

ARTICLE IV.

THE EVOLUTION OF CHASTITY.

BY THE REVEREND HENRY A. STIMSON, D.D.

THIS article has nothing to do with biblical revelation. It raises no question as to God's creating man in his own image. Christian dogmatics as a science detaches itself entirely from the question of how God created man, that it may limit itself to the fact that He did create him, and to the consequent relationship. Man's ultimate moral responsibility unquestionably covers his entire conscious existence, and is to God. Having said this, we are free to study the phenomena of human life and character as they present themselves in the great distinctive groups: the physical phenomena, the moral, and the social.

It is now an accepted truth with the biologist that the embryo, human or animal, reveals in these earliest stages of its history the lines of its subsequent development. It is probable that if we could properly observe we should find in the protoplasmic cell from which the embryo springs an equally clear indication of what the subsequent physical history of the particular organism would be. We could know the man there as definitely as we can in the baby. It seems to be true that no two atoms in the universe are identical, and that each stands related to the group to which it belongs, or to the connection in which its inherent force is to find its subsequent opportunity, in so distinctive a way that its history may be foretold. But whether this be so or not, the important fact is that the line of development of the human embryo is that

of the later development of the man; and as the physical organs unfold in a regular sequence in the embryo, so the faculties, physical, mental, and moral, of the man, have also their fixed natural sequence. They do not all appear together. Man acquires the power to hear, to see, to digest, to stand, to walk, and also to think, to estimate, to measure, to weigh, to forecast, step by step. The moral faculties also obey the same law, and have their true sequence; fear, avarice, love, hate, desire, passion, conscience, all showing a fixed relation to a normal line of unfolding.

With perhaps not the same certainty, but along the same line, it is now generally believed that the life history of a race or a tribe is in the same way foretold in the development of the individual. Men moving together in the mass in the social organism, show the same definite, ordered development as appears in the individual man. Physical traits precede the intellectual, and they in turn the moral. Men, grouped together at first under the guidance of physical necessities, are under the control of physical powers. They need food, or a common defense, or merely physical well-being. Later they seek companionship for intellectual stimulus and gratification; and still later the moral and religious faculties find sustenance and opportunity in the association of man with his kind. So that only relatively late in any particular instance does a social group show the completed form of well-ordered existence in which the spiritual or ethical and intellectual and physical are rightly related and equally matured. In the light of this principle, now so universally recognized in human history, it is manifestly necessary to reëxamine many well-established judgments. We know that with children we do harm when we crowd upon undeveloped minds studies that properly belong only to a later physical and intellectual stage.

And we are unjust and even cruel when we demand moral discernment that lies quite beyond their years. There is, for example, a time when to a child a lie means nothing, when selfishness and greed are but the normal animal instincts, and when passion and violence are only the primitive expression of weakness and fear. Many a child has been punished for an apparent moral obliquity of which it was utterly unconscious, as it has had attributed to it motives of which as yet it was physically (and therefore morally) incapable.

With equal truth we are to measure the moral status of a community or a race only in connection with its ethical age, that is, the stage at which it has arrived in its moral development. Otherwise we are unjust. We may hold up our own standards as an ideal for its future advancement; we may not insist upon them as the measure of its present character. George Eliot says, "The level to which one man strives in vain to rise, is that to which if another falls he is lost." I propose to show the importance of this principle in one relation, and the light it casts upon a single social evil.

The other day a Southern woman, writing on the Negro question, at the South, found difficulty in putting into words the extent of her contempt for Negro women, because of what she esteems their constitutional impurity. She does not believe there is, or at least she never has known, a single negro woman whom she thought chaste. And she proceeded to justify her own antagonism to the race, and the treatment of the negro which is now expressed in Southern legislation and largely justified in Southern society, on the ground that chastity is a sacred trust divinely committed to the Anglo-Saxon race.

There is a general and singular tendency for people to assume that what is committed to them by inheritance, either

in property or personal traits, is characteristic, and marks an inherent distinction which is theirs by the grace of God. The particular possession or trait may be of most recent acquisition and in its nature readily lost. Its origin and history are bravely ignored. The wealthy daughter of the shoemaker who, having made the family fortune, has departed this life, sneers at the son of the successful tailor whose task of money-making is not yet completed; and the wife of the professor in the college town, or of the man of letters or of science in the city, has a comfortable feeling of superiority over her neighbor the wife of the grocer or the butcher. Dr. Johnson's friend who thought all foreigners are fools, has a very flourishing progeny. We none of us can easily escape the comfortable conviction that if in any direction God has given us more than others, it is because of some native and inherent superiority on our part, to which, in the divine providence, external conditions have been made properly in some degree to correspond; in the language of the French nobleman, we think, "God knows a gentleman when he sees him."

Light would be thrown on many burning questions, and something would be done to ameliorate the scorn which is frequently felt for people less favorably circumstanced than ourselves, if the history of the evolution of human society were kept in mind. In the case in hand, chastity, for example, so far from being the characteristic of a particular race or inherent in any one grade of human society, is one of the latest of acquisitions, and one of the most unstable. It pertains characteristically to no stage of human existence, and has proved as difficult to maintain among the highest as in any stage below. Witness the dissoluteness of court life in almost any generation, the immorality of princes as exalted as Louis XIV. or of queens as favored as Mary Stuart or the virgin

Elizabeth, not to speak of the notorious impurity of most European courts to-day. This has always been true. We need not go back for our proofs to the earliest periods of human society, the courts of the Pharaohs or of Sardanapalus. Unchastity was no bar to the position of woman in the best days of Greece, and in Rome the sneer of the satirist told the undisputed-truth that the great ladies of the Empire counted the years by their husbands. Even a man of the personal character and refinement of Cicero did not rise above the level of his times, and readily gave away his wife to his friend. The Old Testament, authoritative expression as it is of the mind of God, is by no means a record of the lives of men who can be adopted as examples, and as a book of morals has carefully to be guarded as furnishing principles, but not patterns. Nowhere in antiquity is there evidence that feminine chastity was an original gift to any race, or was a permanent mark of any state of civilization. It is true that Tacitus noted as a characteristic of some of the remoter German tribes that they had a habit of planting their homes in the solitude of the forest, and highly prized the virtue of their women. But this was only an incidental case; and there is no instance of a race acquiring the idea of the chastity of woman as a virtue and holding it as a prized possession, except as the result of a long and bitterly maintained struggle. From the standpoint of the historian, Rénan says that "Tens of thousands of women had to be stoned to death before adultery could be got recognized by them as a crime." The difficulty with which it is held in that position in the feminine mind is illustrated by the constant falling off of public opinion even in the best society, and the manner in which those who depart from the stricter code are tolerated. Even our highly favored American life is gaining a shameful notoriety because of the looseness

of the marriage tie. We justify the sneer of the satirist, that we differ from the Mormons only in this that we drive wives tandem, and they drive them abreast. And shocking as is the evidence from time to time thrust upon us of the moral degradation that exists in neglected rural communities, the frequency with which divorce and prompt marriage with a paramour occur and awaken no condemnation in the topmost social circles in our great cities, is painful testimony to the instability of our moral standards and the prolonged and insistent struggle by which alone they can be secured.

The most brilliant and the most successful attack upon Christianity in modern times was that of Voltaire. It is by common consent the most unspiritual, immoral, and irreligious of them all. The "infamous" thing, as he termed it, against which his main assault was dealt, was simply continence and chastity. To him chastity was the mystic key of the Christian holiness. Voltaire and his friends held that chastity is no virtue at all, but generally an impediment to free human happiness. This, in the testimony of the historian to-day, is the underlying motive of the line of attack upon Christianity which has never ceased from that time to this, and has lost none of its virulence. As a professed doctrine, free love may not be decent, but it is a practical experience into which individuals, even the loftiest, are continually falling and by which whole groups of the most highly developed in human society are continually affected. Indeed, it is safe to say that to-day there is no community, whether in Christian societies or in heathen, so cultivated or so exalted that it is safe from this form of demoralization or is at any time without its numerous instances. Christianity, and Christianity alone, with the possible exception of Judaism in its later development, has proved able to arrest this tendency or to awaken or maintain this concep-

tion of virtue. So far from its being inherent in civilization and refinement, one is never safe to assume its existence. Even among Christian nations the literature which depicts the lives of the higher classes, and which certainly furnishes the reading of those classes, is loaded with suggestions of impurity. A distinguished French lecturer in New York last winter urged his hearers not to judge of the France of to-day by the novels which are produced by its chief writers, asserting that the great body of the French people, the people of common life, and outside the cities, are as pure and as simple as in any land; while at the same time he was compelled to acknowledge the gross impurity of French literature and the correctness of its picture of the most aristocratic French society. Whether we turn to Russian, or German, or Scandinavian, or even English society, the same is true, and our American aristocratic life as we see it in New York, bears its own shameful testimony. A recent visit to the older part of Pennsylvania, settled by the sturdiest and most religious of German emigrants two generations ago, brings to light a condition of impurity existing to-day among their young people that is difficult to put into words. The point to be observed is that the conception of feminine chastity as a supreme virtue, which is so easily assumed as characteristic of a particular race or group, is only a late acquisition, the result of prolonged and painful development, and is maintained only with effort. Everywhere in society, at home or abroad, there is abundant evidence of the feeling expressed by the famous French tragedienne Madame Bernhard, who, when asked by an American friend for her opinion on the Decalogue, replied simply, "*Il y en a trop.*" The truth is, as George Eliot said, that "Man is by nature an unmitigated savage; let him alone, and he lapses into barbarism." The social virtues and refinements

in which we glory and by which we so readily distinguish our superiority above our neighbors, particularly those of another speech or another skin, are often the thinnest veneer; and are at best the result of circumstances in our history or condition the most accidental. Nothing but the grace of God and the most strenuous obedience to the Christian code of ethics will preserve for us what little of permanent moral character we may at any time have acquired. Relax even a little in our watchfulness, and we seem quickly to lose all that we have gained. When, therefore, we find ourselves tempted, as people of Anglo-Saxon birth are very apt to be tempted, in discussing our relations to what we call inferior races, lightly to throw aside moral obligations or justify ourselves in departing from the strictest rule of right, on the ground that the higher code is only for ourselves, we are sure not only to deal unjustly with others but to undermine the very foundations of our boasted superiority. It is simply suicide to imply that for any immediate gain, however desirable, we are justified in setting aside the strictest observance of the moral law. There can be but one true code of morals. It has been hard to learn it, harder to maintain it in practice. But as human society advances, it gains in significance as well as in power. And there never was a time, and perhaps never a community, in which its assertion and its absolute inviolability were more to be insisted upon. We are entering upon a new stage of history. The opportunity of the Anglo-Saxon is coming in new forms of national development and in new relations to other races. The history of such virtues as we possess, and the consciousness of the unsteadiness and weakness of our practice even of those virtues which we claim as peculiarly our own, are so marked that we may well feel ourselves called to walk humbly. We may indeed be proud

of our distinction and our opportunities, but it is well not to forget the path by which we have come into them and the instability of our present tenure. Then we will be not only more just in judging others and more pitiful to those less favorably circumstanced, but also more modest and more honest in judging ourselves. Woman never held a loftier position than the one she occupies in America to-day. No one can impair it but herself. And as for the men, we will do well to try to understand the spirit of that noble-minded London physician and philosopher, the late Dr. James Hinton, who, with all his distinguished doings to choose from and his intimate knowledge of the needs of modern society, said on his death-bed: "If I am to be remembered at all, this is what I would be remembered by: I am the man who said, 'Man is so made that he can rise above the sexual passion and subordinate it to use.' There! even if that be false and all else I have said was true, I would rather be remembered as having said that one falsehood than by all the truths."

There is permanent validity in Lady Mary Wortley Montague's remark that there are but two kinds of people, men and women. This is the one unfading distinction. Upon their holding their true place and moving forward together, each without degrading the other, depends the progress of the race, and the ultimate attainment of the true goal of existence. The worth of the goal may be measured by the difficulty of the contest.