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AMERICAN SLAVERY AND AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM.

(From the Rambler.)

We are told by competent Protestant authority that the most powerful Ecclesiastical body in the slave states of America is the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. We need hardly remind our readers that slavery was introduced into America whilst that country was yet under English rule.—After the revolution, when the constitution of the new people was being agitated, the subject of slavery naturally entered, as a not unimportant question, into the debates. It was generally believed—at least in half the states—that the evil would not be of long duration. Accordingly, when the discussion reached the Church, the Presbyterian Synods of New York and Philadelphia published a declaration, “highly approving of the principles in favor of universal liberty which prevail in America;” exhorted the slaveholders in their own communion to prepare their slaves for the enjoyment of freedom by means of a good education; and, finally, recommended them to use the most prudent measures, consistent with the interest and state of civil society, in the countries where they live, to procure eventually the final abolition of slavery in America. This language was both humane and temperate; and it was published in 1793, as the decision of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. In the following year they spoke still more strongly. In a note to the 142nd question of their Larger Catechism, on the Eighth Commandment, they refer to the text (1 Tim. i., 10), which speaks of “men-stealers;” and they say that “this word, in its original import, comprehends all who are concerned in bringing any of the human race into slavery, or in retaining them in it; and that the Apostle here classes them with sinners of the first rank. ‘To steal a free man is the highest kind of theft. In other instances we only steal human property; but when we steal or retain men in slavery, we seize those who, in common with ourselves, are constituted by the original grant lords of the earth.’”

Let us next turn to the Methodists. The language of John Wesley, the father and founder of Methodism, fell not an iota short of that of the Presbyterian teachers of Christianity. He even made the very same confusion between slaveholders and slavemasters. “What I have said to slavetraders,” he writes, “equally concerns all slaveholders, of whatever rank and degree—seeing that men-buyers are exactly on a level with men-stealers.” In 1780 the whole community declared slavery to be both hurtful to society, and “contrary to the laws of God;” in 1784 it refused to admit slaveholders to its communion, passing a vote to exclude all such. In the Methodist Book of Doctrines and Discipline it is laid down as the “only one condition previously required of those who desire admission into their society, a desire to flee from the wrath to come and to be saved from their sins; that this desire must be evidenced by certain fruits—by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practised, such as the buying and selling of men, women, and children with an intention to enslave them.”

Example is ever more efficacious than precept; and the example of American Protestantism directly countenances the “degrading theory” that the white man and the black are not equal in the sight of God.—“In the United States,” says the intelligent and trustworthy French traveller, M. Beaumont, “the churches of the Catholics are the only ones which do not admit of any privileges or exclusions; the black population can enter them just as freely as the white. In the churches of Protestants the blacks are either banished into some obscure corner, or altogether excluded.” And in another place the same gentleman observes—“Protestant congregations in this country are select societies as it were, their members belonging, for the most part, to the same rank and social position; the Catholic churches, on the other hand, receive persons of all classes and conditions of life, without any distinction whatever. Here the poor man is placed on an equality with the rich, the slave with the master, the black man with the white.”—And lest the testimony of a Catholic should be suspected of error or partiality in this matter, let us add the testimony of an English Protestant gentleman, Col. Hamilton, which is unimpeachable—

“Both Catholics and Protestants,” he says, “agree in the tenet that all men are equal in the sight of God; but the former alone gives practical exemplification of his creed. In a Catholic Church the prince and the peasant, the slave and his master, kneel before the same altar, in temporary oblivion of all worldly distinctions.

The stamp of degradation is obliterated from the forehead of the slave, when he beholds himself admitted to community of worship with the highest and noblest in the land. But in Protestant churches a different rule prevails. People of color are either

excluded altogether, or are mewed up in some remote corner, separated by barriers from the body of the church. It is impossible to forget their degraded condition even for a moment. It is brought home to their feelings in a thousand ways. No white Protestant would kneel at the same altar with a black one. He asserts his superiority every where; and the very hue of his religion is affected by the color of his skin.

Can it be wondered, therefore, that the slaves in Louisiana are all Catholics; that while the congregation of the Protestant Church consists of a few ladies, arranged in well-cushioned pews, the whole floor of the extensive cathedral should be crowded with worshippers of all colors and classes? The Catholic Priests never forget that the most degraded of human forms is animated by a soul as precious in the eye of religion as that of the Sovereign Pontiff. The arms of the Church are never closed against the meanest outcast of society. Divesting themselves of all pride of caste, they mingle with the slaves, and certainly understand their character far better than any other body of religious teachers. I am not a Catholic, but I cannot suffer prejudice of any sort to prevent my doing justice to a body of Christian Ministers, whose humble lives are passed in communicating to the meanest and most despised of mankind the blessed comforts of religion.”

And, if still further testimony were wanting we might quote the acknowledgments of the Presbyterian Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, in 1833, (quoted by W. Jay in his “Slavery in America,” p. 129, London, 1835) who report that the negroes in those states have no regular and efficient ministry and no churches; “neither is there sufficient room in white churches for their accommodation. We know of but five churches in the slaveholding states built expressly for their use.” White churches and black! We shall expect to hear next that these American students of the Protestant Bible have discovered that there are white mansions and black in the kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, they have already learnt how to carry this Christian and charitable distinction between the white man and the black beyond the narrow limits of the span of human life.

“The aristocracy of color,” says Judge Jay, himself a member of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States, “is maintained, not only in God’s temples, but even in that last abode, where all distinctions have been supposed to disappear. In the very graveyard, where death reigns as conqueror, and worms revel on the mouldering remains of manliness and beauty. . . . prejudice has his dwelling; and caste, under the sanction of the church, rears his hideous and revolting form. How many similar instances there may be, I know not; the following has come under immediate notice. The vestry and wardens of an Episcopal church in the diocese of New York, a few years since accepted a deed for a cemetery which was demised to them upon the express condition, embodied in the indenture, that they should never suffer any colored person to be buried in any part of the same; and all the subsequent conveyances, on the part of the church, of vaults and burying places are subject to the same condition.”

Such is the eloquent commentary supplied by Protestant practice on the other side of the Atlantic upon those texts of Holy Writ which speak of the abolition, under the Christian dispensation, of the distinction between bond and freemen, and of the equality of all mankind in the presence of their Creator.

In 1816 the Presbyterians erased from the statutes of their church the note on manstealing and slaveholding, which they had adopted in 1794, and which has been already commented upon; and in 1843 they resolved that “the Assembly do not think it for the edification of the Church for this body to take any action on the subject of slavery.” In like manner the Methodists, who, in 1801, decreed the excommunication of every buyer, seller, or holder of slaves, resolved in 1836 that they “wholly disclaim any wish, right, or intention, to interfere in the civil and political relation between master and slave, as it exists in the slaveholding states of this Union;” and later still, the general conference has declared that American slavery “is not a moral evil.”

It has been already mentioned as an important feature in the action of the early Church towards the abolition of slavery, that she “facilitated emancipation, by admitting slaves into monasteries and the Ecclesiastical state.” In Protestant America, on the contrary, we find “the religious organs” of the south insisting upon the necessity of “committing the instruction of the blacks wholly to white men;” and they go on to advise that “they should be southern men in whom masters have confidence. If the preacher is himself a slaveholder he will command the greater confidence, and have access to the larger number of plantations.” Moreover, it appears that the Episcopalians, always the most aristocratic of Protestant

sects, object to having “colored Clergymen” at all in the ranks of their Ministry. There have been instances of such a phenomenon; but the unhappy individuals thus promoted, so far from being thereby raised to a position of equality and independence, have only found themselves exposed to insults and injuries, of which the superior education they had necessarily received had made them more keenly sensitive.

“The Rev. Peter Williams, for many years a respectable Clergyman of New York (Judge Jay, himself an Episcopalian, is still our authority), was never allowed to sit as a member of the diocesan convention. In the diocese of Pennsylvania an express canon debarred the African Church from being represented in the convention, and excluded the Rector from a seat. The Rev. Mr. De Grasse, a colored Clergyman of the Episcopal Church, of fine talents, excellent acquirements, and amiable disposition, sought in the West Indies the respectful treatment and sympathy he could not find at home. He once said to the writer, with tears in his eyes, ‘I feel that the Bishop and many of the Clergy are against us; that they do not want any colored Clergymen in the Church. I have struggled against the conviction, but it is impossible to resist it; the proofs are too strong; I experience it daily; I know it is so.’”

The same author tells us that, in 1839, a negro candidate for Holy Orders presented himself for admission into the General Theological Seminary at New York. His Diocesan, Dr. Onderdonk, assures the trustees that “if they should think it right and proper to admit a colored man into the seminary, he considered the applicant before them one in whose case it might with great safety and propriety be done.” However, spite of this cautiously-worded testimonial from the Father (?) of the flock, the application was refused, the true and only case being (it is stated) the color of the candidate’s skin. Other Protestant sects appear to have been not so exclusive yet these too have entirely failed to present that union of charity and prudence which was so marked a characteristic of the early Church in her treatment of this delicate matter. She did not refuse, on the one hand, to the despised race of slaves an entrance into the sacred ranks of the Ministry; whilst, on the other hand, her high sense of the dignity of that holy office caused her to require as an essential condition of ordination, that the candidate should first have been set at liberty; and history shows us that the number of slaves who were thus freed was very considerable.

The following question was proposed to a Baptist Association, which met at Gourdvine, Va., in the month of September, 1846, by one of the churches or congregations in connection with that body:—

“Is a servant, whose husband or wife has been sold by his or her master into a distant country, to be permitted to marry again?”

The query was referred to a committee, and this committee made a report which, after discussion, was adopted. It ran thus:—“That in view of the circumstances in which servants in this country are placed, the committee are unanimous in the opinion that it is better to permit servants thus circumstanced to take another husband or wife.” The Baptist Church (so to call it) in the United States contained at this time about 100,000 slaves, whose matrimonial rights were thus cruelly violated, or rather declared to be null. The Savannah River Presbyterian Association, in reply to the same question—“Whether in a case of involuntary separation, of such a character as to preclude all prospect of future intercourse, the parties ought to be allowed to marry again?”

gave answer—“That such a separation, among persons situated as our slaves are, is civilly a separation by death; and they believe that, in the sight of God, it would be so viewed. To forbid such marriages in such cases would be to expose the parties, not only to stronger hardships and stronger temptations, but to Church censure, for acting in obedience to their masters, who cannot be expected to acquiesce in a regulation at variance with justice to the slaves, and to the spirit of that command which regulates marriage among Christians (!). The slaves are not free agents, and a dissolution by death is not more entirely without their consent and beyond their control than by such separation.” In other words, this answer might have been briefly stated thus:—“Neither law nor custom gives any protection to the slave in his conjugal relations; therefore neither ought religion to give him any such protection. The law of the land—i. e., the law of men, or American law, gives authority to the master to dissolve the conjugal connections existing between any of his slaves; according to this law the parties may, at any moment, be torn asunder and separated for ever; therefore the law of God must be made to succumb to this law of man; and although we declare that the written Word of God is our only rule of faith, and although that Word distinctly says, that ‘if a woman

be married to another man while her husband liveth, she shall be called an adulteress;’ and that ‘the woman who hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth;’ nevertheless, in consideration of the peculiar circumstances of slaves in this country, we are of opinion that a female slave should not be called an adulteress, even though she be married to another man while her husband liveth; moreover, that the woman is bound to her husband only so long as her husband is able to live with her.”

The reader will observe that the Baptist authorities gave no reasons for their decision, but contented themselves with a simple solution of the question proposed. The Presbyterians, on the other hand—while it may be worth while to mention, while thus condemning to a life of adultery and prostitution thousands and thousands of slaves in their communion, expelled one of their Ministers both from the ministry and from the Church for marrying a sister of his deceased wife—enter into details, and assign two reasons for their religious sanction of bigamy; first, that to forbid second marriages in such cases would expose the parties concerned to strong temptations; and of this reason it is obvious to remark, that it applies to a thousand other cases of daily occurrence, besides those which arise from the particular cause here contemplated—viz., compulsory separation of husband and wife by the relentless hand of a slave master; and secondly, that inasmuch as the masters would certainly not acquiesce in any strict interpretation of the marriage vow, and a consequent prohibition of bigamy and such like irregularities of practice, it would be very cruel for the Ecclesiastical authorities to expose the slaves to church censure for acting in obedience to their masters. They take it for granted that the slaves would obey their masters rather than the church, and so they think it best that the church should range herself at once on the side of the masters, even though by so doing she deliberately sanction sin. They do not for a moment contemplate the possibility of martyrdom on the part of the slaves, such as we read of in the annals of the early church, under circumstances not altogether dissimilar; and they are contented to shape their code of morality according to the opinions and practice of the world around them, rather than, by enforcing a stricter code of Divine authority, to endanger their own popularity, and diminish the number of their followers. This is far from being a new feature in the history of Protestantism; but it is not the less striking and important on this account. On the contrary, it is most interesting and instructive to note how this same feature of a disregard of the marriage vow is perpetually reappearing here and there, both in ancient and modern history, in connection with various phases of Protestantism. The example of Luther, Melancthon, Bucer, and other leading lights of the Reformation, allowing the Landgrave of Hesse to have two wives at once, will at once occur to every reader; so also in our own country, the example of the wretched Cranmer marrying, divorcing, and remarrying his royal tyrant master as often as that monster willed.

Father Newman has somewhere hinted in one of his lectures at a secret invisible connection between Protestantism and polygamy, and we have heard the insinuation attacked with the utmost indignation, and denounced as a most wanton insult and calumny.—Yet these examples, and the decrees which we have been now considering with reference to the marriage of slaves, abundantly establish its truth. Moreover, American Protestantism can furnish us with yet another example of the same thing from the history of its missions, which, though in some degree foreign to our present subject, is too important to be omitted. One of the little works before us, to which we have been indebted for many of the facts in this article, speaks of a certain “American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions,” which the writer says is “next in importance to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church; indeed in many respects it undoubtedly should take precedence, not only of the General Assembly, but of any other Ecclesiastical association in the country.” This board was memorialised some six or seven years since, on occasion of its anniversary meeting, as to “whether polygamists should be admitted to the mission churches.” “The subject was referred to an august committee, Chancellor Walworth, of New York, chairman.—Expectation was everywhere alive. To the astonishment of some, the grief of many, and the horror of all but the board, the committee reported in favor of polygamy, or at least against instructing the Missionaries to exclude polygamists; and the report, after long discussion, was adopted without a dissenting voice; those opposing, if such there were, not choosing to register their testimony against it.”

We have no space to enter fully into all the details of this history; a few particulars, however, will interest all our readers. It appears that previously to