

with his temporal condition only. Thus the appetites of the body are regarded as mortal foes of the soul; the excursions of the intellect into any region of truth save the strictly religious, is a grievous wandering from its true course; and matters of taste are to be ignored as adverse to a high spirituality.

This false assumption is based on the old pagan error that evil is inherent in matter. The doctrine is older than Christianity, that the true way to ascend to high spiritual elevation is to bring down the body—aye, to abase and injure it; and “to seclude one’s self, as completely as is consistent with existing upon the earth, from all its concerns and interests; and in the undeviating mortification of even the most innocent desires which have the gratification of the senses for their object. The body as well as the world being composed of matter, in which, according to this scheme, evil inheres, both are in themselves utterly and irreclaimably evil, and must be dealt with as such.” Thus the most tender, natural affections were crucified, by the immolation of children in bloody rites to propitiate an offended deity. This crushing of the body, and this lacerating of the heart, in order to save the soul, have prominent place in existing Asiatic idolatries. The Hindoo endeavors to get near his God by inflicting outrage and suffering upon his body; the Hindoo mother worships by casting her infant into the Ganges, to be instant food for hungry sharks. There seems to be allusion to this most prevalent idea of self-abnegation in relation to the body and to the social affections in the prophet’s language: “Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

After the Apostolic age, when error made rapid and sad inroads upon the simplicity and purity of the Church, fasting and celibacy, and retirement from contact with the world, were placed among cardinal virtues. Some of the early fathers are extravagant in their praises of this asceticism. “Cyprian scarcely mentions fasting; but no theme inspires him like virginity. Celibates are with him a sort of spiritual aristocracy, an angelic quire,—souls in white, shining ones.” “These,” he says, “are the flower of the ecclesiastical plant, the beauty and ornament of spiritual grace, a happy produce, a work of praise and honour,