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JOVINIAN

THE fourth century of the Christian era was marked by a conspicuous growth of asceticism, with a wide extension of the monastic ideal, and an exaggerated esteem of virginity or celibacy to the detriment of matrimony and family life. Christian perfection was felt to be incapable of realization among the usual circumstances of daily life, and such Scripture texts as were available, principally some from the writings of St. Paul, with one or two of our Lord's sayings, were expounded with, at times, a fantastic disregard for common sense and for the fact that marriage was of God, instituted by Him in the time of man's innocence. We need not delay to examine any of the strange perversions of Holy Writ, or the grotesque extremes men were led to. These last have been well portrayed by W. H. Lecky in his *History of European Morals*, and by many other writers. It is sufficient to remark that the spirit which produced these extravagances, to use no stronger term, is still alive, and the record in modern days of Roman Catholic asceticism bears witness to its activity. The whole conception of life as seen from this ascetic angle is Manichaean, not Christian. It may, in the century we are concerned with, have drawn inspiration and currency from the decay of ordered government over wide areas, from the corruption of heathen life which was influencing Christians in the world, and from the power exercised by a few outstanding ascetics whose morbid and perverted outlook, attributable to personal experience or idiosyncrasy, was given a universal character in much the same way as Milton's personal affairs were made the affairs of humanity at large ; at least that is how J. Russell Lowell in his critical essay on Milton argues. Great names, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, come to our minds in this century as the advocates of asceticism. They may not have advocated the extremes of such a one as Simeon Stylites, though Jerome's exuberance might countenance the worse absurdities of the Egyptian laura ; but they assumed it to be beyond question that the dedication of men and women to life-long celibacy was part of the higher cultivation of the Christian life, and that marriage could only be sorrowfully acquiesced in as a lower state of life, suited to the groundlings, the camp followers in the army of Christ, a state of

life only brightened by the possibility that the offspring of the union might be led to become monks and virgins.

The Christian religion, however, was not the creation of monk or ascetic. Jesus of Nazareth was neither Pharisee nor Essene. He was a layman of the tribe of Judah of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood. He chose at least one married man to be an apostle, and according to some patristic, and nearly all medieval teaching, that married man became the Rock on which the Church was built. We do not accept this interpretation of the passage in St. Matthew's Gospel, but it is significant that our Lord spoke only in praise of matrimony, honoured the marriage-feast at Cana with His presence and first miracle, and declared that none other than God made the twain to be one flesh. He recognized that for some causes a man had better remain single. Such a cause, we can easily grasp in the case of certain foreign missionaries, in the case of St. Paul, and in others for whom responsibility is such that the married life has to be set aside. "He that is able to receive it" may do so, but Christ makes him no more virtuous, and places him no higher in the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is plain that when asceticism became a vogue, and was loudly advocated on all sides, that some men would revert in thought to the revealed basis of the life of the Christian, the New Testament, and recall that future rewards of salvation are not by works of righteousness that we have done, but according to God's mercy : that the best, like the worst, appear before God as debtors, not as creditors, that there is no "nicely calculated less or more" in our dealings with God, and claims upon Him. Such a man was Jovinian. He was not a scholar, nor a great man, but he saw clearly that asceticism did not justify itself, that the cloister offered no impregnable barrier to Satan, and that the Christian warfare was not conflict with the phantasies engendered in the mind by confinement, or introspection, but strenuous militancy against sin in the world. The light of the world failed in its purpose when men turned the bushel of monasticism over upon it, and the salt of the earth failed likewise when left unquarried in the mine, or unharvested on the sea-shore. Such also was that greater man Chrysostom, a monk, who found it imperative to preach against the growing belief that the Christian virtues could not be practised in the world. This man used his influence and his immense oratory in the East. In the West,

in Rome, Jovinian the ex-monk had the courage to assert the freedom of the Christian and the honourable estate of matrimony against the tide of popular Church opinion. He taught that there was but one Divine element in life, which all believers share in common ; and but one fellowship with Christ, which proceeds from faith in Him ; and but one new birth. All who are Christians in the true sense have the same calling, the same dignity, the same heavenly blessings ; the diversity of outward circumstances creating no difference in this respect. Everything depends on the inward life, not on outward forms. Neander (*Church History*, iii) calls him “the protestant of his time”, but we need to correct this by recalling what has been written by B. J. Kidd (*History of the Church to A.D. 461*) in reference to H. H. Milman’s description of him as “a premature Protestant”; Dr. Kidd says rightly, “there is nothing to show that he anticipated the reformers in what he protested for, but he had kinship with them in what he protested against.”

Details of Jovinian’s life are wanting. We know only that he was a monk of the Western Church, who lived for a time in Rome. Hefele (*History of the Councils*, ii) says, “he had been a monk, whether at Milan or elsewhere is unknown, and had been a great ascetic, but about A.D. 388 he approached nearly the same views concerning good works as Luther.” He sums up what he conceives to have been the erroneous views of Jovinian as follows. Jovinian taught :

- I. That virginity, widowhood and married life were equally meritorious.
- II. That fasting was not more meritorious than eating, provided the latter was done with thanksgiving.
- III. That all who with full faith were born again in baptism could not be overcome by the devil.
- IV. That all who are saved by the grace of baptism may expect an equal reward in heaven (a consequence of the former views, i.e. that there are no different degrees of moral virtue).
- V. That Mary indeed conceived Christ as a virgin, but did not bear Him as a virgin, for through childbearing her virginity ceased ; for otherwise we must say with the Manichaeans that the body of Christ was not real, but only appeared so. He in fact accused the orthodox of Manichaean and Docetic errors.

It will be seen from Hefele's summary that the views of Jovinian were a complete challenge to the fashionable belief of the period, and in the fifth of these he shows that he may be aligned with such men as Bonosus and Helvidius, while his general teaching is in harmony with that of Vigilantius, his younger contemporary. Both he and Vigilantius had to endure the harsh mockery and vehement polemics of Jerome.

Having come to these conclusions, Jovinian changed his ascetic life for what his enemies described as one of easy luxury, when not more severely apostrophizing it. He endeavoured to spread his views by books, and by activity in securing proselytes. This brought him to Rome during the pontificate of Pope Siricius, where he succeeded in winning over several consecrated virgins and ascetics. He asked them, we are told, "Are you better than Sarah, Susannah, Anna, and many other holy women and men of the Bible?" He does not appear to have gained any of the clergy to his side. On the contrary, he roused severe opposition, and several prominent laymen, especially Pammachius, the friend of Jerome, took proceedings against him, and urged the Pope to condemn his views. Siricius accordingly held a synod in A.D. 390 at which he declared the doctrines of Jovinian to be contrary to Christian law, and therefore expelled from the Church Jovinian and his friends who are named, Auxentius, Genialis, Germinator, Felix, Plotinus, Martianus, Januarius and Ingeniosus. At the same time, to prevent the spread of the doctrine, and fearing lest Jovinian might win the favour of a man much greater and more powerful than the Pope, three priests were sent to Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan. The fifth epistle of Siricius expresses the Pope's views. The treatise written by Jovinian is unfortunately lost, but we may accept the opinion of Dr. B. J. Kidd in the work already quoted that our knowledge of Jovinian's teaching comes from Siricius, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. "It is likely enough that these authorities, for want of sympathy, have damaged his reputation; but there is no reason to think that they have misrepresented his opinions." Dr. Kidd thinks it wrong to associate him with the view of Helvidius, Bonosus and the Antidicomarians who protested against the extremists called Collyridians, but in common with them he combated the over-emphasis on the ever-virginity of the Blessed Virgin and the tendency to confer on her the honours once given to the goddesses of the heathen. The

condemnation of Bonosus of Sardica at the Synod of Capua in A.D. 391 could not have been without some sort of effect on the Jovinian controversy.

In general, according to Dr. Kidd, his fear was that there would arise a formal piety, but he ignored the reality of special calls, and their sacredness, and overlooked the many mansions, dwelling on the penny apiece. It is a pity that Dr. Kidd in his zeal for "Catholicism" should give such concrete significance to the many mansions, and interpret the phrase in a sense we cannot believe to have been intended by its author. We say "Catholicism", for the things implied by this word when enclosed in inverted commas include celibate ideals, and many other things Roman rather than Catholic in the right sense. To dwell on the penny apiece might well become the practice of modern preachers who may take this lesson in homiletics from the old heresiarch. The grace and the mercy of God, and His freedom to do what He will with His own, go to the foundation of man's relation to God. The many mansions suggest only the great capacity of the heart and heaven of God to receive all who come to Him by Christ. They are not distinguished as to size, shape, or situation. Suburbia and its nice gradations will not have their counterparts in the Divine town-planning of the hereafter.

Dr. Kidd continues, "As if he (Jovinian) held the indefectibility of grace he gave out that once regenerate, always regenerate; and if to all seeming fallen away, then the sacrament in that case must have been with water only, not with the Spirit : a sign, not a sacrament." We to-day may not strictly ally the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit with the rite of baptism in the same way as Jovinian did ; and we must remember also that in the fourth century a large proportion of baptisms were still baptisms of adults on profession of faith. When controversies arise, as they do occasionally to-day, over baptism, it is well to recall the words of John, "I baptise with water. . . . He shall baptise with the Holy Spirit." That, and that only, should be called Christian baptism in the sense of regeneration. As the Gorham judgment showed in the case of Church of England formularies, the language in relation to baptism and regeneration is the language of charity and devotion and reliance on the promises of God. It is not mechanical.

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epistle, reporting what he had done, was sent to Milan, and in A.D. 393 Ambrose held a small council of North Italian bishops. This council arranged to condemn Jovinian as guilty of Manichaean error (Ambrose, forty-second epistle). This was retaliation of a cynical kind, for, as we have noted, that had been the charge Jovinian brought against the Church generally (Jerome—*Adv. Jov.* i, 5. Augustine—*de Nupt. et Concupisc.* ii, 38). Ambrose reported this to the Pope, saying that Jovinian dared even to deny the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin, “a miracle expressly asserted in scripture and affirmed in the Apostles’ Creed which the Roman Church ever keeps and preserves undefiled.” The anti-Manichaean law of June 17th, A.D. 389, was put in force against the culprit, and he was driven from Milan. Some followers of his were denounced by Ambrose as “the new Epicureans”. A worthy tribute to him is paid, however, by Dr. Holmes Dudden in his recent great book, *The Life and Times of Ambrose of Milan*: “Jovinian was not a Manichaean or a voluptuary. He was a conservative Western Catholic led by excesses to condemn contemporary asceticism largely due to Jerome’s influence. He was scriptural, and the champion of inward spirituality.”

Pammachius, who had stirred up Siricius against Jovinian, was still not satisfied. The Church leaders had met him with the weight of their authority, not with argument, and had denounced him, leaving him still unconvincing. In A.D. 392 Jerome, inspired it appears by Pammachius, published his treatise “Against Jovinian”, and not long after Jovinian was exiled by order of the Emperor Honorius to an island off the coast of Dalmatia, where he died. (Dr. Kidd is not quite satisfied that this was the same Jovinian.) Here he can have had little opportunity of dying in the unpleasant fashion affirmed by Jerome in his treatise against Vigilantius (§1). “As Euphorbus is said to have been born again in the person of Pythagoras, so in this fellow (Vigilantius) the corrupt mind of Jovinian has arisen. Jovinian condemned by the authority of the Church of Rome, amidst pheasants and swines’ flesh, breathed out, or rather belched out his spirit.” This elegant treatise was written about A.D. 406 or 409, so evidently Jovinian had died before this.

Let us now see the nature of the contemporary opinions of Jovinian and his doctrine. The letter of Pope Siricius to the Church of Milan (A.D. 389) is included in the collection of the

letters of St. Ambrose. In it we read, “The sacred truth of the Church has never been assailed by the barking of such dogs as those who have now suddenly broken in upon us. . . . Some of their chosen ones have betrayed their blasphemies by writing a rash discourse which the rage of a desperate mind has led them openly to publish, favouring, as it does, the cause of the heathens” (§4).

“Of their madness I suddenly received intelligence by means of a shocking writing which certain faithful Christians caused to be conveyed to me in order that the opposition to the divine law might be repressed by a spiritual sentence” (§5).

“Having held an assembly of my clergy it became clear that their sentiments were contrary to the Christian law. Therefore we have excommunicated them” (§6).

“Nothing doubting that your Holinesses will observe the aforesaid decree (the excommunication), I have sent you this epistle” (§7).

The reply of the Council of Milan, which probably Ambrose wrote, is a long document, full of abuse of Jovinian, echoing the phrase about barking dogs, “it is a savage barking to show no reverence for virginity, observe no rule of chastity, to seek to place everything on a level, to abolish the different degrees of merit, and to introduce a certain meagreness in heavenly rewards, as if Christ had only one palm to bestow, and there was no copious diversity in His rewards” (§2).

“They pretend that they are giving honour to marriage, but what praise can rightly be given to marriage if no distinction is paid to virginity? A good wife is deservedly praised, but a pious virgin is more properly preferred . . . the one is under law, the other is under Grace” (§3).

Ambrose then discusses the opinions of Jovinian on the virginity of Mary, and gives us a typical piece of patristic exegesis. “What is that gate of the sanctuary, that outward gate which looketh towards the East, which remains shut, and no man, it is said, shall enter in by it, but the Lord, the God of Israel (Ezekiel xliv. 1, 2). Is not Mary this gate by whom the Saviour entered into the world?” (§6).

“But why need we say more to our master and teacher, seeing that these persons have now paid the worthy price of their perfidy, who have on this account come hither, that no place might remain where they were not condemned, who have proved

themselves to be truly Manichaeans, by not believing that He came forth from a virgin " (§9).

" All who saw them have fled from them as a plague. Witnesses thereof are our brethren and fellow presbyters, Crescens, Leopardus, Alexander (the three clergymen sent from Rome), by whose means they have been exposed to common execration, and driven forth as fugitives from the city of Milan " (§13).

We have also the letter Ambrose wrote in A.D. 396 to the Church of Vercellae (Ambrose Epistle 63), against two disciples of Jovinian, in which he ridicules their teaching as he pictures it. He refers to these disciples (Sarmatio and Barbatianus) as men who had come to assert that " there is no virtue in abstinence, no grace in a strict life, none in virginity, that all are to be rated at one price, that they who chasten the flesh are beside themselves." " What school has sent forth these Epicureans ? No school of philosophers, as they affirm, but of ignorant men who are setters-forth of pleasure, who persuade to luxury, who hold chastity to be useless." " What virgin can hear without grieving that her chastity will have no reward ? What widow, were she to find her widowhood profitless, would choose to preserve inviolate her first marriage vow, and live in sorrow instead of allowing herself to be comforted ? What wife is there who hearing that no honour is due to chastity might not be tempted by unwatchful heedlessness of mind or body ? "

He goes on to show that the Epicureans were in his judgment better than the Jovinianists, and says, " seeing that philosophy has renounced these men, shall not the Church exclude them ? "

Augustine has much to say on the problems at issue. His ascetical works treat of the various problems of fasting, virginity, widowhood, etc., in a completely anti-Jovinian manner. He is, of course, far milder than Jerome, who far exceeds Ambrose in vehemence. In his *De Haeresibus*, ch. 82, he writes of anti-asceticism, " From Jovinian, a monk, this heresy sprang while we were young. This man, like the Stoic philosophers, said all men were equal, and that it was not possible for a man to sin, having received the washing of regeneration, nor was fasting, or abstinence from food profitable. He destroyed the virginity of Mary saying that it was corrupted in child-bearing. He put virginity, celibacy, marriage, on equal level, so that some holy virgins in Rome, having heard him, are said to have married, not

that he either had or wished to have a wife." These last words of Augustine are of importance, for they show that Jovinian recognized that there was place and justification for celibacy. Had he wanted to overthrow restraint, and preach lust, his conduct would scarcely have been so consistent with his former life under a vow of celibacy.

The scurrilous Jerome, who sublimated his obsessions till he imagined they were the commandments of God, whose great scholarship is befouled by his coarse mind and jeering tongue, is the chief and most voluminous of Jovinian's opponents. He alone gives us some information about the book Jovinian wrote to expound his doctrine, and thus enables us to see what Jovinian's revolt stood for.

We have noted that Pammachius, Jerome's friend, was active in the matter of starting the campaign against the culprit, and no doubt influenced the great exponent of asceticism to use his invective. However, the immediate cause of Jerome's interference seems to have been a Roman lady, Marcella, who had a circle of ascetically minded women around her. She inspired some of Jerome's most important writings, and the editor (F. A. Wright) of the selection of Jerome's letters published in the Loeb Classical series says that "it was certainly at Marcella's request that Jerome denounced the teaching of the renegade monk Jovinian who made an attempt to discredit the celibate life which Jerome had done so much to encourage, and with such success that by that time, he exultantly writes, Italy was full of nunneries, and the number of monks in Rome was past counting." "Renegade" is scarcely a fair epithet to apply to Jovinian, but we can let it pass.

In A.D. 392 Jerome published his long work *Adversus Jovinianum*. We reproduce some passages to show the quality of this momentous book. "The Apostle (2 Peter) has described Jovinian speaking with swelling cheeks, and nicely balancing his inflated utterances, promising heavenly liberty, when he himself is the slave of vice and self-indulgence; a dog returning to his vomit. For although he boasts of being a monk, he has exchanged his dirty tunic, bare feet, common bread and drink of water, for a snowy dress, sleek skin, honey-wine, and dainty dishes; for the sauces of Apicius (an Epicure) and Paxamus (author of a treatise on cooking); for baths and rubbings, and for the cook-shops. Is it not clear that he prefers his belly to Christ, and thinks his

ruddy complexion worth the Kingdom of Heaven ? And yet that handsome monk, so fat and sleek, and of a bright appearance, who always walks with the air of a bridegroom, must either marry a wife if he is to show that virginity and marriage are equal, or if he does not marry one, it is useless for him to bandy words with us when his acts are on our side."

Jerome then gives illustrations of "Christian chastity and angelic virginity" from the Scriptures, answering Jovinian's assertion that the dogma of virginity is against nature by a survey of Greek, Roman and foreign history (Bk. I). This is an answer to Jovinian's first proposition (stated in extract from Hefele).

A description of the circumstances is given. "The holy brethren of Rome sent me Jovinian's books with the request that I might reply to the follies contained in them, and would crush with evangelical and apostolic vigour 'the Epicurus of Christianity'. I read but could not comprehend them. . . . The style is so barbarous, and the language so vile, and such a heap of blunders that I could neither understand what he was talking about, nor by what arguments he was trying to prove his points. At one moment he is all bombast, at another he grovels. . . . The introduction to his second book of which he has discharged himself like a sot after a night's debauch, will show the character of his eloquence, and through what bright flowers of rhetoric he takes his stately course." Jerome then quotes the following passage from Jovinian. "I respond to your invitation, not that I may go through life with a high reputation, but may live free from rumour. I beseech the ground, the young shoots of our plantations, the plants and trees of tenderness snatched from the whirlpools of vice, to grant me audience and the support of many listeners. We know that the church through faith, hope, and charity is inaccessible and impregnable ; all are apt to learn ; none can force a way into it by violence, or deceive it by craft." Jerome comments, "Would you not think he ought to be put in a strait-jacket ?" He goes on, "I will briefly set forth our adversary's views, and will drag them out of his books like snakes from the holes where they hide, and will separate the venomous head from the writhing body."

In Book II the second, third and fourth of Jovinian's propositions are answered (see extract from Hefele). It displays well the extent of Jerome's knowledge of the classics, and of the

Eastern creeds. Speaking of over-indulgence he says, “even if our food be the commonest, we must avoid repletion. For nothing is so destructive to the mind as a full belly, fermenting like a wine-vat, and giving forth its gases on all sides. What sort of fasting is it, or what refreshment is there after fasting, when we are blown out with yesterday’s dinner, and our stomach is made an ante-room to the closet ? ” This coarse and vulgar tirade shows the sort of mind the ascetic possessed, and does no justice to the reason and moderation of his victim.

On the subject of rewards in Heaven, Jovinian had, as we have seen, cited the parable of the labourers, and Jerome speaks of his “crafty opponent’s perverse ingenuity”, and dwells much on the better and higher rewards of some hereafter than of others, a theme intended to encourage his fad for asceticism.

He draws to his conclusion. “I must in conclusion say a few words about the modern Epicurus wantoning in his gardens with his favourites of both sexes. On your side are the fat and the sleek in their festal attire . . . if ever I see a fine fellow, or a man who is no stranger to the curling-irons, with his hair nicely done, and his cheeks all aglow, he belongs to your herd, or rather grunts in concert with your pigs. . . . If many assent to your views that only indicates voluptuousness. Do you regard it as a mark of great wisdom if you have a following of many pigs whom you are feeding to make pork for Hell ? ” Rome is exhorted to beware of the very name of Jovinianus, for it is derived from that of an idol !

Many of Jerome’s letters continue the polemic against Jovinian. Letter 44 addressed to Pammachius and written after the treatise, about A.D. 393 or 394, replies to a suggestion of Pammachius and others that the treatise had unduly exalted virginity against marriage. Indeed, it seems that an effort had been made to suppress the treatise for this reason. Jerome says that he hears that some find fault with the treatise on the ground stated above. “If I remember rightly the question at issue between myself and Jovinian is that he puts marriage on a level with virginity, while I make it inferior. As a result due, under God, to your agency, he has been condemned because he has dared to set matrimony on an equality with perpetual chastity . . . either my view of the matter must be embraced, or else that of Jovinian.” He discusses second and third marriages, and extols the teaching on this subject of Cyprian, Tertullian and

Ambrose. In letter 49 he says that, despite the attempted suppression, the book has become well known in Rome. Letter 50 is addressed to one Domnio. " You write to me of one (a critic), a lounger who is to be seen in the streets, at crossings, and in public places, a monk who is a noisy news-monger, clever only in detraction, and eager in spite of the beam in his own eye, to remove the mote in his neighbour's. You tell me he preaches publicly against me, gnawing, and rending with fangs the books I have written against Jovinian. You tell me that this home-grown dialectician ventures to unravel by subtle arguments what he is pleased to call my sophisms." This was evidently some supporter of Jovinian, and the tone of the letter shows how intractable the Great Cham of controversy remained. Even thirty years later, when he wrote against Pelagius in a section of his introduction to the *Commentary on Jeremiah*, he reminds him of his answer to Jovinian. He did not immediately silence the protest, for in the treatise against the Pelagians written in A.D. 417 he says of Jovinian that " his heresy is now being fanned into flame ; he disturbed the faith of Rome in my absence, he was so devoid of the gifts of utterance, and had such a pestilent style that he was a fitter object for pity than for envy."

Later we find Ildefonsus of Toledo in his " *De Virginitate Geneticis Dei Mariae*," I, 2 (*Bibliotheca Veterum Patrum*, Vol. vii) referring rhetorically to Jovinian. " Audi te, percipe tu, Joviniani, corde sapito fatue, praecordiis gnosci stulte, sensu disce Caduce." Minor echoes of the controversy are heard in later Church writers, and there is the almost contemporary strife over the teaching of Vigilantius. Then the matter lapses, and the protest against excessive asceticism with its unscriptural depreciation of many of God's gifts to man, ceases. Not until Erasmus do we find the tide of opposition rising again, this time to be victorious over a large part of the Christian world.

We shall be right in viewing Jovinian, unskilled in literary craft and inexperienced in controversy, as a man who saw the danger of the formalism prevailing in the Church of his day, and who to the best of his ability strove to raise a protest for a purer, sincerer religion of the heart. He wished to overthrow the self-righteousness which springs from lofty conceptions of human merit, and to cast all men back on the mercy of God. It is well to remember him, and his difficulties ; and while we may thank God that our freedom in Christ is not yet hindered,

let us bear in mind that our day needs the protest against mechanical doctrines of eternal rewards, and superior merits, not less than his did. "I will give unto this last even as unto thee" is a precept we must not lose sight of, or be silent on, especially in the pulpit.

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