The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.   *Associates:* E. C. HEGELER, MARY CARUS.

VOL. XX. (NO. 3.)   MARCH, 1906.   NO. 598

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The Open Court Publishing Company

LONDON: Kegan Paul. Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd.

Per copy, 10 cents (sixpence). Yearly, $1.00 (in the U. P. U., 5s. 6d.).

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"Give me not, O God, that blind, fool faith in my friend, that sees no evil where evil is, but give me, O God, that sublime belief, that seeing evil I yet have faith."

My Little Book of Prayer

BY MURIEL STRODE

If you want to know the greatness of a soul and the true mastery of life, apply to The Open Court Publishing Company for a slip of a book by Muriel Strode entitled simply "My Little Book of Prayer." The modern progress of sovereign mind and inner divinity from the narrow cell of the ascetic to the open heaven of man, made in God's own image, is triumphantly shown in it, yet a self-abnegation and sacrifice beyond anything that a St. Francis or a Thomas a'Kempis ever dreamed of glorifies the path. To attempt to tell what a treasure-trove for the struggling soul is in this little volume would be impossible without giving it complete, for every paragraph marks a milestone on the higher way. That the best of all modern thought and religion is garnered in it, its very creed proclaims:

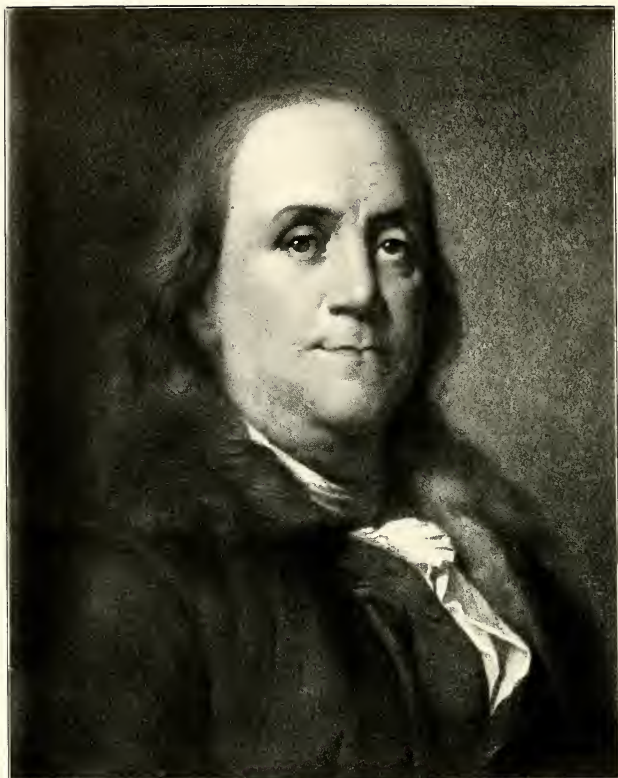
Not one holy day but seven;
Worshiping, not at the call of a bell, but at the call of my soul;
Singing, not at the baton's sway, but to the rhythm in my heart;
Loving because I must;
Doing for the joy of it.

Some one who has "entered in" sends back to us this inspiring prayer book, and to seize its spirit and walk in the light of it would still the moan and bitterness of human lives, as the bay wreath ends the toilsome struggle in the hero's path. Measure the height attained in this one reflection for the weary army of the unsuccessful: "He is to rejoice with exceeding great joy who plucks the fruit of his planting, but his the divine anointing who watched and waited, and toiled, and prayed, and failed—and can yet be glad." Or this, in exchange for the piping cries of the unfortunate: "I do not bemoan misfortune. To me there is no misfortune. I welcome whatever comes; I go out gladly to meet it." Cover all misfortune, too, with this master prayer: "O God, whatever befall, spare me that supreme calamity—let no after-bitterness settle down with me. Misfortune is not mine until that hour." Here, too, is the triumph of the unconquerable mind: "The earth shall yet surrender to him and the fates shall do his will who marches on, though the promised land proved to be but a mirage and the day of deliverance was canceled. The gods shall yet anoint him and the morning stars shall sing." And this the true prayer for the battlefield: "I never doubt my strength to bear whatever fate may bring, but, oh! that I may not go down before that which I bring myself."

Nuggets of pure gold like these abound in this mine of the mind which the victorious author has opened for us. To seek it out swiftly and resolve its great wealth for himself should be the glad purpose of the elect. And who are not the elect in the light of its large teaching? To claim them in spite of themselves is its crowning lesson. "It is but common to believe in him who believes in himself, but, oh! if you would do aught uncommon, believe in him who does not believe in himself—restore the faith to him."—*St Louis Globe-Democrat, March 5.*

Printed on Strathmore Japan Paper, Gilt Top, Cloth, $1. Alexis Paper, Bds. 50c Postpaid

The Open Court Publishing Co., 1322 Wabash Ave., Chicago



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.

After the Duplessis Portrait.

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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FRANKLIN AND PLATO.

BY C. M. WALSH.

FRANKLIN'S indebtedness to Plato seems to have escaped notice. Yet his writings give evidence that in his youth he fell under the spell of the ancient charmer and bore traces of its influence ever afterward. Only once in his published works does he quote or refer to Plato. Only once does he quote the kindred *Memorabilia* of Xenophon. But in his *Autobiography* he mentions that in his seventeenth or eighteenth year he procured that memoir and at once adopted the Socratic method of drawing people into embarrassing concessions, and always retained the habit of expressing himself "in terms of modest diffidence," getting his friends in the Junto to make a rule of it, and throughout his life never engaging in personal disputations on philosophical questions. He relates also that about 1731, when he was twenty-five years old, (for he was born just two centuries ago), he set before himself certain rules for the acquisition of moral perfection, one of which was, for the practice of humility, to "imitate Jesus and Socrates." A year earlier he wrote two dialogues which he alludes to as "Socratic," though they would be more properly designated Platonic. These, and other papers written between 1728 and 1735, exhibit a marked tendency to treat of matters after the fashion of Plato. It may be noted that Franklin never studied Greek, which perhaps was an advantage; for, instead of poring upon one or two books in a tedious effort to interpret them, he was probably led to read the complete works in a translation already made.

During this period we have from his pen a curious little article, written when he was twenty-two, in which he asserted belief in a pluralism of gods. Man, he held, should not have the presumption

of looking upon himself as "the most perfect being but one" in the universe, or of supposing that "the Supremely Perfect does in the least regard such an inconsiderable nothing" as man and require worship of him. But, as it seems to be required of us to worship *something,* there must be other gods, of intermediate perfection, between that being and us, whose praise and worship is acceptable to him and to whom our praise and worship is likewise acceptable; and, though creatures themselves of the Infinite, each of them is creator of a sun with attendant planets; wherefore there is a wise and powerful God who is the author and owner of our system, whom Franklin proposed to adopt as the object of his adoration, and, conceiving him to be a good being, hoped to win his friendship by making himself virtuous and therefore happy, which he thought would be pleasing to such a being, and by praising him, which is his due and all man can return for his many favors and great goodness. Here is hardly anything else than the doctrine of Plato's *Timæus,* simplified by cutting off still lower gods and thereby keeping monotheism at least for this world of ours, along with Plato's general teaching that the just are alone happy and befriended by the gods, and that the only service we can render the gods is to worship them and to range ourselves on their side in the fight with the irrational powers of evil. How seriously Franklin took up these opinions, we have no means of judging. Of course, we never hear of this polytheism again, except in one of the playful *Bagatelles* of a later date. But Franklin always preserved the belief that we can make no return to God for his great mercy but by worship and—here Jesus took the lead before Socrates—by trying to make others happy, laying more and more stress, however, upon the latter, preferring works to words. The two dialogues, already referred to, dating from 1730, followed by another treatise written in 1734, deal with self-denial, showing, on the one side, that it is not a hardship, since it is a calculation for giving up a present in order to gain a more permanent good, and, on the other, that it is not the highest virtue, since acting rightly with a feeling of self-denial, out of a sense of obligation, is not so fixedly virtuous and no more meritorious than acting rightly by a natural or acquired inclination, with pleasure in the act, because "the most perfect virtue is above all temptation." In a way, these essays have a peculiar inverse relation to one of the dialogues attributed to Plato, the *Hippias Minor,* and to a passage in the fourth book of the *Memorabilia*; for they teach that the willing doer of righteousness is superior to the unwilling doer of righteousness, whereas that dialogue and that pas-

sage taught that the willing sinner is not so bad as the unwilling sinner. Franklin concludes that moral pleasure is a more durable good than sensual pleasure, that the explanation of this is because the happiness of all creatures "consists in acting up to their chief faculty," which in us is reason, and that " the foundation of all virtue and happiness is thinking rightly" ; and in still another paper, from the year 1735, he posits that we never choose evil as evil, but only under the appearance of an imaginary good, passion, which views things only in their present aspect, obfuscating reason, which represents them in their whole nature and tendency:—all which is in accordance with Plato's well-known doctrines in the *Protagoras* and the *Republic* and in several other dialogues. From these teachings Franklin always retained belief that virtue is essential to happiness, adding that villainy cannot be concealed, and those who do their duty will surely receive reward, if not here, at least hereafter, thus resembling Plato himself again, who in his *Republic,* after showing that the just man is internally rewarded, at the end introduced external and future rewards from the all-overseeing of the gods. Of another early opinion of his, Franklin informs us in his *Autobiography.* This is, that certain actions are not bad because forbidden to us by revelation, but they are forbidden because bad. He does not tell where he got this idea; but a similar one is found in Plato's *Euthyphro,* where it is contended that certain things are not holy because beloved by the gods, but are beloved by the gods because holy.

In 1732 Franklin issued his first *Almanac,* which at once leapt into popularity; and soon thereafter he began to insert in its annual numbers those homely apothegms which became famous under the appellation of the sayings of *Poor Richard.* Through economy and assiduous labor having reached prosperity, he recommended to others frugality and diligence by such mottoes as "Fly pleasures and they will follow you," "Keep thy shop, and thy shop will keep thee," "Time is money," and emphasized the need of a competency by reminding people that "It is hard for an empty bag to stand upright." He became engrossed in worldly affairs, and abandoned metaphysics, growing disgusted, as he says,[1] by the great uncertainty he found in its reasonings, and, to satisfy his inquisitive spirit, took to physics instead. He left off the subjective treatment of moral questions, ceasing to meditate upon virtue and his own state, and became objective, considering only duty and the good and useful things he might do to others. From now on

[1] *Works,* Sparks' edition, Vol. I, p. 76n.

we meet with no writing of his even remotely Platonic; yet the footprints of Plato's passing are still in places discernible. The essentials of every religion Franklin ever believed to be these: that there is a God, that God governs by his providence, that he ought to be worshiped, that the most acceptable service we can show him is doing good to his other children, that the soul of man is immortal, and that it will be treated with justice in another life respecting its conduct in this.[2] These, though they constituted the prevalent deistical creed, are little else than Plato's, stripped of its embellishments. Plato's doctrine of pre-existence Franklin neither accepted nor rejected; but he reprobated a recent attempt to revive it for the purpose of accounting for the evil in this world, as unnecessary and officious, since we are not called to such service, and it is beyond our powers.[3] He did, however, himself, a few years before his death, once fall into such an attempt at theodicy, and in a manner precisely Plato's, which perhaps is an instance of an outcropping in age of a long-forgotten opinion entertained in youth. "I sometimes wonder," he wrote in 1787, "that Providence does not protect the good from all evil and from every suffering. This should be so in the best of worlds; and, since it is not so, I am piously led to believe, that, if our world is not indeed the best, we must lay the blame on the bad quality of the materials of which it is made."

John Adams undertook in middle life what he called "the severe task of going through" all Plato's works, with the help of one English, one French, and two Latin translations, and occasionally referring to the original. He said[4] that he learned only two things from Plato, one of which was that "Franklin's ideas of exempting husbandmen and mariners, etc., from the depredations of war, were borrowed from him."

We need not be surprised at this influence of Plato upon Franklin. If Franklin's character does not accord with our conception of Plato's, there is considerable resemblance between Franklin and Socrates, who so greatly influenced Plato, and the latter's influence on Franklin was only the back flow of the stream. Socrates also, after first busying himself with metaphysics, abandoned it, and brought philosophy down from the clouds. He had the same versatility, discussing all possible subjects. He lacked the æsthetic temperament of Plato, though he occasionally dabbled in verse, as did Franklin too. He was equally utilitarian. If Franklin confessed

[2] Vol. I, pp. 103, 119-20, Vol. X, p. 423.

[3] Vol. VII, pp. 497-8, 59n.

[4] *Works,* Vol. X, p. 103.

it would give him more satisfaction to find in any Italian travels a receipt for making Parmesan cheese than a transcript of any inscription from any old stone whatever, Socrates said a well-built and serviceable dung-cart is beautiful. Socrates was even the narrower of the two; for he considered the study of geometry useful only for purposes of surveying, but Franklin went with Plato in regarding it a good mental discipline. Their moral characters were not dissimilar; for as Socrates refused to take pay for his instructions, Franklin refrained from making profit by his inventions. They both did good without expecting reward from those to whom they did it, but from themselves and from God.