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PORPHYRY AND NEOPLATONISM

DEAR FRIENDS:

In his preface to PORPHYRY THE PHILOSOPHER TO HIS WIFE MARCELLA, Richard Garnett, C.B., LL.D., makes the interesting statement: "From one point of view it may be said that but two religions exist in the world--the religion of the flesh and the religion of the spirit." Garnett then enlarges his statement by pointing out that for countless ages primitive mankind had no objects for veneration other than material objects. By usage a custom was established and has descended to us as part of our cultural heritage. Habits are not easily broken and customs linger on long after their validity has been lost. Religion is an inclusive word for all the faiths of humanity regardless of their creeds or denominational differences. The two aspects of religion represent, therefore, the changing cultural platforms through which a society passes or by which it ascends from one level to another. As the material concerns of nations and races take dominance it is inevitable that spiritual factors should become involved in the material policies of both individuals and collective humankind. We may say that the sensory perceptions become the judges and discriminators and that which lies beyond their scope receives lesser consideration.

Materialism as we know it is merely an emphasis by which the visible takes precedence over the invisible. The mind may recognize the fallacy of such thinking, but in the course of time it is over-influenced by its physical environment. Most enlightened persons have acknowledged that the physical body of man is not his true self and that an invisible part of his own compound nature ensouls the flesh. The belief in immortality requires the realization that the spiritual part of man transcends the body and has an existence apart from his corporeal constitution.

Religion, in essence, worships an invisible power or principle, but does not know how to establish contact with the spiritual world except through rites, rituals, ceremonials, and such physical actions as baptism, penance, or offerings of material goods. What Mohammed called the primitive religion of the patriarchs was comparatively free from the outward splendor of an extravagant ecclesiasticism. The Christianity of Christ and the original apostles was extremely simple and free from all ostentation. Nearly all of the great teachers of the world have been poor or have renounced wealth as being incompatible with the spirit of religion.

While it is true that during the classical periods the Mystery Schools did use pageantry in an effort to convert the senses to the contemplation of divine realities, the teachers of these sacerdotal sects clearly informed their followers that the initiation rites were but symbols of invisible truths, but as ages passed the symbols took on the appearance of immediate realities. The modern world with its materialistic ambitions has come to prefer an ornate kind of theology. The wealthy man is not comfortable in a shabby place of worship, and is willing to donate generously to build a sanctuary appropriate to his own affluence. Various faiths have attempted to prove their superiority by erecting magnificent cathedrals, temples, and mosques to the glory of an invisible God. To maintain their political influence and support the structure they have erected, it has been necessary for religion to enter the business world, invest in stocks and bonds, increase their holdings of real estate, and undertake expensive missionary and propaganda programs. No doubt the basic intentions were good, but the more completely a faith secularizes its means of support the sooner it verges toward the religion of the flesh.

This point was of great concern to the Neoplatonists who flourished in Alexandria and Athens in the early centuries of the Christian era. They were religious philosophers and were protected, somewhat at least, by the fact that poverty has always been the disease of the wise. Free from the delusions of grandeur it was possible for the true scholar to contemplate the religion of the spirit.

To quote a few lines from the Neoplatonist, Porphyry, who was among those of earlier times who had lost confidence in all institutions which had been established to glorify the ways of the flesh, "The conventional law is subject to expediency, and is differently laid down at different times according to the arbitrary will of the prevailing government." Some have said that philosophy moved into those simple, unpretentious structures from which theology was emerging. This probably explains why the average person turned away from true learning and aligned himself with the more prosperous group. Plato was once asked why the rich were so generous in their gifts to the poor, but did nothing to support the wise. The great philosopher explained that all men fear that sometime they will be poor, but they do not fear that they will ever be wise.

Neoplatonism made a valiant stand against the foibles of its day, but after the death of Porphyry a kind of discouragement set in. It was apparent that the multitude preferred to follow in the footsteps of Fortuna, the goddess of plenty. That materialism should come to dominate all human conduct was a misfortune, but that it should profane the mysteries of man's inner life was a disaster. In the fifteenth century Neoplatonism was revived in Italy. The moving spirit of this revival was Lorenzo de Medici, whose family had already experienced the tragedy of opulence. The Reformation attacked the splendor of theological institutions and finally resulted in a rather bleak, square-toed puritanism. Here again, materialism took over. It was assumed that man should rescue his inner life by deforming his physical existence. It was only one form of extreme austerity and seldom actually ennobled the inner life, for the Neoplatonists themselves considered the beautiful as a primary manifestation of the faith of the spirit.

Under the heading of the religion of the spirit, we should consider the rise of true

mysticism. The most primitive human beings lived in a state of almost constant fear. They had no defenses against the terrors of the material world and no realization of the natural laws regulating physical phenomena. As the mental functions matured, anxieties gave way to respect, and this in the course of time was expanded into admiration. The individual was impelled by some power within himself to admire the rules of life which he was beginning to understand. This admiration led in its turn to veneration and a more complete experience of Deity. The evolution of attitudes reached its highest expression in adoration or perfect love of God. Mysticism was the personal experience of divine love. In some systems religion conferred this exaltation of spirit, but in Neoplatonism the bridge between the mortal and the immortal was philosophy. In the modern world the arts and sciences, through the unfoldment of their metaphysical overtones, should attain the same end.

In his letter to his wife, Marcella, the philosopher, Prophyry, points out the way of similitude. Man approached the divine by cultivating the qualities of divinity. There can be no way to the personal experience of truth except through the life of virtue. To understand the laws governing human regeneration, regard for virtue is second only to love for God. Porphyry was a Greek and the Hellenes had a special affection for beauty as it expressed itself throughout the created world. The principle of beauty was suspended directly from the infinite Spirit of Life. Porphyry, therefore, was not inclined to consider religion as requiring disregard of the beautiful or of any of its manifestations. In man, the human soul was the most beautiful of all his parts. Within it were many levels of expression. The virtuous life was moral beauty. The proper relationships between human beings were beautiful and conduct in harmony with divine and natural law was the harmonious expression of the beautiful. Everything which ennobled beautified, whereas unworthy attitudes were deformed. To the Neoplatonist the path of mortal life was the journey of the lonely to That which is alone. It was a returning home to the inevitable--the proper end of all searching.

Porphyry describes the law of similitudes which Paracelsus much later defined as sympathies. That which is like can never be distant from that which it is like. The enlightened soul, therefore, can never be separate from the soul of the world. This was the philosophical foundation of the Neoplatonic mysticism. As a seed buried in the earth seems to die, so the human soul descending into a body must pass through a kind of death, but in due time its vitality is released by a mystical resurrection. Mortal confusion and discord bear witness of the soul imprisoned in matter, from which it is released by the regeneration of character and conduct. The Neoplatonist was not actually in conflict with religious institutions, but opposed the belief that rites and ceremonies were indispensable to man's well-being. Such practices were not harmful unless they induced the believer to neglect the disciplines which alone released the soul from bondage to the infirmities of the lower nature.

It is not necessary for an individual to suffer in order to grow, but it is the course most frequently followed. The misfortunes of living and the disillusionments attending temporal ambitions impel the inner life to cultivate the moral and ethical virtues. The thoughtful person, contemplating the errors of his associates, gradually becomes disillusioned--the word itself means to renounce or turn away from illusion, and is thus

a double negative. It is best described as turning away from the untrue. Most religions have mystical overtones, but as their temporal states improve their essential teachings are compromised. Porphyry observing this trend falls back upon his philosophy for consolation. The drift toward materialism ends in theological confusion. The conflict of creeds gives rise to a revival of mysticism and the devout follower takes refuge in the sphere of his own intuitions. It is said that the conqueror, Cambyses, once approached the temple and was met by a priest who offered to serve his spiritual needs. The conqueror asked, "Whose house is this?" The priest answered, "This is the house of God." Cambyses then replied, "If this be God's house, man--stand aside," and he entered the temple alone.

Neoplatonism could have dominated the known world had its doctrines been accepted by the general public. There were few, however, who were willing to sacrifice their own selfish purposes and appetites. They valued the pleasures of the moment, hoping for the best even while fearing the worst. Porphyry, following the earlier Platonic tradition, pointed out that there were two ways of departure from the material state. There is physical death by which the body separates from the soul, and philosophical death by which the soul separates from the body. The first ends in the grave and the second in the heart of God; however, the separation of the soul from the body must be accomplished gradually. The most certain way by which this can be accomplished is by daily self-improvement. The wise person frees himself from the tyranny of the flesh while he is still alive and, having given his allegiance to the noblest part of his own nature, ascends in due time to the company of the gods.

With best wishes for the Holiday Season, I am

Most sincerely yours,

Marilyn P. Sell

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