

THE EXAGGERATION OF REMORSE IN RELIGION.

A COMPARISON OF THE PURITAN AND ORIENTAL POINTS OF VIEW.

BY JAMES G. TOWNSEND, D.D.

THE New England attitude, an inheritance from the teachings of Jonathan Edwards (who sits yet in his "magisterial chair"), is that of self-analysis, of self-accusation, of repentance. In the Oriental or Indian scheme of life, there is no room for self-scrutiny, no time for repentance. The novice, the pupil, knows that he makes mistakes, that he sins, but he ceases to think of them; he gains by his increased knowledge, and enters upon a new and better day.

Is not this fore-looking wiser than the New England habit of self-interrogation and repentance? May not this self-accusation, this continual repentance, become morbidness, whose only fruit is sorrow?

We admit that we have no right to judge others, to censure or to criticise them. Why then should we condemn ourselves? Should we not be as courteous, as charitable, with ourselves as with others?

It is not this tyrannical self-condemnation that brings the greater life, the nobler vision, but the larger *truth* that we have gleaned. We must cut these self-imprisoning cords and let the self free for ideality, spontaneity, affection, faith, adventure. How can we do our work well with a spirit *à la dimanche*?

In the Dark Ages, in the long line of popes, the name of Gregory shines like a star gleaming through a cloudy sky, because he composed his immortal chants. One of his chants is worth more than a million of the morbid, petty self-revilements of a Thomas à Kempis. For surely the *love* of good is higher than the *hatred* of evil, the passion for truth than the despising of falsehood, the worship of the beautiful than the detestation of the ugly. How wide the gulf be-

tween the one who feels himself mean, petty, full of shame, smitten with sin, and the serene, cosmic soul who knows he has the expansions as well as the limitations of the universe; between the one mourning in dust and ashes over his imaginary sins, and the lofty soul of a Channing, "balancing equivalent of infinitude."

I was reared in a Methodist home, and my parents were gentle and good. My grandmother was known to all the Methodist churches of Pittsburg as a saint. She taught me the duty of self-introspection, the awfulness of *sin*. For years after I became a minister, how many nights lying on my bed would the old pain for my sins (I do not mean crimes, for of them I was innocent) return to me, the old accusations pierce me with an agony too deep for tears. I could no longer believe that the sufferings of *another* could atone for my sins and wash my unclean soul as white as snow. But in my Unitarian life taught by Channing, Parker and Emerson, I found a saner, sweeter religion. I became a reader of *The Open Court* and other independent journals; I found such friends as Barber, Hosmer, Batchelor, Chadwick and Jones. But still the old pain of the New England conscience *would* come back to me, to poison every pleasure, mar every happiness, until, in these later years, the thought has come, that I have no right to accuse myself,—my part was but a drop, that of the universe a sea. The lights and the shadows which chase each other across my soul, are reflections from the whole of humanity, and the vast orrery of the stars. I seem to hear the voice of Jesus saying, when he rose to his highest self: "Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more." But to learn that the universe is more to blame than I does not make me less vigilant, less careful, less religious, only more free, more alert, more cosmic.

When I walk, as I do daily, down the streets of my city, I see the faces seamed with sin, many broken lives, broken in body and in soul, and I say, it is not they, no, no, no! I am forced in honesty to cry out as I see these social outcasts: "There, but for God's grace, go I." But if I am without merit when I rise to a higher level, am I not sinless when I sink to a lower one? At least should we not see that it is a waste of time to number our sins and another waste to repent of them? We should turn away from the filths of depravity which were discovered by the old saints prying into the crepuscular depths of their being, and live in the feeling of the infinite beauty, the courageous soldiers of the ideal.

In Hawthorn's marvelous story of the "Marble Faun," the theory is evolved that sin was necessary in human education. Donatello must commit an awful crime to become conscious of his soul.

There may be a grain of truth in this theory, but I do not believe in any religion founded upon the theory of sin. In my view the inward-looking, self-accusing, sin-mourning one is smaller, than the unconscious, unaccusing, aspiring soul turning intuitively to the light. In the old Greek mythology the hapless Orion, turning patiently his sightless eyes to the sun, received his sight.

Let, then, our faults and sins sink away like a stone cast in the sea. We shall come to the supreme good through human service, ever looking beyond towards that which is beautiful and divine.

In those exquisite lines of Matthew Arnold we find a deep meaning:

“Weary of myself and sick of asking,
What I am, and what I ought to be,
At the vessel’s prow I stand, which bears me
Forwards, forwards o’er the starlit sea.”