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THE
EXERCISE OF PRAYER.

BY

THOMAS LUMISDEN STRANGE.

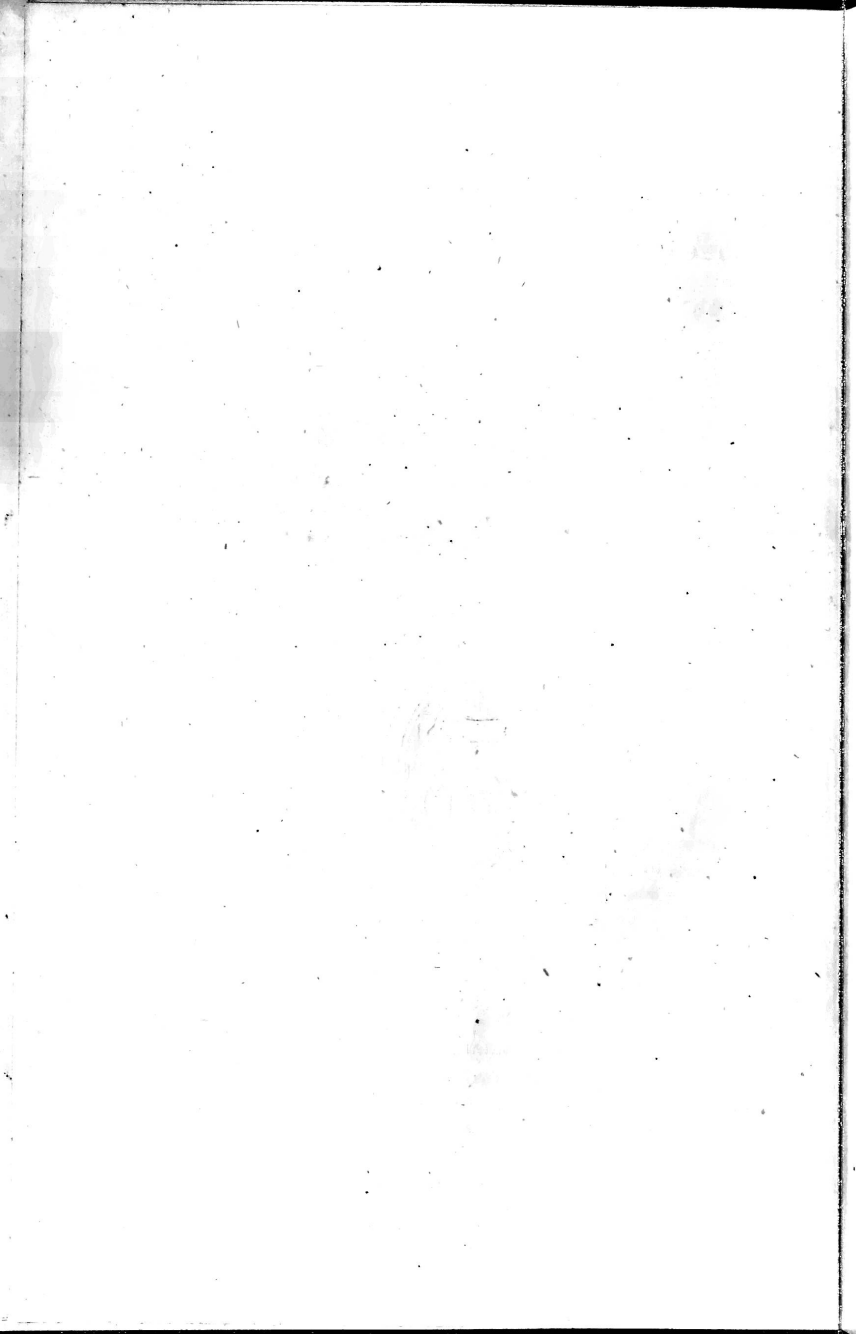
LATE A JUDGE OF THE HIGH COURT OF MADRAS.

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THE EXERCISE OF PRAYER.

WE have had an interesting article on the "Province of Prayer," from an able writer in this series, who signs himself W. E. B. He describes what others have said on the proper action and effects of prayer, and gives his own conclusions on this momentous subject. There are some positions taken by him to which many will be ready to yield assent. We may, for example, cordially agree with a writer cited by him from the *Contemporary Review*, who says, "I cannot express my repugnance at the notion that supreme intelligence and wisdom can be influenced by the suggestion of any human mind, however great." It is also most true that the phenomena of the exact sciences are beyond the province of prayer, and that it is only because ignorant of the prevailing laws which govern the weather, or the progress of disease, that persons, who would not dream "of praying that the sun should always be visible in England," expect by prayer to change the weather and avert disease. But if we are to conclude, as W. E. B. appears to do, that all connected with ourselves is so absolutely under the dominion of fixed regulation, as to make variation in the distribution of effects an impossibility, and that the result of prayer is merely to put into operation our own proper resources, mental and spiritual, and to create a "reflex action" upon our individual minds, without causation by any power beyond us, it seems to

me that we are introduced to two very serious negations ; 1st, that the Creator has ceased to interfere with the concerns of those whom he has created, but has committed all affecting them to the ministration of his appointed laws ; 2d, that no desire expressed by us reaches him, but merely serves to excite emotions or thoughts of our own, which are turned back upon ourselves. If this be so, there is an end of prayer. No one would address a being who cannot be moved, or put his aspirations in the shape of prayer, when all that is to be looked for is the promotion of his own mental activities. Reflection and resolution would be his resources, but never prayer.

The physicist, cited by W. E. B. from the *Contemporary Review*, in the consciousness of the immutability of the laws of the universe, describes himself as one who "fears no catastrophe—regards calmly all that happens. . . . For the future he has no anxiety ; the supreme order in which he has a place and work cannot fail to provide, and he submits, without suggesting limits, or a definition, to the plan he never could have devised, and cannot compass—too glad to believe that all such order is not to be influenced by human interference." This is an enviable condition to have arrived at, doubtless ; but are we limited to the acquisition of mere contentment ? Have we no thought of bettering ourselves, or those around us ? Have we no aspirations for what lies beyond us ? Are existing conditions for ever to satisfy us ? Is every consideration to centre in the narrow element of ourselves ?

Man is assuredly not constituted for this impassive and isolated state. He has relations with all that is present to his senses, which draw him continually beyond the contemplation of his individual being. He can enter into the joys and woes of others. He can exert himself to minister to their necessities, or to take part in their gratifications. He has sentiments and desires of his own that are never stagnant. He

has aspirations of the highest order. There is nothing existing, within his reach, but what he grasps at, seeks to understand, and to utilize. He places before him ideal perfections to which he strives to attain. He is in continual progress to what is higher, better, vaster, than what characterizes his existing status. A creature so greedy of gain, so willing to associate all creation in the wealth of his advancement, can never rest, without something like the process of emasculation, in the cold immovable condition of placid resignation to which the physicist would condemn himself. The question is, can a being, large-hearted, emotional, and ambitious, as I conceive man to be by nature, be dependent, for the realization of his most exalted aims, upon himself, without requiring, or receiving, external guidance and support? If the answer can be yes, then prayer is uncalled for. If otherwise, then he will surely address himself to the source wherein may lie his hope of help.

In respect of his physical state, man is by no means a self-contained being. He has innumerable wants, all of which have to be satisfied from what is external to him. He has to build up his abode, to weave his apparel, warm his dwelling, and feed himself. He has to guard himself from hostilities and dangers, to transport himself from place to place by sea and land. He resorts to endless devices to procure himself all that his necessities require. All his materials are gathered from outside his system; nor does he work alone. Mostly he serves himself through the means of others. His mental wants are similarly satisfied. Many have laboured in the fields of knowledge, and he profits by the accumulated results. Is he, in respect of spiritual attainments, cast only upon himself? When he takes in his food, assimilates it, and adds it to the replenishment and support of his physical system; when he feeds, enlivens, and sustains his thinking powers by resorting to the intellectual productions of others; is

the process a "reflex action" created out of his individual resources? Has he not been drawing upon materials outside himself for the invigoration and advancement of his own proper condition? And in seeking the satisfaction of the higher desires of the soul, in striving to avoid what is hurtful to his spiritual state, and to acquire that which will fortify and promote the power of his inner life, is he cast absolutely upon himself? Are there no wells, no magazines, beyond him, to which he may look for continual and unfailing supplies?

Centralization presents itself to us everywhere as the universal method of arrangement. Every organized object, vegetal or animal, is endowed with some governing power which watches over and promotes all its interests. In our social systems, whether constituting families, communities, or nations, there is always an ultimate ruler and director, from whom the different administrations derive their authority, and whose edicts they have to obey. In physics the same rule obtains. The various forces of nature act together to effect some common end, the scheme of which betrays the existence of some influencing medium. Isolation exists nowhere. All that we come in contact with exhibits combination, and there must be some combining power. The globe which we inhabit is associated with other globes, the whole being placed under the domination of a central governor. There are countless systems beyond us, which are apparently similarly associated and directed. And these, there is room to believe, are held together in one mighty embrace, and revolve in subordination to some universal centre. Has the designer of these magnificent arrangements left himself without any proper action of his own?

In physics there is always some subtle source which evades detection. We see certain chemical effects, but how produced, no one can describe. How our food is converted into the various elements upon which our bodies subsist we have not discovered.

Certain combinations terminate in the production of life. But what life is, and how introduced, none can say. The prime origin of any force or movement is beyond our means of discernment. The region of thought, how it germinates, develops, and multiplies itself, none have apprehended. Is it not possible that in these phenomena we have the threads which lead up to some central influencing and governing power—the links of the creation with the Creator?

We have to do on all sides with infinitude. Our minds stretch back to trace the course of time. We are satisfied that it has had no beginning, and can have no end. The same of space; it cannot be confined within any bounds. The same of power; it must have existed always, and can never be absolutely expended. The same of all the sensations of the mind; they are illimitable. Atoms as we are, we are bound up with this infinitude. Perfect satisfaction is a condition never attained, and would seem to be unattainable. With an inexhaustible storehouse before us, we are, and probably shall for ever be, emulous of further good.

The highest result of the creative mind of which we are conscious is man himself. With his faculty for adaptation, for designing ends to be accomplished by selected means, he is continually rearranging, transforming, and utilizing the objects around him. He turns clay into bricks, cuts down the trees and shapes them to his purposes, quarries and makes use of the slaty deposits of the hills, and so constructs for himself dwelling-places. Where there was a marsh, he drains and converts it into dry arable land. He digs up the ore, smelts it, and makes therewith an endless variety of useful implements. He tunnels the mountains, diverts the course of rivers, bridges their channels, crosses in comfortable habitations the ocean, skims the earth in conveyances with the fleetness of a bird, and sends his messages across seas and continents, round the globe, with the speed of lightning. In these operations

he does not controvert nature, but makes use of her resources. Is the contriver of all these means debarred from interference with his provided materials? Has he no voice in the endless adaptations and developments of which they are susceptible? Is man himself placed beyond his reach for direction and control? Does he call the individual into being, and not rule his circumstances?

We see it to be otherwise. The discipline of life gives us the highest testimony of the operation of a purposing director. Its events, as they pass before us, each occupy us with their seeming importance; but the combination of them, and their effect in influencing our apprehensions and estimate of all with which we are associated, convey lessons, arriving to us from outside ourselves, as from a supreme instructor. The culture of the soul, to those who are awakened to obedience, produces very marked and durable effects upon the character. The action of the inward monitor is as an inspiration from one beyond us. A watchful and enlightened mind is conscious of being under better direction than its own. Such a one can compare his former with his existing self, and be satisfied that he has been brought under systematic and effectual training by a master-hand. This experience is beyond estimate in its value. Any one who has had it should evermore resign himself with gladness and entire confidence to the guidance of his maker. He is no isolated atom, but is in communion, for everlasting interests, with the central ruler of the universe.

If, then, we do in truth stand associated with some common centre—the source of life, of power, and of thought—the creator of every visible object, the ruler of all that exists—one who has planned everything, ordered everything, purposed the ultimate design of all that he has called into being—who commands the abundance, and the perfection, of all that we can desire; what more reasonable and allowable exercise of the

mind than that we should turn to him in every emergency and every need?

W. E. B. holds that "Science owes no allegiance to Religion." He probably is here referring to what passes for revealed religion. Science introduces us to the works of the Creator, enabling us to comprehend something of the wisdom and beneficence with which they have been ordained, and to appreciate the certainty with which all the appointments answer their ends. To study the laws of nature, moral as well as physical, is therefore, so far, to study the Creator himself. They read us, in their action, perpetual lessons by which we may judge of the fitness of things, and estimate results. We can see the unerring consequences of conforming to or disobeying these laws. They never violate their integrity, and they execute their designed sentences with unflinching fidelity. No sane person should dream of requiring the disturbance of such a system. He would be warring in mind against his central ruler, and courting evil, and not good. No request can be effectual, but what may consist with the constitution of the authority addressed. If we could not legitimately ask an earthly potentate to break through, in our behalf, the settled laws of his dominions, still less should we expect the supreme ruler to set at nought, for us, his decreed arrangements. In the compass of our own necessities, to express the sense of a felt want, or the fear of a threatening danger, is a natural and a perfectly legitimate movement. We do our best to obtain a remedy, and may call upon one mightier than ourselves, who is ever present, to direct and aid us. We may not get what we ask for. Seldom is there such a response as to make it clear that we have had a direct answer to the particular prayer uttered. But relief in some way is certain. The apprehensions will in time be tranquillized, the sense of destitution removed, or positive help may be brought in. Or we may undergo the feared calamity, and eventually find we have been

introduced to what has been profitable to us. And should the danger, to ourselves or another, end in death, there is a further sphere, beyond this life, in which the Creator's action has to be maintained; and we may look forward for others, and for ourselves, in hopefulness, beyond the dark inevitable passage that has to be made. ONE WHO SETS HIMSELF AGAINST ALL EVIL, ONE WHOSE POWER AND RESOURCES ARE LIMITLESS, KNOWS HOW TO TRIUMPH IN EVERY INSTANCE, AND TO CONDUCT HIS CREATURES, BY ASSURED STEPS, TO THEIR ULTIMATE GOOD.

The writer whose pamphlet is before me has apparently a sense of this desired end. He notices the existence among us of "a natural craving for sympathy," and observes, "there is never *perfect* sympathy between two human beings. To no human friend, however dear, can we talk as unreservedly as we can think and feel. But we can pray, at least silently, with a freedom as unrestrained as the thoughts and desires of our minds. The Divine Being is to us the infinite personification of our purest ideal. We may believe, in an indefinite way, that He is also infinitely more than this; but it is as this that we pray to Him. Prayer, then, in its highest, purest, and, as I think, its only useful form, consists in a yearning after the loftiest ideal."

With such a goal before us, with such a friend to whom to open out our inmost thoughts and aspirations, may we not ask for help, as we feel the need of it, at every step of our onward progress; and when we have the support and guidance wanted, acknowledge, gratefully, the source beyond us as that from whence the aid has come?

GREAT MALVERN,
September 1873.