Treatise 6. On the Vanity of Idols

Cyprian of Carthage (c. AD 200–258)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

Treatise 6. On the Vanity of Idols

Showing that the Idols are Not Gods, and that God is One, and that Through Christ Salvation is Given to Believers.

Argumnet.-This Heading Embraces the Three Leading Divisions of This Treatise. The Writer First of All Shows that They in Whose Honour Temples Were Founded, Statues Modelled, Victims Sacrificed, and Festal Days Celebrated, Were Kings and Men and Not Gods; And Therefore that Their Worship Could Be of No Avail Either to Strangers or to Romans, and that the Power of the Roman Empire Was to Attributed to Fate Rather Than to Them, Inasmuch as It Had Arisen by a Certain Good Fortune, and Was Ashamed of Its Own Origin. 1. That those are no gods whom the common people worship, is known from this. They were formerly kings, who on account of their royal memory subsequently began to be adored by their people even in death. Thence temples were founded to them; thence images were sculptured to retain the countenances of the deceased by the likeness; and men sacrificed victims, and celebrated festal days, by way of giving them honour. Thence to posterity those rites became sacred which at first had been adopted as a consolation. And now let us see whether this truth is confirmed in individual instances.

2. Melicertes and Leucothea are precipitated into the sea, and subsequently become sea-divinities. The Castors die by turns, that they may live. Aesculapius is struck by lightning, that he may rise into a god. Hercules, that he may put off the man, is burnt up in the fires of Oeta. Apollo fed the flocks of Admetus; Neptune founded walls for Laomedon, and received-unfortunate builder-no wages for his work. The cave of Jupiter is to be seen in Crete, and his sepulchre is shown; and it is manifest that Saturn was driven away by him, and that from him Latium received its name, as being his lurking-place. He was the first that taught to print letters; he was the first that taught to stamp money in Italy, and thence the treasury is called the treasury of Saturn. And he also was the cultivator of the rustic life, whence he is painted as an old man carrying a sickle. Janus had received him to hospitality when he was driven away, from whose name the Janiculum is so called, and the month of January is appointed. He himself is portrayed with two faces, because, placed in the middle, he seems to look equally towards the commencing and the closing year. The Mauri, indeed, manifestly worship kings, and do not conceal their name by any disguise.

3. From this the religion of the gods is variously changed among individual nations and provinces, inasmuch as no one god is worshipped by all, but by each one the worship of its own ancestors is kept peculiar. Proving that this is so, Alexander the Great writes in the remarkable volume addressed to his mother, that through fear of his power the doctrine of the gods being men, which was kept secret, had been disclosed to him by a priest, that it was the memory of ancestors and kings that was (really) kept up, and that from this the rites of worship and sacrifice have grown up. But if gods were born at any time, why are they not born in these days also?-unless, indeed, Jupiter possibly has grown too old, or the faculty of bearing has failed Juno.

4. But why do you think that the gods can avail on behalf of the Romans, when you see that they can do nothing for their own worshipers in opposition to the Roman arms? For we know that the gods of the Romans are indigenous. Romulus was made a god by the perjury of Proculus, and Picus, and Tiberinus, and Pilumnus, and Consus, whom as a god of treachery Romulus would have to be worshipped, just as if he had been a god of counsels, when his perfidy resulted in the rape of the Sabines. Tatius also both invented and worshipped the goddess Cloacina; Hostilius, Fear and Paleness. By and by, I know not by whom, Fever was dedicated, and Acca and Flora the harlots. These are the Roman gods. But Mars is a Thracian, and Jupiter a Cretan, and Juno either Argive or Samian or Carthaginian, and Diana of Taurus, and the mother of the gods of Ida; and there are Egyptian monsters, not deities, who assuredly, if they had had any power, would have preserved their own and their people's kingdoms. Certainly there are also among the Romans the conquered Penates whom the fugitive Aeneas introduced thither. There is also Venus the bald,-far more dishonoured by the fact of her baldness in Rome than by her having been wounded in Homer.

5. Kingdoms do not rise to supremacy through merit, but are varied by chance. Empire was formerly held by both Assyrians and Medes and Persians; and we know, too, that both Greeks and Egyptians have had dominion. Thus, in the varying vicissitudes of power, the period of empire has also come to the Romans as to the others. But if you recur to its origin, you must needs blush. A people is collected together from profligates and criminals, and by founding an asylum, impunity for crimes makes the number great; and that their king himself may have a superiority in crime, Romulus becomes a fratricide; and in order to promote marriage, he makes a beginning of that affair of concord by discords. They steal, they do violence, they deceive in order to increase the population of the state; their marriage consists of the broken covenants of hospitality and cruel wars with their fathers-in-law. The consulship, moreover, is the highest degree in Roman honours, yet we see that the consulship began even as did the kingdom. Brutus puts his sons to death, that the commendation of his dignity may increase by the approval of his wickedness. The Roman kingdom, therefore, did not grow from the sanctities of religion, nor from auspices and auguries, but it keeps its appointed time within a definite limit. Moreover, Regulus observed the auspices, yet was taken prisoner; and Mancinus observed their religious obligation, yet was sent under the yoke. Paulus had chickens that fed, and yet he was slain at Cannae. Caius Caesar de-

spised the auguries and auspices that were opposed to his sending ships before the winter to Africa; yet so much the more easily he both sailed and conquered.

6. Of all these, however, the principle is the same, which misleads and deceives, and with tricks which darken the truth, leads away a credulous and foolish rabble. They are impure and wandering spirits, who, after having been steeped in earthly vices, have departed from their celestial vigour by the contagion of earth, and do not cease, when ruined themselves, to seek the ruin of others; and when degraded themselves, to infuse into others the error of their own degradation. These demons the poets also acknowledge, and Socrates declared that he was instructed and ruled at the will of a demon; and thence the Magi have a power either for mischief or for mockery, of whom, however, the chief Hostanes both says that the form of the true God cannot be seen, and declares that true angels stand round about His throne. Wherein Plato also on the same principle concurs, and, maintaining one God, calls the rest angels or demons. Moreover, Hermes Trismegistus speaks of one God, and confesses that He is incomprehensible, and beyond our estimation.

7. These spirits, therefore, are lurking under the statues and consecrated images: these inspire the breasts of their prophets with their afflatus, animate the fibres of the entrails, direct the flights of birds, rule the lots, give efficiency to oracles, are always mixing up falsehood with truth, for they are both deceived and they deceive; they disturb their life, they disquiet their slumbers; their spirits creeping also into their bodies, secretly terrify their minds, distort their limbs, break their health, excite diseases to force them to worship of themselves, so that when glutted with the steam of the altars and the piles of cattle, they may unloose what they had bound, and so appear to have effected a cure. The only remedy from them is when their own mischief ceases; nor have they any other desire than to call men away from God, and to turn them from the understanding of the true religion, to superstition with respect to themselves; and since they themselves are under punishment, (they wish) to seek for themselves companions in punishment whom they may by their misguidance make sharers in their crime. These, however, when adjured by us through the true God, at once yield and confess, and are constrained to go out from the bodies possessed. You may see them at our voice, and by the operation of the hidden majesty, smitten with stripes, burnt with fire, stretched out with the increase of a growing punishment, howling, groaning, entreating, confessing whence they came and when depart, even in the hearing of those very persons who worship them, and either springing forth at once or vanishing gradually, even as the faith of the sufferer comes in aid, or the grace of the healer effects. Hence they urge the common people to detest our name, so that men begin to hate us before they know us, lest they should either imitate us if known, or not be able to condemn us.

8. Therefore the one Lord of all is God. For that sublimity cannot possibly have any compeer, since it alone possesses all power. Moreover, let us borrow an illustration for the divine government from the earth. When ever did an alliance in royalty either begin with good faith or end without bloodshed? Thus the brotherhood of the Thebans was broken, and discord endured even in death in their disunited ashes. And one kingdom could not contain

the Roman twins, although the shelter of one womb had held them. Pompey and Caesar were kinsmen, and yet they did not maintain the bond of their relationship in their envious power. Neither should you marvel at this in respect of man, since herein all nature consents. The bees have one king, and in the flocks there is one leader, and in the herds one ruler. Much rather is the Ruler of the world one; who commands all things, whatsoever they are, with His word, disposes them by His wisdom, and accomplishes them by His power.

9. He cannot be seen-He is too bright for vision; nor comprehended-He is too pure for our discernment; nor estimated-He is too great for our perception; and therefore we are only worthily estimating Him when we say that He is inconceivable. But what temple can God have, whose temple is the whole world? And while man dwells far and wide, shall I shut up the power of such great majesty within one small building? He must be dedicated in our mind; in our breast He must be consecrated. Neither must you ask the name of God. God is His name. Among those there is need of names where a multitude is to he distinguished by the appropriate characteristics of appellations. To God who alone is, belongs the whole name of God; therefore He is one, and He in His entirety is everywhere diffused. For even the common people in many things naturally confess God, when their mind and soul are admonished of their author and origin. We frequently hear it said, ”O God,” and ”God sees,” and ”I commend to God,” and ”God give you,” and ”as God will,” and ”if God should grant; ”and this is the very height of sinfulness, to refuse to acknowledge Him whom you cannot but know.

10. But that Christ is, and in what way salvation came to us through Him, after this manner is the plan, after this manner is the means. First of all, favour with God was given to the Jews. Thus they of old were righteous; thus their ancestors were obedient to their religious engagements. Thence with them both the loftiness of their rule flourished, and the greatness of their race advanced. But subsequently becoming neglectful of discipline, proud, and puffed up with confidence in their fathers, they despised the divine precepts, and lost the favour conferred upon them. But how profane became their life, what offence to their violated religion was contracted, even they themselves bear witness, since, although they are silent with their voice, they confess it by their end. Scattered and straggling, they wander about; outcasts from their own soil and climate, they are thrown upon the hospitality of strangers.

11. Moreover, God had previously foretold that it would happen, that as the ages passed on, and the end of the world was near at hand, God would gather to Himself from every nation, and people, and place, worshippers much better in obedience and stronger in faith, who would draw from the divine gift that mercy which the Jews had received and lost by despising their religious ordinances. Therefore of this mercy and grace the Word and Son of God is sent as the dispenser and master, who by all the prophets of old was announced as the enlightener and teacher of the human race. He is the power of God, He is the reason, He is His wisdom and glory; He enters into a virgin; being the holy Spirit, He is endued with flesh; God is mingled with man. This is our God, this is Christ, who, as the mediator

of the two, puts on man that He may lead them to the Father. What man is, Christ was willing to be, that man also may be what Christ is.

12. And the Jews knew that Christ was to come, for He was always being announced to them by the warnings of prophets. But His advent being signified to them as twofold-the one which should discharge the office and example of a man, the other which should avow Him as God-they did not understand the first advent which preceded, as being hidden in His passion, but believe in the one only which will be manifest in power. But that the people of the Jews could not understand this, was the desert of their sins. They were so punished by their blindness of wisdom and intelligence, that they who were unworthy of life, had life before their eyes, and saw it not. 13. Therefore when Christ Jesus, in accordance with what had been previously foretold by the prophets, drove out from men the demons by His word, and by the command of His voice nerved up the paralytics, cleansed the leprous, enlightened the blind, gave power of movement to the lame, raised the dead again, compelled the elements to obey Him as servants, the winds to serve Him, the seas to obey Him, the lower regions to yield to Him; the Jews, who had believed Him man only from the humility of His flesh and body, regarded Him as a sorcerer for the authority of His power. Their masters and leaders-that is, those whom He subdued both by learning and wisdom-inflamed with wrath and stimulated with indignation, finally seized Him and delivered Him to Pontius Pilate, who was then the procurator of Syria on behalf of the Romans, demanding with violent and obstinate urgency His crucifixion and death.

14. That they would do this He Himself also had foretold; and the testimony of all the prophets had in like manner preceded Him, that it behoved Him to suffer, not that He might feel death, but that He might conquer death, and that, when He should have suffered, He should return again into heaven, to show the power of the divine majesty. Therefore the course of events fulfilled the promise. For when crucified, the office of the executioner being forestalled, He Himself of His own will yielded up His spirit, and on the third day freely rose again from the dead. He appeared to His disciples like as He had been. He gave Himself to the recognition of those that saw Him, associated together with Him; and being evident by the substance of His bodily existence, He delayed for forty days, that they might be instructed by Him in the precepts of life, and might learn what they were to teach. Then in a cloud spread around Him He was lifted up into heaven, that as a conqueror He might bring to the Father, Man whom He loved, whom He put on, whom He shielded from death; soon to come from heaven for the punishment of the devil and to the judgment of the human race, with the force of an avenger and with the power of a judge; whilst the disciples, scattered over the world, at the bidding of their Master and God gave forth His precepts for salvation, guided men from their wandering in darkness to the way of light, and gave eyes to the blind and ignorant for the acknowledgment of the truth.

15. And that the proof might not be the less substantial, and the confession of Christ might not be a matter of pleasure, they are tried by tortures, by crucifixions, by many kinds of punishments. Pain, which is the test of truth, is brought to bear, that Christ the Son of

God, who is trusted in as given to men for their life, might not only be announced by the heralding of the voice, but by the testimony of suffering. Therefore we accompany Him, we follow Him, we have Him as the Guide of our way, the Source of light, the Author of salvation, promising as well the Father as heaven to those who seek and believe. What Christ is, we Christians shall be, if we imitate Christ.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.