

## The Peril of Asceticism.

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AT various times in the history of the Christian Church the tendency deliberately to limit the exercise of natural powers and the satisfaction of natural desires has been prominent. If this severity deserves to be called a vice, at the least it must be admitted that it is born of the exaggeration of a great virtue; it may be claimed for it that it is the school of self-control. And this ascetic tendency in religion is not the outcome of Christianity merely; it appears to be co-extensive with the religious instinct. The semi-religious rites of self-torture by which the young Red Indian completed the process whereby he became a warrior of the tribe, the lancing of their own flesh by the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel, the beds of spikes and the twisted bodies of Hindu fakirs in the present day, all illustrate the naturalness with which the human mind attributes a religious, if not a moral, value to self-inflicted pain. A modified form of the eighth beatitude of our Lord, "Blessed are they that persecute themselves for religion's sake," would find a wide acceptance throughout the heathen world—perhaps an acceptance more practical and a testing more sincere than those which Christians accord to the actual words of their Master.

The influence of the ascetic ideal among Christians is seen in the glamour which in the minds of some persons has always seemed to surround the monastic life. In spite of the celibate condition, and the enforced renunciation, as well as the implied depreciation, of the joys of the home and the family; in spite of the rigour of the daily round of duty and the straitened outlook upon human activity; in spite of the strictness of the discipline and the severity of the penances, life in the monastery or the convent has seemed to many men and

women to present the highest opportunities for the worship and service of God. It is not difficult to account for this. Any service which involves suffering and sacrifice does undoubtedly test the sincerity of the convictions and motives behind it. There is little room for selfishness of a base kind in such a life, though it appears to the writer that there is as little room for that purest form of unselfishness which is exhibited in the positive virtue of altruism. And so it is not to be wondered at if a certain sort of religious mind seizes upon this method of trying its faith by the standard of readiness to bear afflictions, without pausing to consider whether the afflictions are of God's appointment or man's. Still less wonderful is it if such self-denial impresses upon the irreligious crowd the conviction that here at least is a religious spirit, here at least is an unselfish love of God ; so that the "religious" life means to many people even to-day the life that is spent in the cloister. In fact, to the thought of the ascetic and the onlooker alike, the sharing in the sufferings of Christ has seemed to consist in the bearing of a cross which was, in reality, not appointed by Him, but was invented by the one who carries it.

In both non-Christian and Christian faiths a truer view of asceticism has at some period prevailed, and the worship of God by self-chastisement has been set aside as unworthy of the high place which had been given to it. It is interesting to remember that, five hundred years before Christ, Gautama, afterwards the Buddha, in his search for a means of escape from the miseries of existence, tried first the ascetic methods of the Hindu teachers ; yet he had come to see that they were unavailing before his discovery of the "truth," and had renounced them even at the cost of losing the devotion of his earliest disciples. And in our own branch of the Christian Church we know how the Reformers set aside, amongst other things, much of the excessive asceticism of medieval days : how, for instance, they would not demand the celibacy of the clergy, or even fasting reception of the Holy Communion ; how they refused to exalt the monastic life by distinctions of regular and secular clergy ;

how they left the method of observing days of abstinence to be determined henceforth by the individual.

It will scarcely be disputed that in adopting this attitude the Church of England was obeying the teaching as well as following the example of Christ. He whose manner of life among men differed so strikingly from that of His forerunner that the names "wine-bibber" and "glutton" were applied to Him by those who were offended by the contrast; He who taught His disciples that in fasting they should see to it that they appeared not unto men to fast; He who announced that the object of His mission to men was that they might have life, and have it abundantly; He who prayed to His Father, not to take His chosen out of the world, but to keep them from its evil, must not be appealed to on behalf of any theory of life which excludes from its ideal the complete use and development of all its powers, and the fullest sharing in all its lawful pleasures.

It is not, of course, intended to deny the place which self-denial must of necessity take in every Christian's life. "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him," and, "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself," are eternal laws of the kingdom of heaven. But opportunities of self-denial, if it is to be acceptable to God, will not be sought needlessly for their own sake, though they will be accepted, and indeed welcomed, when they come to us by God's plain appointment; while the essence of the ascetic idea is this—that the salutary effects of physical hardship upon the human spirit are so great that abstinence from things that enter into the life of the world is in itself a profitable exercise.

To establish the fact that harm does result from such asceticism, it must be observed that, while the effect upon the spectator is first of all, as has been said, to produce conviction of the sincerity of the motive which actuates it, there are further consequences as well. It stamps upon his mind also the loftiness of the religious character, its exaltation above the level of all ordinary human activity. He feels that it is

not for him or for any other man, busy in the practical life of the world, to presume to imitate it; the attempt to do so would be folly. And when it is said that the religious ideal of life comes to be regarded as unattainable, and even inimitable, the admission must follow that, as a practical force influencing human conduct, it is powerless. Further, this ideal life is as unnatural as it is high. It is what it is, not chiefly by virtue of its including new activities, but by virtue of its excluding old ones; and the activities which have been excluded are not such as were sinful in themselves, else it were no asceticism, but they are just those elements in life which in many cases make it useful or pleasant. And so the ordinary man is brought to the point of thinking, not only that he could not be religious if he would, but also that he would not if he could.

Of course, this is not a complete account of the modern attitude of indifference, just because the influence of the ascetic life is not the only one brought to bear upon the modern mind. But it represents the contribution of asceticism towards the formation of that attitude; and it is, indeed, easy to see that the prevalence in any wide extent of an ascetic type of Christianity must lead to a separation in common thought between religion and the ordinary occupations of life.

Such a cleavage—opposed as it is to the true character of Christ's religion, and fatal to its progress—is so widespread at the present day that it would seem as if any effort is worth making which can help at all to remove it. And, distasteful as it would undoubtedly be to many, one means to this end would be the abandonment of that attitude of disapproval which is so often adopted towards those habits of the world in which lurks the possibility—often, alas! realized—of abuse. At the risk of losing at the outset the sympathy of some readers, the principles are first of all applied to the case of temperance in regard to intoxicants.

It is necessary to begin by emphasizing one or two conditions under which all discussion of temperance methods must be carried on; and no apology for doing so is required,

inasmuch as these conditions are frequently ignored. First of all, the use of alcoholic liquor cannot be condemned on the simple ground that such use is unnecessary, and it is therefore a luxury. Assuming for the moment that it is a luxury, it does not follow that its use is unjustifiable for a Christian; for the whole question of the rightness of luxuries is exceedingly complicated, and admits of no general answer—every particular luxury must be considered on its own merits. The subject is too large to be entered upon here; it will suffice to say that no argument of this kind can be found against the use of intoxicants which will not prove with equal decisiveness that it is wrong to eat meat more than once a day, to wear any but the coarsest clothes (*e.g.*, a blanket suit), to be the possessor of a silver watch or of two walking-sticks. How many of those who condemn the use of wine on the ground that it is a luxury go to church on Sunday in silk hats or expensive bonnets! Moreover, it cannot even be accepted as an “additional” argument whose object is to strengthen, though not to prove, the case against intoxicants; for unless all luxuries be sinful, including those which have been instanced, no luxury can be sinful merely because it is a luxury, though it may be so on other grounds. Let us be careful to avoid the attractiveness of an undistributed middle term.

In the second place, the “medical” objection must be discarded so long as medical opinion on the subject is so far from being unanimous. The difference between the state of medical opinion with regard to this practice and that with regard to, say, the use of opium is manifest. Again, even if medical men were unanimous in condemning the moderate as well as the excessive use of alcohol, it would not be competent for anyone to base his total abstinence principles on this fact, unless he were prepared also to condemn, tacitly if not publicly, the use of wine in the Holy Communion. At present, however, the very openness of the question is proof that alcoholic liquors cannot all be labelled “poison.” And the significance of this must be pressed, for it is not unusual to meet the “medical”

objection in a subtle disguise. It is urged sometimes that, while moderate indulgence in intoxicants may be harmless to some particular individual, yet it is wrong because of the influence exerted by his example upon others. But this can only mean either (1) "that his moderate drinking makes others believe that excessive drinking is lawful," which is simply untrue; or else (2) "that it makes others believe that moderate drinking is lawful," which can only be regarded as undesirable, in general, by means of the most shameless *petitio principii*. For, if one sets out to investigate the rightness of any particular habit, it is no evidence against it to say that its practice by one individual encourages its practice by others; otherwise we should be compelled to pronounce sinful all attendance at public worship, and all daily intercourse through the medium of speech. The words "in general" have been used because many special cases exist in which moderate drinking is confessedly harmful, in that the persons concerned, whether through past habit or lack of sufficient self-control, are incapable of making it their regular practice. For them moderate drinking leads almost inevitably to excess; and this fact—a particular fact—must affect the decisions of themselves and of those by whose example they are influenced. But all this is irrelevant to the general statement made above and the general interpretation given.

After this preliminary clearing of the ground, let us consider the important facts. Alcohol, like all other material things, has no essential moral character; the dispensation under which distinction was made between clean and unclean beasts has passed away. Hence our attitude towards this particular substance, as towards all others, must be a desire to make as full use of it as possible without allowing use to become misuse. That is to say, at the outset we are confronted by the axiom that right use is here, as elsewhere, the true ideal for the servant of Jesus Christ. But, alas! misuse is sorely prevalent, and is universally admitted to be one of the most fruitful causes of human misery and sin.

How shall the Christian seek to repair this state of things?

Two methods are proposed. The one is, to teach, by word and example, in what the ideal consists—in other words, to preach, “Not misuse, but use.” The other is, to avoid all contact with what is seen to lead in so many cases to disaster—in other words, to preach, “Not misuse, but disuse.” That there is room—even necessity—for both these methods cannot be doubted. Everybody will heartily agree that the cause of temperance—that is, of moderation or self-control—can often be promoted most effectively—it may be only—by the method of total abstinence. Everybody will agree that the case must often arise in which a true Christian will rightly feel the obligation to become a total abstainer for others’ sake ; but, unless we are to revive the ascetic manner of life, such action will never be regarded as the ideal, but only as a means towards the attainment of a far-removed, far higher ideal. It may well be true that this ideal is so difficult of attainment that we shall long be compelled to employ such means ; yet even so it is possible to make it plain that the method of total abstinence really looks forward to the accomplishment of a result as far removed from “disuse” as from “misuse.” To what extent is this made plain in practice ? How many total abstainers there are who not merely make their abstinence an end rather than a means in their own plan of work, but even look askance at all those who believe that they can best promote the cause of moderation by practising and exhibiting now the true ideal of conduct, the ideal of right use, in order that its intrinsic superiority to misuse may be, as it surely must be, recognized by all. It should be possible for all temperance workers to recognize the value and meaning of both methods of work, and to agree as to the ultimate end in view.

It is not easy to gauge the amount of harm that is done, not only to the temperance cause, but also to Christianity itself, by those total abstainers who in this way arrogate to themselves exclusively the dignity of temperance workers. Their action gives a show of justice to the popular description of our faith as a religion of “giving up,” a religion of “not doing.” A

Christianity, however, whose characteristics are negative rather than positive will not touch men's hearts nor win the devotion of their wills.

Much of what has just been written will apply equally to some other practices the disuse of which is proclaimed in certain quarters as a Christian duty. While every decision must take into account the individual's power of self-restraint and the extent and nature of his influence, yet it cannot be right to frame an ultimate ideal on the hypothesis that men are not able, nor ever will be able, to control themselves.

Is it desirable that the servant of Christ should play cards? In seeking to answer this question, we may probably dismiss the objection that all mere games are a waste of time; but we must not overlook the important one, so often heard, that to play cards at all is to encourage gambling. Is this true? All will agree that gambling is inconsistent with the perfect Christian life, and that it is the duty of everybody to discourage it. But how can that best be done? Is the disuse of cards the ideal, or only one possible method of working towards it? Let the answer be given by an incident within the writer's knowledge—very common, no doubt, but well suited to illustrate the point. A young layman in Cambridge, after dining at another college than his own, was invited by his host to join in a game of bridge. He replied that he would greatly enjoy it, but that it was his rule to play for love only. This decision was accepted by the others who played with him, though with surprise. It was evident that they expected such a scrupulous person to be a quite incompetent player who would have been sure to lose, but as the game proceeded they found that he was as skilful as themselves. Now let us put three pertinent questions. First, can anyone maintain that his action encouraged gambling? Secondly, can anyone suppose that his influence for good would have been greater, or as great, if he had replied, "Thank you, I do not play bridge," and had left them without the object-lesson of a game played and enjoyed for its own sake? Thirdly and chiefly, which of the two possible courses would the better have commended to



those particular men the reality and worth of the Christian life?

It is no answer to all this to urge that many people would not dare to assert their principles, and would be betrayed by card-playing into gambling against their will. For while this must be freely admitted, it only goes to prove that such people must regard themselves as obliged by their circumstances to take exceptional action, and must abstain from what, for them, is no longer an opportunity of bringing Christian influence to bear upon others, but has become instead an opportunity for their own failure. Once more it must be emphasized that the ideal at which we aim, and for which there are more ways than one of working, must not be lowered just because there are persons who cannot at once attain to it. We aim to replace misuse by a right use, and not finally by disuse. Is this principle recognized? Does it govern our criticisms?

An Evangelical writer has recently expressed his opinion that a clergyman had better not smoke; and his opinion is shared by many. Two remarks may be made in addition to those above, many of which are still applicable. It has been said, though it has also been disputed, that smoking in the company of other men promotes friendliness. If this is true in anyone's experience, it is a fact to be reckoned with. But another reply may be given, in line with the main principle of this paper: that the man who finds smoking pleasant, and smokes moderately and at reasonable times, is helping definitely to bring home to the mind of to-day the fact that Christianity is not a negative but is an essentially positive thing. If he is misunderstood, the fault must be assigned, not to his smoking, but to himself.

Another practice which some persons think it right to condemn is cycling on Sunday, for whatever purpose. Now it will not be disputed that to many persons cycling has long ceased to be a recreative pastime, and has become only a means of locomotion. If a cripple, able without assistance to move slowly and painfully, finds a pair of crutches a valuable help and saver

of time, must he put aside all such artificial assistance on Sunday? If not, why should a non-cripple, who finds that it saves time in locomotion to use a certain mechanical device whereby a rotary movement of the feet replaces an oscillatory movement, be required to discard such on that day? There is no question here, be it observed, of enforcing Sunday work upon others, as there would be in the case of using trains or carriages. Can this practice, then, justly be condemned, or even deprecated? Those who think so urge as their reason that Sunday cycling for reasonable purposes encourages the desecration of the day by immoderate and unnecessary riding. But it is the writer's opinion that the man who cycles during the whole of Sunday or at the hours of worship recognizes as clearly as the strictest Sabbatarian the difference between his act and that of one who rides for the sake of his work; and if he claims inability to distinguish between the two acts, he does so in order to distress some tender conscience, and to rid himself—in other people's estimation, not his own—of responsibility for his sin. But he does not deceive himself. The parishioner who tells his clergyman, "You can't blame me for spending last Sunday on my bicycle, because I saw you riding to church at eight o'clock the Sunday before," is quite clear in the knowledge that he is playing with his conscience, and that his excuse is not valid.

The writer has endeavoured to make it plain in this paper how very far indeed he is from condemning the abstinence method, whether in smoking, drinking, or any other habit mentioned, so long as the ideal behind it is admitted. But he pleads for the recognition of the other method, too. At the present time that other method—consisting in the immediate presentation of the ideal wherever possible—may achieve results far beyond those for which it directly works. The loss to the influence of the Church of Christ through any popular identification of it with the ascetic principle is immense. And rightly so; for a religion which seeks to remain apart from the most complete human life can make no claim on human allegiance. The

duty of impressing upon men the conviction that Christianity means life (present life in all its fulness, as well as future life in all its glory), that a Christian is not primarily a man who abstains, but a man who believes and acts—this is one of the most important and urgent of the tasks which have been committed to the Church of our time.



### What is the Church ?

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**W**HAT is the Church? It is one of the learned professions. It consists of three orders—Bishops, Rectors or Vicars, and curates—constituting together the superior and inferior clergy. This is hardly an exaggerated form of the answer which would have been given not so long ago by those who were in the habit of using the current phrase, “going into the Church.” The Church was regarded simply as synonymous with the clergy.

The present writer remembers hearing Bishop Wilberforce, of Oxford, say that whenever a candidate for Orders told him he was “going into the Church,” he always asked him to be sure to let him know the date fixed for his baptism.

The fact that the laity are an integral part of the Church seems to have been slowly arrived at. The corresponding fact that they are there not simply to be legislated for, but that they are entitled to a voice and vote in its legislature, is not yet sufficiently recognized. That it will have to be recognized universally if the Church is to maintain its hold on the laity, and prevent the drifting away of at all events the more educated and thoughtful members of it, is what, in the present paper, it is proposed to point out.

In the “Life of Archbishop Benson” (chap. i., p. 560) there is a suggestive letter from Professor Hort, in which he notes the present danger. He says: “The convulsions of our English