ARTICLE VII.

PRAYER IN WAR-TIME.

BY EDWARD MORTIMER CHAPMAN.

"It is time that humanity learned that praying to some divine power or being for escape from the consequences of violating the eternal laws of justice and goodness, is vanity and foolishness. Prayer may have its consoling and inspiring influences upon minds more or less superstitious, but any belief contrary to the law of cause and effect is demoralizing to the individual or nation."

I HAVE QUOTED these sentences from a daily paper because they voice so well certain popular notions concerning the nature and the place of prayer. They seem instinct with a high moral purpose to preserve the nation and its citizens from "all belief contrary to the law of cause and effect." Belief contrary to the law of cause and effect is certainly a damnable heresy, from which, if it were permissible to pray at all, one might petition to be delivered. They assure us further, that it is vain and foolish to expect that petitions "to some divine power or being" can serve as shields under cover of which the eternal laws of justice and goodness may be violated with impunity. It is sound doctrine, worthy of proclamation in season and out of season. But the writer, though he is evidently suspicious that prayer tends upon the whole to promote the heresy and to corrupt the doctrine, would not therefore condemn it to extinction. He is considerate of the hardness of men's hearts and the frailty of their natures. He realizes that there are minds, "more or less superstitious," to whom the exercise of prayer proves grateful. It exerts upon them certain "consoling and inspiring

influences" which it would be cruel to ask them to forego. It serves as a stimulating intellectual or spiritual gymnastic. What though it be a mere sublimated and beatified tugging at one's own boot-straps in an effort to rise into a clearer and purer air, so long as it has amused Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Luther, Maurice, Bushnell, and Phillips Brooks, the world may bear with it a little longer. Meanwhile, to sneer at it politely, serves admirably as the *cachet* of the superior person, and to smile patronizingly upon the superstition of those who practice it reveals an intelligence that has measured the limits of Creative Power.

It is especially in war-time that the absurdity of the praying man vexes the righteous souls of those who cannot think as he does. The newspaper writer quoted above goes on almost in a strain of bitterness as he thinks of the multitudes upon both sides in every great conflict who will persist in praying. Charm he never so wisely, some among them will not abandon the practice. Nay further, they teach it to their children despite all demonstration that can be made to them of the superstitious futility of their act. Indeed this is the standing wonder of it. That eighteen hundred years ago a man should have told his fellows that "men ought always to pray, and not to faint," is only what might have been expected. It was a rude and superstitious age. It bred men, to be sure; but they were men in whose thinking astrology and astronomy, alchemy and chemistry were not yet differentiated. To-day we stand upon the summits of scientific attainment whose very foothills were invisible to them. We have looked so far into the depths of astral space that some of us have concluded that, if there were any God, the telescope should have brought the hem of his garments to light. We have toiled in our laboratories until we feel assured that our list of the elements must at least approximate completion. Yet he does not appear among them.

In all this searching, moreover, one thing has grown ever clearer. The universe is an orderly one. Despite all seeming independence of events, we have come to possess a reasonable conviction of the Continuity of Nature. We knew it as an instinctive feeling once. We have elevated it to the place of a scientific dogma now. When we are asked to explain a seemingly mysterious occurrence, we cleverly trace the various steps in it back to certain general and immutable Laws of Nature. It is an enlightening and inspiring process. The only difficulty about it is that we sometimes have trouble in making it seem ultimate. We write Law with a capital initial; but, in spite of all, men have an uncomfortable way of asking us how a formula expressive of our observation of Nature can be reckoned with as an ultimate cause. We are always being pestered by this question as to how Law can *do* things. When a man puts that question too persistently, we begin to suspect him of "superstition." And if he go so far as to assert that, to his mind, the reign of Law is but the outward and visible sign of the supremacy of an Ultimate Reason, we hasten to purge our scientific synagogue of him. If he be a man of eminent attainment, we may still bear with and patronize him as a proselyte of the gate, but the sanctuary remains barred to such as he.

Yet in the existence of such as he lies one secret of the persistence of prayer. Men seem ineradicably possessed of this notion that an orderly universe bespeaks the existence of Reason behind and in it. And they seem, as a mass, to be infected with an equally ineradicable instinct that moves them to try to communicate with this Reason. Some outgrow all such puerility, to be sure, and relegate it to women and children. But even they can never be quite certain lest the instinct bewray them, and they be put to confusion by some ejaculatory prayer in time of peril. They are forced to keep the old anecdote of the

unbeliever who began his speech with a hearty "Thank God, gentlemen, I am an atheist," ever before their minds, and to walk humbly in fear of a like fate. Nor do these men and women who pray seem to be overconscious of the embarrassment which their critics say they are perpetually causing God by asking for mutually contradictory things. Yet it would be going too far to deny to all of them a sense of humor. Even the newspaper writer whom I have quoted, although he evidently considers Christian folk as a class "more or less superstitious," would scarcely claim that there is not here and there a man among them who ponders what he does and who has intellectual as well as spiritual reasons for the faith that is in him.

"'Twere to consider too curiously to consider so."

Let us suppose then that our Journalist, querying like Pilate as to what truth may be, lights on such a man, who owns frankly that, if he did not seem to himself to find a rational basis for the act, he would not pray. He maintains, however, that his right to pray is not only indefeasible, but worthy of all respect, so long as he can show reasonable ground for the exercise of it. The Journalist will straightway expect him to begin to quote proof-texts and to multiply instances from Scripture, setting in the forefront of their array the incident of the sun and moon halting over Aijalon, to which he will insist that a literal interpretation be given if any common ground for argument is to remain. But Precator—if Plautus will lend us the word—does nothing of the sort. He even consents for the moment to set Scripture aside,—not because it lacks meaning and authority for him, but because he believes that even one who knew nothing of its message would still have reasonable ground for prayer.

He will maintain, in the first place, that there is a certain suggestiveness in the fact that prayer is an instinctive, or at least a semi-instinctive, act. He would not try to

found an argument upon this fact, but he insists that it has a certain significance. The things that men do instinctively generally have some basis in reason, even when the instinctive action is very crude, or when the instinct simply asserts itself as an impulse that is repressed. Precator will remind his friend of Mercutio's sleeping soldier over whose throat Mab drives her hazel-nut chariot,

> "at which he starts, and wakes,
> And, being thus frighted, swears a prayer or two,
> And sleeps again."

He will of course be told that, if such instances be cited to bolster up the rationale of prayer, they will go quite as far toward suggesting a rationale for swearing. To which Precator will answer, that this does not disturb him, inasmuch as a curse is but a prayer gone wrong through human frailty and perversity. If the objection be further urged, that prayer is instinctive only so far as it reflects the half-outgrown training of men through superstitious generations, the reply is ready, that the things in which men are trained through generations so persistently that they still remain as instinctive acts, are things that have a basis in reason. The training may be bad, and its results may manifest themselves in a fashion that seems sufficiently absurd; but, at the basis of it all, some elements of reason will appear if the training have persisted to the extent which we assume. Though you inspire every mind in Christendom to-day with a dreadful doubt as to whether prayer be worth the time spent in it, men will pray again to-morrow, not merely from force of habit, but because prayer is an exercise upon which the heart would insist, even if the faculty of ratiocination found too little material at its hand to justify it perfectly. And, in the long run, those demands of the heart which persist are pretty sure to be owned by the intellect.

But, in the present instance, Precator will very likely be

bold enough to maintain that there is intellectual justification for prayer without calling in the aid of the heart. In view of the appeal which the universe makes to his individual mind, he even goes so far as to feel that he would contradict his own reason if he did not pray, or at least recognize prayer as a perfectly natural and rational exercise. And searching about for some expression of this appeal that will not at once antagonize his friend the Journalist, as any citation from Scripture would surely do, he lights upon certain words of Marcus Aurelius:—

> "One Universe made up of all that is; and one God in it all, and one principle of Being, and one Law, the Reason, shared by all thinking creatures, and one Truth."

Although the creed of the old Roman may not exactly voice the belief of either of them, still they may well find common ground on it, especially in view of its emphasis upon the essential and fundamental Unity of Being. Precator is as far as his friend can be from regarding the universe as

> "That codeless myriad of precedent,
> That wilderness of single instances,"

which is so often supposed to represent the only world in which prayer could ever be answered. He is just as insistent as the most determined scientific scoffer in his assertion of the Continuity of Nature and the wide scope of the Realm of Law. He asserts his own belief that under no circumstances is a Law of Nature ever contravened or outraged. In his view neither the "screams of the revivalists nor the wind-jamming of the Salvation Army" (to quote the courteous phrases of the Journalist) can ever put the Law of Gravitation to confusion or cause two and two numerically to equal five. Yet while he yields to no one in his complete recognition of the range and sphere of Law, he believes that he has rational ground for praying and for believing that his prayer is effective if it be honest and

reverent. And he believes this not in spite of, but because of, the fact that the universe is an orderly one.

Summarily his faith may be thus expressed. He finds himself put to intellectual confusion in view of the orderliness of Nature unless he predicates a Reason working in and through it. He is far enough from being inclined to press Paley's old figure of the watch, not because it was logically false, but because it seems inadequate, bald, and meager in view of the scientific advance of a later day. Instead of arguing from the peculiar adaptation of means to end in eye or hand that there must have been a Divine Artificer, he will rather cite the whole stupendous Process of Development facing the student at the end of every avenue of research which he may enter. So far from "holding a belief contrary to the law of cause and effect" it is his profound conviction of the prevalence of that Law throughout the universe which assures him that the ultimate fact for him is the existence of a Supreme Reason.

He cannot conceive of that Reason which is the groundwork of the universe as so separated from it as to be ignorant of, or unintelligent in its attitude toward, the processes of the universe. A demiurge might conceivably have made a world-machine and taken his seat apart to see it go. But there are factors in the present equation which the substitution of a demiurge utterly fails to satisfy. Creation, as the scientific man sees it in progress, is not a series of unconnected cataclysms, but a vast process of development whose very orderliness betokens its issue from a Mind. It is impossible to conceive of this Mind as bereft of those attributes that give to human reason its choicest distinctions and powers. And we are under no obligation at all to think of the Creative Reason as merely inaugurating an automatic process and then withdrawing from all care for or direction of it. Indeed, that seems so irrational that we are under obligation *not* to believe it un-

til it shall be shown by irrefragable evidence. We have no right to regard God as an absentee until the charge is proven.

Precator will be told that this is proven by the evident prevalence of immutable Law. To which he will make answer that the prevalence of Law proves nothing of the sort. It only shows that the Supreme Reason always works in orderly fashion and with a perfect sense of the adaptation of means to ends. Law, in the scientific sense, is only the formula expressive of our observation of this working. But orderliness even when it can be formulated, as in the attraction of two bodies, does not constitute a limit to the ends which power may attain. It only defines the method of the adaptation of certain means. For instance, a man may jump from the window of a burning building at such a height as seemingly to involve his destruction, in view of the force of gravitation. He realizes this, and yet cries to men to save him. How absurd! What possibility is there that these men can tamper with the Law and reduce the force of the earth's attraction for the man's body sufficiently to enable him to reach the ground in safety? Or, granting for the sake of argument that one among them has such power, who, even to save human life, would dare to interfere with the orderly process of Nature? But the firemen do not ask these questions. They quickly spread a life-net into which the man is received unharmed. No law is contravened. No operation of Nature has been suspended. The thing desired has been attained simply by a proper adaptation of means to ends. The phenomenon excites no wonder simply because every step in the process is so familiar and so easily discerned.

But suppose the case were somewhat different. Let a man of scientific temper, but unfamiliar with the modern adaptations of electricity, sit within hearing of a telephone

conversation between Boston and New York. Question and answer alternate in quick succession. After all is over, the complete conversation is reported to him. But he stoutly denies that it could ever have taken place over so great a distance, in view of certain perfectly well-known laws of acoustics. Granting the connection by copper wire, it is impossible, even through copper wire, to propagate sound-waves with sufficient rapidity to warrant the quick interchange of speech he seemed to hear. And if that were possible, it would be still absurd, in view of the fact that sound's intensity varies inversely with the square of the distance, to suppose that through any medium the sound which he has heard could be intelligible so far. Because he cannot discern or conceive of any means whereby this end has been brought about, he denies that it has been brought about. It would be a miracle. Miracles do not happen. Therefore this has not happened. Yet such an occurrence would be no unfair sample of every miracle in which intelligent Christians believe. It is simply a phenomenon so far beyond the scope of man's present experience as to bewilder him when he attempts to account for it.

Now the believer in prayer simply believes in a Supreme Reason behind and in the universe, endowed with such powers as the attributes of human reason faintly reflect. As he puts it briefly, he believes in God. He cannot think of God as so shut out of the world as to be ignorant of, or impotent with reference to, its ongoing. In Law he sees a portion of the method of God's working. He believes that God works everywhere in like orderly manner. But he also believes that God has means at his disposal the law of whose adaptation to ends men have not yet fully discerned, and that through them a thousand things may easily be brought about which seem impossible or at least inexplicable to-day. Under these circumstances it seems

to him the most natural thing in the world that he should communicate with God as a source of power whom he believes to be infinitely wise and righteous. If he be a true believer, he will never frame his prayer into an attempt to dictate to God. He will always rather humbly recognize a higher wisdom and a larger knowledge than his own. But with this proviso he will unhesitatingly ask for what he desires.

It will seem perfectly natural to him that the possession of many things should be conditioned upon his request for them, precisely as any parent or guardian may well condition gifts of a certain sort upon request. It will seem just as natural that for the sake of his training some petitions should be answered literally and to his own temporary confusion. He will remember that

> "God answers sharp and sudden on some prayers,
> And thrusts the thing we have prayed for in our face,
> A gauntlet with a gift in't."

It will not surprise him that some petitions are refused, inasmuch as, if he has prayed aright, he has always prayed that a wisdom greater than his own might determine the matter. But in any case he will be first to acknowledge that *petition*, in itself considered, is but one element in prayer, and that often the minor element. Prayer is primarily a communion with God in which petition finds a place. It is a statement of our case to God for aid and comfort according as He shall direct. When a man looks upon prayer in this light—and those who pray most do look upon it in this light—the absurdity of opposing nations offering conflicting prayers vanishes at once. Human requests are bound to conflict. What better lot could befall them than their submission to an infinitely wise and righteous arbitrament? And it is such arbitrament that true prayer invariably recognizes.

No more ridiculous proposition was ever made than the

suggestion of a "prayer-test" which went upon the supposition that prayer is a sort of nickel-in-the-slot arrangement for the gratification of human whims. Prayer is rather a means to the mastery of circumstance. No man has a right to issue his ultimatum to God, that, unless he have one hundred thousand dollars, let us say, by a given date, he will refuse to believe and worship. Such methods of taking the kingdom of heaven by storm are foredoomed to failure. But every man has a right not merely to make humble request for a sufficiency of food and raiment—gifts that very probably are not conditioned upon his request—but for the higher gift of such constancy, that, whether the larger interests of the world entail his poverty or wealth, he may still play the man and not dishonor the image of God in him. Every man has reasonable ground for believing that God can and will influence the circumstances of his life in this world in such fashion that they must minister to his ultimate good if he consent to conform his will to God's. The baldest materialist must admit that in the long run it makes a difference with men whether they pray or not. And he will have difficulty in explaining the phenomenon on the theory that prayer is nothing but a rather transparent device of the "more or less superstitious" for tickling their own imaginations.