

## SIN IN THE GREEK CULTS.

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IT has been customary for many ages now to think of the Hellenic mind as possessing more healthy joyfulness and less consciousness of the dark side of life than others. When Rawlinson wrote that "the typical Greek was devoid of any deep sense of sin," he expressed what most men have thought, who have read their literature. Professor James, however, has come forward as an advocate against the lightsome joyous view of life possessed by the Greek. He writes, that "the moment the Greeks grew systematically pensive and thought of ultimates they became unmitigated pessimists." As examples he cites first of all the *Iliad*, XVII, 446: "Nothing then is more wretched anywhere than man of all that breathes and creeps on the earth." Also *Theognis* 425-428: "Best of all for all things upon earth is it not to be born nor to behold the splendors of the sun; next best to traverse as soon as possible the gate of Hades. Other passages of like significance he quotes from *Œdipus in Colonus*, 1225, and also in another place, the words Achilles hears Lycaon, Priam's young son, say, beginning "Ah, friend, thou too must die."

Probably the whole value of these words of James will be that in the future we shall not be so wildly enthusiastic over the bright worship of the Greek and the joyful optimism that characterized it. For we certainly shall do wrong if we blot out the beautiful picture of Apollo, for example, "the bright cheerful patron of song," and the procession of young boys carrying the olive branches singing of the "heartening wine that sends all care to sleep," and in its place put the "blackly pessimistic" picture of the Harvard Professor.

We doubtless have been wrong in allowing joyfulness to strike too loud a note in their religion and it is good to be pulled up—even sharply—that we might recognize that like every other nation there was a dark and painful vein in their experience. But it must yet

be said that joy *was* the prevailing note in their religion, and there was not, as Plato tells us, a very deep consciousness of sin present in their life. The sacrifices were usually followed by banquets which communicated a festive character to the acts of worship, and this was accompanied with singing and dancing. Naturally sadness and melancholy were in their life as in the life of all, but it does not conquer their spirits. Says Pericles in his funeral speech when praising Athens, "We have not forgotten to provide for our weary spirits many relaxations from toil: we have regular games and sacrifices throughout the year. . . . and the delight which we feel in all these things helps to banish melancholy." In these sacrifices we need to remind ourselves of the "communion" idea, with which W. Robertson Smith has made us so familiar. The fact that Pericles mentions it with the games, itself shows us that a peculiar notion was not uppermost. In many of the festivals, such as the Diasia, (in honor of Zeus Meilichios) the Plyteria, the Thargelia and the Thesmophoria there was at least one day of fasting and gloom, but it was a joyful note that sounded loudest during the days given to the festivals. "Apollo loves the joy of song and the music," sings Stesichorus (Frag. 50), "but dirges and wailing are the portion of Hades." "He is not one to be present with those that lament," the chorus in the Agamemnon say to Cassandra. All morbidness concerning wrong doing was absolutely opposed to their nature. Where consciousness of sin existed, it was got rid of as soon as possible. There is a Pythian epigram or utterance which breathes the characteristic Greek spirit of *ἐπιείκεια*—which it will be remembered Matthew Arnold has immortalized—"sweet reasonableness," quoted by Farnall in the fourth volume of his *Cults of the Greek States*. The consultant was a priest who under great temptation had broken his vow of chastity which his office temporally imposed upon him; in remorse and terror he asks the oracle, by what penance or sacrifice he can avoid the wrath of the divinity; but the oracle comforts him with the answer: "God pardons all that man's nature is too weak to resist."

In studying Greek religion that we may learn a little about the place that sin held in it, we need to keep in mind that Greece was not a unity in respect of this consciousness. In previous studies we have noted that geography can materially modify the content of sin, so here the same is true. The Athenian goddess protected Orestes and shielded him from the onset of the furies, though he was not an Athenian. But "Athena of the brazen house," the bronze goddess on the rising ground that was regarded as the Acropolis of

Sparta, was appealed to in vain by her own king of Heracleid descent because he had been guilty of a rash act of homicide. It has been truly said, "she shared all the sternness of the Spartan discipline and was of a rigorous, unrelenting mood." In a later day we find the usual unity which reveals a great ethical advance on the old ideas. Empedocles of Agrigentum voiced the feeling of this later day when he said, "It cannot be that one and the same thing is lawful in one city and forbidden in others, but universal law stretches throughout the widely ruling sky and the immeasurable beam of light."

As in all religions the cults of Greece provide us with many illustrations of primitive notions of sin. Thus Farnall finds reason for thinking that Zeus Meilichios was once conceived as a physical god of vegetation who grew sombre with the winter months and must be appeased in order that the season of fertility may return. In such a case as this the people would understand by the varying moods of the divinity a reflection of the varying conduct of man. Sinfulness with them would thus be dependent upon the season of the year, and offerings for fertility easily pass to sacrifices for sin. We also find in the Thesmophoria the familiar notion that fasting and continence had an agrarian value. A breach of either of these two things was visited generally by sterility of the land. In this connection reference should be made to Fraser's *Golden Bough* (II, 212) where illustrations of the same idea are given from the Karens of Burma, the Battas of Sumatra and the natives of Mowat in New Guinea. The sympathetic relation supposed to exist between the commerce of the sexes and the fertility of the earth is probably the reason that the ancient Greek husbandmen caused boys and virgins to plant and gather the olives.

The notion that sin is something which can be contracted like a plague as we noticed in our previous study (see "The Changing Content of Sin," Jan., 1908) does not seem to have been unknown in Greece. When Athena was washed, Artemidonis explains all such rites as necessitated by human "sin, which pollutes the temples and the images." It was a notion of sin like this that made the Dipolia seem reasonable to the Greek mind. This story is told by Pausanias and more fully by Theophrastus in Porphyry. It appears that the axe which was used for killing the ox, being blamed for murder was solemnly tried and condemned and cast into the sea. In the fuller account a number of men did something towards the murder, so that they all blamed each other, "until the guilt was at last allowed to rest on the axe." With this we should compare the

following from Plato's "Laws." "If any lifeless thing deprive a man of his life, except in the case of a thunderbolt, or other fatal dart sent from the gods,—whether a man is killed by lifeless objects falling upon him or by his falling upon them, the nearest of kin shall appoint the nearest neighbor to be the judge and thereby acquit himself and the whole family of guilt. And he shall cast the guilty thing beyond the border."

What were the sins of which the Greek was most conscious? In answering this question we shall find many things that would not be judged as sins by our modern ethical standards. We find such natural things as childbirth and death counted among the things for which lustration is necessary. These were "sunderers" and could separate the Greek from the favor of the gods as much as murder. All connected with these things were also infected by the uncleanness. Care was even taken that the sun should not shine upon the corpse, "since even the Sun-god must not pollute himself by the sight of a dead body." Thus the funeral usually took place in the early morning before sunrise. In this connection we should remember a similar idea in the sacrifices in Locris to *Θεοὶ Μείλιχοι*. These were performed in the night, and all the flesh of the victim slain must be consumed before morning. If, as some think, this victim bore away the sins of the people, the fact that it must not be exposed to the light of day would show that a corpse and a sin-bearer were thought of as equally harmful. One of the strange inconsistencies of primitive ethics is seen in that childbirth always required a cleansing at the festival of Amphidromia, and yet the Artemis cult seems to have viewed childlessness as a grave offence. This may have been a survival of phallic worship, as it seems to have been among the Jews, barrenness being the most likely curse of a god of fertility. In any case the mad Proetides lead a wild life and reject marriage until they are tamed at last by Artemis *Ἡμερασία*. Women in travail used to call on her for aid, and her encouragement seems to have gone farther, for Euripides says, "Artemis *Λοχία* would not speak to childless women." Any conception of sin or purification does not seem however to have played a very large part, if any, in her cult. The Hindu idea of the evil of birth does not come until the Greek reaches a more reflective stage. Then we find Empedocles of Agrigentum saying that "human birth is one of a series of transmigrations which are the punishment for some original sin." The notion that the sins of the father are visited upon the children is often found in Æschylus, and Theognis prays that the gods would



punish the guilty in his own person and not avenge the sins of the fathers upon the children.

One of the most heinous sins to the Greek was inhospitality. All sins against the home and hearth were punished. Unnatural vice and exposure of children were spoken of as sins against Zeus Ἐρκεῖος, the god of the family life. "The parent must be honored more than the statue of the god, according to Plato, who asserts that Nemesis accuses before the divine judge those who neglect such duties." To their minds the hearth fire and also the temple fire were very sensitive to all sins. After some great sacrilege or at the annual piacular season, all the fires were extinguished to be re-kindled from some holy flame. The same custom has been found with the Chinese, Mexicans, Peruvians, Iroquois and some African tribes. "The most famous instance," says Farnall, "is the account of the feast of Eleutheria instituted to commemorate the battle of Plataea. The Delphic oracle commanded the generals to extinguish all the fires in the country as having been *polluted* by the barbarians and to fetch new fire from the common hearth of Pytho."

Homicide seems to have also been looked upon with horror by the Greeks. The statue of Hera is said to have turned aside when the blood of the Sybarites was shed at her altar. And Iphigenia in Euripides's play declares that the idol of Artemis showed the same aversion when the matricide Orestes drew near. Cf. Farnall, *Cults*, I, 20. The shedding of blood seems to have been the original sin for which the worship of Zeus Ἰκεῖος, the god of supplication, was established. The punishment for the murder of a kinsman was madness. The Erinyes sent this to Ixion, "The first murderer in Greek legend." Doubtless as in other nations, the murder of a kinsman was a greater offence than that of an alien, because of the mystical bond supposed to exist between the god, the slayer and the slain. Other sins frequently mentioned are treachery, especially towards a guest or friend; cruelty; blasphemy; robbing of temples; incest; violation of the rite of asylum and perjury. Of this last even Euripides says, "Thinkest thou that the gods are inclined to pardon when by false swearing a man would escape death or bonds or violence? Then either they are less wise than mortal men, or they set fair specious pleas before justice." In some of the popular beliefs of the Greeks, prosperity was looked upon as an evil thing. It awakened the jealousy of the gods. It will be remembered that Herodotus (I. 34) says, "The indignation of the gods fell heavily upon Cræsus, probably because he thought himself the happiest of all men." "Here," says Lewis Campbell in his *Religion in Greek*

*Literature*, "thought is in transition between the danger of prosperity and the sinfulness of pride." Compare the lines of Æsopus: "If a man has some good fortune, he receives Nemesis by way of compensation."

Up to the present we have said nothing of the sin of licentiousness which is often associated with the Greek character. Before we see how they sought to rid themselves of sin, it may be well therefore, to say something of this characteristic Greek failing. The popular idea that Greek worship was seldom unconnected with sexual sin is entirely false. There was no such indulgence at the Thesmophoria but there was *αισχρολογία*, (as there was also at Haloa and in the worship of Damia and Auxesia) "badinage of an undoubtedly indecent kind." But it was not like the coarseness that we should naturally associate with such a word. It was performed as a ceremony by matrons whose chastity was not to be questioned. The object of it all was simply to stimulate the fertilizing power of the earth and the human frame. It will not do for us therefore to draw any evil inference from this ritual.

With regard to the cult of Aphrodite, the goddess of physical beauty and love, as it appears in written and monumental record, it was, says Farnell, "as pure and austere as that of Zeus and Athene, purer than that of Artemis." In some of the communities rules of chastity were imposed upon the priestesses. "The only hint before the fourth century of impurity is in connection with Aphrodite Ourania at Corinth." Another writer, after granting that the Athenian in the earliest times had "a severe and stern conception of the great goddess," declares that the lower conception came after the Persian war, through greater intercourse with maritime populations. Thus it may have been the result of Phœnician influence. It will be remembered that the Platonic Socrates speaks in the *Phædrus* of this lower kind of love as taken from "some haunt of sailors where good manners were unknown." It also appears from inscriptions that land was granted at Piræus for the specially Tyrian worship of Aphrodite (*Astarte*). Farnell attributes the degeneracy to the influence of the *hetærae* in social life, and doubtless this was a strong factor. They may certainly have made possible an extension of the bad morals of the foreign sailors. They were found almost everywhere and association with them was seldom a reproach to married men. While there is some reason to doubt that Solon instituted regular provision for licentiousness it is not unlikely that the State in a later day promoted the establishment of houses for them. Their place in the social life of Greece, and actions like that of the *hetæra*

Phryne imitating Aphrodite Anadyomene can only be explained in the light of the intense Hellenic love of beauty, apart from considerations of morality. To them a beautiful human body was something divine, and often the admiration given to it made them forget its weaknesses. In passing any judgment upon this phase of Greek life we must remember that the hetærae were thought of as a necessity of every social organization, and just as no conscience was pricked in the Middle Ages when churches were supported by brothels and the Papal treasury substantially helped by the trade, so in Greek life these things were not viewed as strictly as we do to-day. (Cf. Herod. I. 8, 10, 93, 203.) We need also to check the fury of our condemnation with the fact that modern civilization is yet a long way from the solution of the problem which yet lives in every city. It should not be forgotten also in this connection that the period of greatest rottenness in Greek social life was also the period "renowned in Greek literature and art as of the greatest splendor." It is significant of the same problem that the poets and artists of a later day whose brilliance is beyond question have had the same weakness.

We should badly misrepresent the Greek content of sin if we left the impression that its nature was always of a ceremonial kind. As every reader of its best thought well knows, there gradually grew a high ethical consciousness. Religion in Greek literature finds its culminating point in Plato and he treats with scorn the idea that ceremonial rites can purge from sin. In the "Laws" the three heretics are (1) the atheist whose offence is least, (2) the believer in gods who are indifferent to human beings, and (3) worst of all, the believer in gods who can be bribed by prayers and incense to the remission of sins.

That the idea of sin had a moral content sometimes alongside of the old physical idea could be shown in various passages. There is the Rhodian inscription, which says that the only people who can rightfully enter the temple are those "who are pure and healthy in hand and heart and who have no evil conscience in themselves." Origen quotes the following passage from Celsus, "Those who invite people to the other mysteries [as distinct from the Christian] make this proclamation: 'Come all ye who are pure of hand and heart and intelligible speech.'" In Pythagorean philosophy we possess the advanced reflection that righteousness was the best sacrifice and that the poor man's offering was more to the deity than hecatombs of oxen. In Herodotus (VI. 86) we have a saying which has been well called "a landmark in the history of Greek ethics." It is the forerunner of the Christian ethic that sin can be in thought more than deed. One

transition from ritualistic to ethical purity is seen in the story of Aelian, a Greek who has accidentally slain his dearest friend while protecting him from robbers. He hurries heart-broken to Delphi to see if he can cleanse himself from the stain of innocent blood. Under the old code he was altogether unclean, but a better fate greeted him: "Thou slewest thy friend in trying to save his life: his blood hath not defiled thee, thou art even purer of hand than thou wert before." Another transitional epigram reads, "Oh stranger, if holy of soul enter the shrine of the holy god, having but touched the lustral water: for lustration is an easy matter for the good, but an evil man the whole ocean cannot cleanse with its streams." The Greeks thought once to excuse their actions by appealing to like actions in the gods. But Euripides—and Bacchylides and Menander have a similar thought—says, "it is men who impute their own evil nature to the gods," and again, "if the gods do evil, they are not gods."

Sin was got rid of in a variety of ways, mostly characteristic of physical ideas about sin. Water, especially sea water, was of great lustral power. The plague at the beginning of the *Iliad* sent by an offended deity, is stayed by sacrifice and washing in the sea. The image of Athena was annually washed in sea water, because "human sin" had polluted it. The preference was always given to flowing water or sea water for holy water to be placed at the entrance to temples and private houses for sprinkling. After death a vessel of water brought from another house is placed at the door and every one who leaves the house must sprinkle himself before he can associate again with his fellows. The bodies of the animals sacrificed in Athens were always cast into the sea. The Eleusinian rites always began with a rush into the sea, doubtless for the sake of purification.

Pig's blood was another great lustral element. On a vase-painting representing the purification of Orestes after the murder of his mother, Apollo holds a sucking pig above the head of the murderer. On another vase-painting we see the hero Theseus seated on the altar of Zeus the Atoner with pig's blood running down his body to cleanse him from the slaughter of the brigands.

Another favorite manner of doing away with sin was to transfer it to another person or thing. This was a very common practice in antiquity. We are told by Eustathius that a ram was offered to Zeus Meilichios at the end of Marmacterion, and its skin was used for the purification of the city, whose offences by some ceremonious means were cast out and passed over into certain unclean objects that were taken away to the cross-roads. This is a reminder that



the most potent purification charm at Eleusis was "the fleece of God"; this was placed under the feet of those who desired purification from guilt. At Athens we have a clear example of the transference of sin in the *Φαρμακός*; like all harvest gods, he is fed up and royally attired, but as a sin-bearer he is vile, ugly, rejected and after his death, his ashes cast into the sea, or as another account has it, "strewn on the land to impregnate it with his spirit." A further study of this most interesting ritual can be found in Fraser's *Golden Bough*, and in relation to Christian origins and dogma in Grant Allen's *Evolution of the Idea of God*.

It would be possible to go on indefinitely quoting examples of the mechanical ways in which the ancient Greek got rid of his sin, but it is hardly necessary. One thing must impress us all, namely that the Aryan nature as we have noted it in India (cf. "Sin in the Upanishads," Oct., 1907) and in Greece is not easily made to think darkly about sin. The emphasis which Christianity has given to this so-called "fundamental" is being gradually thrown from us. We are not becoming less moral, but simply asserting in higher terms the old Aryan healthymindedness which looks upon prudery and emphasis of the failings of human nature as much a sin as that which it condemns. The fact is that those who have never been in bondage to the sin notions of Medievalism have for many years "laughed at a fall" in order to "get up and begin again." And when we think of the thousands who are kept in the bondage of old bygone forms and beliefs in our churches, when we remember that the great stay of orthodoxy is its unnatural view of sin, we must long more than ever for the day when the rising world shall realize that the things we leave behind us are not to be cursed, but kept in their place. Sin is a return to the first steps of the ladder and it should be the aim of all the teachers of men to direct the attention of their fellows to the rungs above far more than to the steps below.