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Letters to Women on the Christian Faith.

A Philosopher to a Lady: On Religion.

By Professor James Moffatt, D.D., New York.

From time to time in the history of Christianity women have shown an interest in the faith which has manifested itself in literature. Sometimes they have been writers themselves, and sometimes they have been the cause of treatises or epistles. Last year I wrote a little study in the *Canadian Journal of Religious Thought* upon the letter of Ptolemæus the gnostic in the second century to a lady called Flora. But in the next century another lady is the recipient of a religious tract or treatise, and it is on this epistle that I am now asked to write a word. Neither lady was an orthodox Christian; Flora belonged to the gnostic movement, and Marcella, who forms our present subject, was married to a Neoplatonist, so that the pair were on the fringe of Christianity and no more. But they were both intelligent women, serious-minded and plainly interested in more than children and cooking. Neither could have been described like the Lady Crewe of whom Pepys wrote, that she was 'the same weak silly lady as ever, asking saintly questions.'

Porphyry, the husband of Marcella, flourished in the second half of the third century. He was the biographer of his master Plotinus, and by his works not only interpreted Neoplatonism to his age, but did damage to Christian apologetics in some incisive writing, of which unfortunately we possess merely fragments. As Augustine remarked, he despised Christianity, although he admired Christ—a type which is not yet extinct among philosophers. However, our interest is in one writing from his pen, a letter to his wife, in which he discusses some of what were to him the vital issues of religion. Porphyry was an ascetic, and indeed by temperament a celibate. He had not married till he was in middle life, and the tale of his motives is a curious self-revelation. Busy with the task of editing the works of Plotinus and of composing treatises on Neoplatonic philosophy, he suddenly surprised his friends by marrying a middle-aged widow. Marcella was not to Porphyry what Dorothea was to Mr. Casaubon, for she was neither young nor unencumbered. As Porphyry reminds her in this letter, she had been left with a large family of seven children, five of them girls; she was not wealthy, and she did not enjoy robust health. However, she seems to have shared the philosophy of her second husband. Indeed, when he had to leave her in Sicily and travel abroad, on a religious mission to Greece, she was so upset over his departure that he wrote her a long letter by way of consolation, with good counsels on the management of life and on the Neoplatonic code of personal morals. The fact is, as we read it, we begin to wonder whether it is really a letter and not a tract thrown into epistolary form. The bulk of it has no reference to Marcella herself; Porphyry expatiates upon his philosophy of life as if he were preaching or lecturing. And some of the personal references do not strike us as being in the best of taste. But the latter point ought not to be pressed, for Porphyry had no romance in his nature, and his philosophy shut him off from any warm interest in what would normally occupy the mind of an absent husband writing to his wife. Unless we recollect his aloofness from anything like human affection or domestic ties, we may misjudge him when he tells Marcella coolly that he had not married her 'for the sake of having children, since I thought that lovers of true wisdom are my children, and that your children would be mine as well, if they should ever embrace the right philosophy of life, when we had educated them.' Nor, he calmly explains, did I marry you to secure a nurse in my advancing years, 'for you are delicate yourself, and more in need of being looked after by others than able to help or tend them.' Making rather a parade of his chivalry, he unchivalrously reminds her that he had thought it a pity to leave her unprotected. Evidently her relatives had objected to the wedding, but Porphyry recalls how he carried his point, risking misunderstanding and malicious comment, because he was persuaded that she had the root of the matter in her and that under his training she would become a true Neoplatonist. There is a note of unpleasant detachment about all this, one is bound to confess.

Poor Marcella was only human, and when her husband refused to take her abroad with him she missed his company so acutely that he felt moved to write this letter to her, he says, so that in his absence she might work out her Neoplatonic salvation. They had been married for only ten months, and she was apparently quite willing to

have left her family in Sicily and to have enjoyed her husband's company. This he would not permit. So he endeavours to comfort her for the absence of 'him who sustains your soul, who is to you father, husband, teacher, kindred, yes, if you will, and fatherland.' Lofty words, but 'husband' is somewhat out of place.

It is only at the beginning and at the end that any intimate references are introduced. Porphyry exhorts her, for example, not to let her housekeeping cares divert her from her religion, that is from the philosophy which he had begun to instil into her. She will need that, to rise above spiteful gossip and worries of the home. Be sensible, he tells her, not emotional. 'Education means not absorbing a vast amount of knowledge but purging the soul from affections.' This is rarefied doctrine; Marcella wanted more than education from her husband. However, towards the close, he condescends to offer her some practical advice about managing her slaves. 'Try never to wrong them, nor to correct them when you are in a passion. And before you correct them, show them that you are doing it for their good, and give them a chance of explaining their conduct. When you buy slaves, avoid those who are stubborn.' He adds, but do not let yourself be dependent on the service of others in the household. 'Accustom yourself to do much for yourself.' And so on. Unfortunately the letter breaks off at this point, just as Porphyry seems to be coming down from the heights of philosophy to the plain of practical life. It is a pity that he does not do more than give such serious advice on housekeeping!

But the philosophy which fills the rest of the letter is not without significance. Even when the writer seems to have forgotten all about his correspondent, he never forgets the principles of his religious philosophy; of them he writes with a depth of conviction which is all the more interesting that it reveals the private feelings of a Neoplatonist in the third century upon his personal principles. One misses the practical concentration of Anselm's letters to religious women, royal or monastic, and the poignant note of Schleiermacher's letter to his wife. It was not in Neoplatonism, as Porphyry conceived it, to sanction any such relations of intimacy between man and woman, even though they were married. Still, the sincerity of his exposition is unmistakable. He preaches to Marcella first and foremost the abiding presence of the Deity within the pure-hearted. Why long for my physical presence, he pleads, as though you had no one to guide you and enrich your life when I am absent? You and I may enjoy communion of spirit, if you will but follow Plato's advice and recall yourself to the centre of your being. 'The mind of the wise is consecrated as its temple, and to know Him best is to honour Him best.' Right thoughts of Him, meditation upon His inward presence, that is the saving thing in life. As for prayer? Well, prayer must rise from a life eager in the quest for purity and goodness. 'The prayer of the idle is but empty words.' Pray only for spiritual blessings, not for anything bodily. 'Be sure of this, that as one longs for the body and the things of the body, he is failing to know God, he is blind to the sight of God, even though all men may regard him as a god.' And by the things of the body Porphyry means not simply physical desires but much of what St. Paul groups under 'the flesh' (although, by the way, there is little or no evidence that Porphyry was indebted to the Apostle here or elsewhere). For he proceeds to warn Marcella or the audience he may have in mind, that deceitfulness and lying as well as the love of money pertain to love of the body. Prayer is good, he admits, but let it be reverent, not effusive. Beware of talking much about God, also, 'for the wise honour God even as they keep silence, whereas the foolish dishonour Him even while they are praying and offering sacrifices.' Porphyry maintains that deeds are the best recognition of God, and further that one must never imagine that God needs us. We need Him, and all our task is to provide for His indwelling presence a mind purified by the thought that 'He is ever present, overlooking all your thoughts and deeds.' In a word, as he sums up his counsel on this point, 'a prayer accompanied by base actions in life is impure and therefore unacceptable to God; prayer accompanied by noble deeds is pure and at the same time acceptable.'

From this he passes to the four first principles of religion, 'faith, truth, love, and hope. We must have faith that in turning to God we are saved—the only way of our salvation. Having faith, we must strive with might and main to know the truth about God. Then as we know this, we must love Him whom we know, and loving Him we must nourish our souls on good hopes for life.' The addition of 'truth' to the New Testament 'faith, hope, and love' is significant.

Then come ten or eleven paragraphs on the Neoplatonic scheme of the three laws. The law of nations relates to international affairs, but it fails to reach the world of motives; Porphyry views this as an external regulation. The law of Nature, again, which regulates the physical desires of man

is in harmony with the Divine Law, and by practising it, as an ascetic discipline, one attains to that Divine Law. Here Porphyry develops his favourite views on abstinence. 'The veil of flesh hangs dark between Thy blessed face and mine' is not really a Christian but a Neoplatonic sigh. 'It is one great proof of wisdom to keep the body in thraldom,' *i.e.* to crush the passions of fear and desire; he becomes eloquent on this point, particularly as he seems to remember Marcella, 'Never trouble yourself whether you are male or female, never regard yourself as a woman, for I did not approach you as a woman.' Our relationship, he means, has had nothing of mere sex about it. 'Avoid all that is womanish in the soul, as though you had the body of a man.' The teaching here is what is to be found in his other writings; what makes it sound strange is the fact that he addresses it bluntly to his wife. The morbid reaction against the flesh, which was already deflecting monasticism as it was afterwards to deflect some types of mystical religion in the Middle Ages, is already voiced by this Neoplatonist saint and sage. In last century poets like Swinburne were fond of shouting protests against the 'pale Galilean,' as though Christianity had been responsible for fear of the red blood in human nature and suspicious of the powers of vital passion. History in the third century tells a very different tale. Gnostics and Neoplatonists alike were disparaging the body. It was Christianity that had to maintain, by the doctrine of the Incarnation, the reality of human nature. The interpretation was often inadequate, for current tendencies swung many Christians into inconsistent practices and principles, until it seemed as though one ought to be ashamed of the body as one was spiritual. Yet the fundamental principle of the Incarnation was never wholly lost sight of. It was the teaching of lofty souls like Porphyry which turned human nature into a pale phantom. Perhaps there is no clearer proof of this than the letter which we have been surveying.

Yet let us leave it with appreciation of its ethical teaching. The unhealthy idealism or spiritualism of the letter need not blind us to some admirable counsels in this exhortation to Marcella from her husband. Some of these have been already noted. Here is another, of permanent value. 'It would be absurd to exhort you to worship God, as though that admitted of any question. And we do not worship Him aright by doing this rite or by holding this or that belief.' It is not that Porphyry rules out religious rites. Indeed, he leaves it free to people to worship the deity as their particular national customs dictate. It is not that he disparages even right beliefs about God. What he means in this sentence is that neither outward forms nor intellectual beliefs are equivalent to real worship. It is his way of saying what had been said by the Christians whom he scorned so heartily: 'God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.' And in conclusion—this happens to be the very conclusion of the letter: 'It is not possible for any one who injures man to honour God. Consider the love of mankind to be the basis of your religion.' Whether Marcella needed this counsel or not, others do, even at the present day. How Porphyry intended to develop this argument, we cannot tell. He certainly did not mean that religion was to be resolved into anything like humanitarianism; he was far too genuine a Platonist to take this line. But, for all his disconcerting indifference to human love as a sphere for Divine love, he did not dream of identifying religion with any form of contemplation which sat loose to human duties. The moral conditions which he postulated for spiritual religion involved strict abstinence from bodily passions; yet he was evidently careful to recognize that selfishness in any form was fatal to the perception of reality.

In the Study.

Virginibus Puerisque.

The Tail-Waggers.

By the Reverend E. W. Price Evans, M.A., Pontypool.

'I am among you as he that serveth.'—Lk 22^{27}.

During my last summer holiday I met a dog. He was a handsome terrier, well-bred and friendly. His early home was in Penmaenmawr, North Wales, but when I met him he had settled down in a new home near London, and was living on excellent terms with his new mistress. You will not be surprised to learn that his name was Taffy.

Now Taffy was a gentleman, and, like many gentlemen, he was a member of a Club. I was a bit surprised at that. A Club for dogs! It sounds