

the moral force of Christian faith was of a kind that could not be crushed by any force at the disposal of the Empire; and this at last necessitated a change in the attitude of the Empire towards Christianity. Christian faith displayed itself as a moral force powerful enough to break down all the walls of partition by which human beings are separated, uniting into a new society Jew and Gentile, Greek and Barbarian, male and female, freeman and slave. This at first seemed a peril to the Emperors, always in dread of any social combination that might overthrow their authority. But in face of the enormous force which Christianity had displayed for generations—a youthful vigour which rose triumphant out of every attempt to subdue it—the question must at last have occurred to some of the Roman statesmen, whether this moral force might not be utilized for the purpose of strengthening the political unity of the Empire. The idea may have been suggested before the time of Constantine, but he was the first who had the sagacity and the courage to make it the basis of his policy; and thus Christianity, instead of being treated as incompatible with loyalty to the Empire, came to be its national religion.

The long conflict which the moral force of Christianity had to sustain with the force of secular authority, necessarily raised a number of moral problems. For, naturally, Christians differed from one another in regard to the length to which their common faith allowed them to go in making concessions to Imperial authority and to the usages of the Pagan society in which they lived. Christians, therefore, at a very early period, split into two parties separated by a line of cleavage which can still be traced—one adhering rigidly to the requirements of Christian morality in their strictest interpretation, the other believing itself entitled to greater freedom in its relations with the surrounding world. Accordingly, the ethical writings of the early church are entirely taken up with the discussion of particular problems in practical morals. It is not till late in the fourth century, a generation at least after Christianity had been adopted as the religion of the Empire, that we come upon any attempt to construct a science of Christian Ethics as a whole. The form which such attempts took, was determined by an obvious law of human life.