

THE PLEASANT PAINS OF ASCETICISM

BY LEO MARKUN

ASCETICISM, according to the Rev. Dr. Charles Morris Addison's definition in *The Theory and Practice of Mysticism*, "is belief in pain and want for their own sake, as agreeable to God laying up grace in Heaven." Martyrdom may, then, when voluntary, be included under the term; but here we shall be chiefly concerned with self-inflicted and willingly received pains falling short of death.

After mentioning certain cruel disciplines that St. Francis inflicted upon himself, Dr. Addison remarks, "And here his aim was joy as much as that of any epicurean." This is the interpretation of a minister, made in a lecture addressed to theological students and intended to draw them into the practice of mysticism. I think it is true; and if it is, the fact is important.

As soon as we say that even the person who tortures himself in the name of God is seeking his own joy, we reduce the ethics of all systems of religion and philosophy to a common hedonism. After all, Carlyle's Professor Teufelsdröckh is quibbling when he says "there is in man a HIGHER than Love of Happiness: he can do without Happiness, and instead thereof find Blessedness!" His everlasting yea, "Love not Pleasure; love God" is self-contradictory. Perhaps there are people to whom the love of God can bring greater joy than any sensual delight can; nay, there undoubtedly have been and are such people, but joy is joy however sought, however found. The worship of sorrow is really the adoration of bliss.

The story is told of St. John of the Cross that in his old age, after he had spent his strength in virtue, Christ came to him and asked what reward he desired for his good deeds. "Lord, that I might suffer most!" was the final reply. Lecky, telling the story, says that "every selfish wish was forgotten" in the saint as he made

this request. This is a gross psychological mistake. To be most like the Man of Sorrows, to be as nearly as possible Christlike, was certainly the most selfish of all desires to the saint, even though Lecky was incapable of envying him such a reward. The story is told again of a Spanish saint, Ramon Monat, who, after refusing a crown of roses at the hands of the Virgin, receives Christ's own crown of thorns.

Asceticism is, however, not a mere historical curiosity interesting only a few hermits and monks and their admirers. The tribal taboos and religious prohibitions which arise out of a more or less clearly formulated theory of sacrifice are so widespread that no one of us, however anarchical and revolutionary in his thoughts and actions, can entirely escape their influence. Though we go our daily way as if ignorant that gods exist, though we go out of our way to deny that gods exist, we are constantly doing things simply because the interpreters of divinity have suggested or commanded that these things be done, and we are ever omitting to do things which are said to arouse divine wrath.

Asceticism is often bound up with belief in future rewards and punishments. The doctrine that our existence on earth is but a test to determine where and how we shall live evermore after death has no doubt had more influence than any other religious teaching in causing pleasure-loving men and women to renounce the ordinary mortal joys. To the anticipation of future bliss is often added the mystical delight of communication with or mergence into the divinity.

But asceticism does not inevitably imply a belief in personal immortality. Painful practices may be directed toward Nirvana, which is at once the loss of individual consciousness and an entering into the godhead. They may be intended to produce mundane prosperity. They may become, by a transfer of values, symbols and manifestations of a higher, more intense order of bliss. Indeed, properly speaking, this last is what asceticism means. He who clings to a glorious horror of never-ending tortures in Hell is more truly the ascetic than he who is convinced that his austerities on earth assure him of all the delights of Paradise. The latter is but a thrifty soul who appreciates the value of compound interest at an infinite rate of increase, and to whom the security offered is satisfactory.

The Paradise-seekers have almost invariably been gregarious, at least with respect to their plans for eternity, even though many

theologians have represented among the leading joys of Heaven that of looking down upon the damned in Hell. The ardent fearers of damnation have sought to make others share in their pleasant pains. Moreover, because self-cruelty is ordinarily associated with greater than normal cruelty, they have not stopped at suasion. In Christianity, to be specific, the desert anchorites were succeeded by the monks, some of whose orders were especially devoted to the task of converting pagans and suppressing heresy by force. Among schismatic groups, the Catholic doctrine of the counsel of perfection was discarded in favor of the theory that every Christian should sanctify himself by ascetic practices.

Considered in the light of his own experiences, after as well as before he wrote *The Critic as Artist*, there is much meaning in the words of Oscar Wilde: "Self-denial is simply a method by which man arrests his progress, and self-sacrifice a survival of the mutilation of the savage, part of that old worship of pain which is so terrible a factor in the history of the world, and which even now makes its victims day by day and has its altars in the land."

Perhaps Wilde says too much here. If self-denial includes the postponing of pleasures, the occasional subordination of individual desires to communal action for the ultimate advantage of all the individuals participating in it, surely it is one of the methods that have been used in erecting our civilization. It was really self-denial and self-sacrifice for their own sakes (forms of enjoyment he could understand, at least in his prison days) to which Wilde objected.

We cannot all say with the Christian mystic Jacob Boehme, "that this is joy, that the will to nature is delivered and freed from the dark anguish: for else there would be no knowledge of what joy was, if there were not a painful source." We cannot all be placed upon the same alghedonic level, although most, probably all, of us are capable in some ways of deriving pleasure from painful sources.

But, try as we will, we cannot altogether escape the consequences of the teaching that it is blessed to suffer. This message of consolation to the slaves and the poor artisans whom the Nazarenes gathered around them quickly became and has remained to this day a cardinal dogma in official Christianity. The luxury of the decadent Graeco-Roman world has been much exaggerated, together with the extent of its "vices," but at any rate it was altogether out of the reach of the poor followers of Jesus. Accordingly they were

delighted to hear that those who were then carousing and reclining upon soft couches were not to be admitted into the imminent Kingdom of Heaven.

Thus then is the teaching explained: "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink: nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on." Of course, some persons of our time who describe themselves as Christians do pause to consider whether a green necktie goes well with a pink shirt, and whether synthetic lemon pop will be quite as efficacious as synthetic raspberry pop in relieving their thirst. Comparatively few are they who sell all they have and follow in what they conceive to be the way of the Lord. The Christian self-cruelty of today is for the most part more subtle, being concerned largely with conscience, which is built up to a considerable extent upon the obsolescent dogma of original sin.

Theological ingenuity long ago discovered that we have all inherited wickedness from Adam and Eve, and theologians have hardly yet stopped arguing to what extent original sin can be eradicated. Our present morality represents in large measure the attempt to repress natural impulses, to conquer the "sinful old Adam" who is supposed to dwell in all of us. Indeed, a great many of our crimes, including some that are punished with great severity, are such only because of taboos that are without rational meaning for us now.

It can hardly be denied that some of our religious taboos have served useful purposes, and that a few of them remain harmless; but the superstitious self-cruelty of our ancestors has cast about us many an irksome bond which we cannot think of removing without trembling at our own temerity. Those who venture to free themselves on their own account soon learn how cruel "virtue" can be.

The initiates into the Roman mysteries were taught, according to Cicero, that men come into this world to atone for sins which they have committed in a previous state of existence. This is literally the same as Origen's teaching, and it amounts in effect to the orthodox Christian dogma of original sin.

The curious will of man to find himself guilty is inexplicable except as pleasurable self-cruelty. Conscience is very real to some of us, at times more potent than the fear of tangible punishment; but of course the result of conscience may or may not be socially beneficial. We have but to think of the inner spiritual tribunal of Queen Isabelle of Spain, which permitted her no rest until many heretics and infidels were slaughtered, many fair cities laid waste.

The New England or Nonconformist conscience is first and foremost a manifestation of pleasant pain.

Christian preachers have repeatedly stressed the importance of humiliation and affliction. Men are still advised to approach God in the humble attitude of the child that has repented of its misdeed and voluntarily kisses the whip with which it is to be chastised. (Not that the kissing is likely to be altogether voluntary in the case of an unperverted child.) Harriet Beecher Stowe, who thought she had freed herself of the cruel Calvinism of her ancestors, remained capable of saying the "sorrow is godlike, sorrow is grand and great, sorrow is wise and far-seeing."

If present-day advocates of the "blue laws" seldom argue that we need an abundance of sorrow, it is yet asceticism more than anything else which clamors for a Sunday without amusements and an eternal interdict on that which "maketh glad the heart of man." Paradoxically, while the Calvinist theology is apparently drying out into nothingness, its psychological spring is furnishing holy water to religious leaders who have abandoned predestination and original sin, and even to humanists who profess full allegiance to utilitarianism in ethics.

Whether the divinity served be wrathful Jehovah or the new American god Efficiency, self-denial is the favorite sacrificial offering of our time. The worship of Efficiency (perhaps the same deity which has been condemned under the name of Mammon) has in fact led to certain modifications of the Sunday laws. The priests of Efficiency were agreed a few years ago, although they hesitate a little now, that workingmen should be sober on Monday mornings, even though this involves certain industrial losses and an enormous cost in enforcing the relevant laws.

The characteristic prudery of England and the United States, which continental Europeans often refer to as hypocrisy, is a sort of psychic celibacy. It amounts in effect, however, to the spicing of sex with algolagnia or pleasantly painful voluptuousness. Certainly there are men and women who take great delight in suppress-*infi* books and pictures. If they cannot burn alive the artists and the publishers, they must content themselves with the lesser cruelty of flinging the supposedly indecent books into the fire. Their desire to commit malicious mischief seems legitimately satisfied when they smash to bits a splendid statue or empty rare liquors into a sewer.

The principle of sacrifice has taken many curious forms, and

there are peoples even more convinced of the value of a taboo on milk than good Americans are of their taboo on champagne. There was a puritanical sect in the fourth century which proclaimed that no true Christian would defile himself with any sort of animal flesh.

The teaching that virginity is holy has had an influence on the lives of millions of persons, beginning long before the Christian era. Celibacy plays an important part in Brahmanism, Lamaism, and Buddhism. Although the main line of Jewish religious thought distinctly favors fruitfulness, it was from a Jewish sect, the Essenes, that the Christian ascetic ideals were derived. An important sect in normally polygamous Islam believes in the holiness of celibacy. Among the aborigines of South and Central America many tribes had celibate and otherwise ascetic priests and priestesses. Dionysus, the Greek god of love, was served by priestesses sworn to chastity. Pythagoras taught his followers that they could not partake of certain mysteries unless their lives were virginal.

A sharp differentiation between matter and spirit, such as can be found in some Greek philosophies, is usually accompanied by an ascetic tendency. This was noticeable, for example, in the old Christian heretical sects that were more or less akin to Manichaeism. The erratic young Otto Weininger, who defended celibacy only a few years ago, says: "Denying sexuality merely slays the bodily man, and but for the sake of giving full scope to the spiritual one."

Removing the spirit from the debasement of its corporeal alloy is an intermediate process in mysticism, and it is indeed among the mystics that celibacy has been most important. The principle is that to communicate with a god, one must become godlike, therefore (according to some religions) removed as far as possible from the natural appetites of men. Possibly magical notions about the efficacy of celibacy and various other forms of asceticism arose before there was any worship or fear of gods.

Self-castration and other forms of self-mutilation, the voluntary suffering of flagellation, fasting, uncomfortable garb, abstinence from bathing and from knowledge, religious prostitution or other sacrifices of modesty, have been among the most important manifestations of asceticism. Except for fasting and (to a limited extent) abstinence from knowledge, these forms of self-sacrifice seem remote to most of us. Yet an important American sect debated not long ago the God-fearing way of fastening undergarments, and

many religious communities are still sharply distinguished from their neighbors by their garb.

In our own time, when scholars and philosophers and scientists are chiefly to be found outside monastic walls, many of these men and women show a certain tendency toward asceticism. Choosing to devote themselves to pleasures which are not such at all in the eyes of the unsympathetic, they renounce others. Knowing in many cases that they are not to enjoy the material rewards which come to persons of intellectual ability inferior to their own, they nevertheless choose to serve humanity or to follow the inward gleam.

There are still men of religion who undergo great sufferings in their missionary labors. There are physicians and research scientists who willingly suffer the loss of health or life in their daily work. Many an artist weds Lady Poverty as surely as did the good St. Francis. There are self-sacrificing people who give much of their little for what they consider deserving causes. That they actually accomplish beneficial results does not, of course, always follow.

For the true ascetic nobility and even repose arise out of suffering. Out of their pains they make real and tremendous pleasures. The joys of renunciation are no less keen than the joys of appetite.