fights and wins empires for me? Who are the courtiers of my misfortune? Who thinks of me? Who makes efforts for me in Europe? Where are my friends? Yes, two or three, whom your fidelity immortalizes, you share, you console my exile.

“Here the voice of the Emperor trembled with emotion, and for a moment he was silent. He then continued:

“Yes, our life once shone with all the brilliance of the diadem and the throne; and yours, Bertrand, reflected that splendor, as the dome of the Invalides, gilt by us, reflects the rays of the sun. But disasters came; the gold gradually became dim. The rain of misfortune and outrage with which I am daily deluged has effaced all the brightness. We are mere lead now, General Bertrand, and soon I shall be in my grave.

“Such is the fate of great men! So it was with Caesar and Alexander. And I, too, am forgotten. And the name of a conqueror and an emperor is a college theme! Our exploits are tasks given to pupils by their tutor, who sit in judgment upon us, awarding us censure or praise. And mark what is soon to become of me; assassinated by the English oligarchy, I die before my time; and my dead body, too must return to the earth, to become food for worms. Behold the destiny, near at hand, of him who has been called the great Napoleon. What an abyss between my deep misery and the eternal reign of Christ, which is proclaimed, loved, adored, and which is extending over all the earth. Is this to die? Is it not rather to live? The death of Christ! It is the death of God.

“For a moment the Emperor was silent. As General Bertrand made no reply, he solemnly added,

“If you do not perceive that Jesus Christ is God, very well, then I did wrong to make you a general.”²²

Endnotes:

1. Liddon, Henry Parry, The Divinity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Page 147-148, Scribner, Welford and Armstrong, New York, New York, 1869.
 2. Harpers New Monthly Magazine, By Making of America Project, Page 177-181, Harpers & Brothers Publishers, New York, New York, 1855
- Photo, courtesy of the Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov>

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