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The Imitation of Christ

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to help us . . . that we may ever live with thee," etc. (9.) From the prayer for the King, "So replenish him with the grace of thy Holy Spirit that he may always incline to thy will and walk in thy way."*

It is plain that it is, to say the least, very hazardous to base a theological argument on the expression in the prayer which we have been considering.

JOHN DOWDEN.

THE IMITATION OF CHRIST.

1. "The Imitation of Christ, called also the Ecclesiastical Music." A Revised Translation, Notes, and Introduction. By C. Bigg, B.D., Canon of Christ Church, Oxford. (1903.)
2. "The Authorship of the De Imitatione Christi." By S. Kettlewell, M.A. (1877.)
3. "Thomæ Kempensis De Imitatione Christi Libri Quatuor: textum ex Autographo Thomæ." By Carolus Hirsche. (1874.)
4. "Thomas à Kempis: notes of a visit to the scenes in which his life was spent, with some account of the examination of his relics." By Sir F. R. Cruise, M.D. (1887.)
5. "Thomas à Kempis: his Age and Book." By J. E. G. de Montmorency, B.A., LL.B. (1906.)
6. "The De Imitatione Christi." By F. W. Farrar, D.D. Lecture delivered in St. James's Church in 1875.
7. "The World's own Book, or the Treasury of à Kempis." By Percy H. Fitzgerald, M.A. (1895.)

* If my memory is not at fault, it was a magazine article by Professor John Conington, published many years ago (but *where* I cannot recollect), which first suggested to me what I take to be the true sense of "so . . . that" in the Prayer of Humble Access. Since then the same way of understanding the expression was maintained in *Papers on the Doctrine of the English Church concerning the Eucharistic Presence*, by an English Presbyterian (pp. 436-439). The authorship of this work (displaying a great wealth of learning in the literature of the period of the Reformation) has since been acknowledged by the Rev. Nathaniel Dimock.

8. "The Christian's Pattern, or a Treatise of the Imitation of Christ." Written originally in Latin by Thomas à Kempis, with a Preface by John Wesley, M.A. (1735.)

THE little book known as *The Imitation of Christ* is said to have been translated into fifty languages. There have been sixty translations of it into French alone. In 1864 Backer reckoned about 3,000 editions and translations, and a few years since the British Museum, which already possessed about 500 editions, purchased the Waterton Collection containing six manuscripts, and 1,199 printed editions (some of them in duplicate) in 37 languages and dialects. Needless to say, it is read and beloved by Christians of all denominations ; nor is the appreciation of it confined to Christians, it extends to Agnostics, Positivists, and even Mohammedans.*

Although it came forth commended by no great name, under no sanction of great authority, it was, as Dr. Johnson said, "received by the world with open arms." It carried with it its own credentials, and appealed to the hearts, not only of the common multitudes, but of the elect few. George Eliot, in one of her novels, has given a powerful description of the effect upon the sorrow-stricken of the "small old book which works miracles to this day turning bitter waters into sweetness." Milman speaks of its "short quivering sentences, which go at once to the heart," and of its axioms each of which suggests "endless thought." Hallam, so cold and measured in his language, speaks of its "heart-searching truth," and of "the inimitable expression in its concise and energetic, though barbarous Latin." It is said that Comte used to read a chapter of it every day. An Irishman, a disciple of Comte, the late John Kells Ingram, wrote: "My long continued study of the book has impressed me with a still deeper

*Cf. The Introduction to the *Imitation*, published at Cologne, A.D. 1657.

sense of its spiritual significance and value than my early reading of it had produced"*; and Thomas Carlyle, when sending a copy of the *Imitation* to his mother, wrote, "No book, I believe, except the Bible, has been so universally read and loved by Christians of all tongues and sects. It gives me pleasure to think that the Christian heart of my good mother may also derive strengthening from what has already strengthened so many." The soldier-mystic, General Gordon, carried the *Imitation* about with him; and last, not least, Matthew Arnold, long after he had lost his early faith, quoted it continuously in his private notebook.

It is unnecessary here to discuss the question of its authorship, so long disputed. It was claimed for a fictitious Abbot of Vercelli, Gersen by name. On better grounds it was attributed to Gerson, the famous Chancellor of Paris. In England it was regarded as the work of the mystic Walter Hilton, Canon of Thurgaton Priory, Notts, who wrote *The Ladder of Perfection*. But, as against all these, the claim of Thomas Haemerlein, called à Kempis from the place of his birth, may be considered established, particularly since the discovery of the rhythm in which the *Imitation* is written, a rhythm in which he wrote also the *Soliloquium Animæ*, the *Hortulus Rosarum*, and the *Vallis Liliorum*. According to some, the original title of the book, *The Ecclesiastical Music*, was derived from this rhythm, though others have referred it to the hidden music of the soul, or to the name of Jesus—mellifluum nomen. Its present title, *The Imitation of Christ*, belongs of right only to the first part of the first chapter, and was first applied to the whole book in the Nuremberg Edition of 1494. Somalius was the first who, in 1591, divided the chapters into paragraphs, and the division of these into versicles was later still.

* Preface to the earliest English translation of the first three books from a MS. in the Library of T.C.D., edited for the Early English Text Society, 1893. Dr. Ingram, in his notes, points out passages "where the language of the *Imitation* has a Dutch character, betraying the nationality of the author," and so Cruise from Malou.

A Kempis was a Christian mystic. All Christians believe that in some sense Christ is with them and in them. But Christian mysticism is an attempt to realize in some special way Christ's promise to come to His true disciple and "manifest Himself to him," and that other promise of Divine intimacy, "I will come in to him and sup with him and he with Me." This inner and most intimate communion with God by which He dwells in us and we in Him, which, when it is realized, fills the soul with His peace, and communicates an unutterable spiritual joy, is the object and aim of the mystic. If he does not expect to enjoy it continuously here below, he at least hopes for it in snatches, and he feels that even a brief moment of such communion is worth more than all the world. It is no mere ideal framed by the imagination. It is something which, hard as it may be for people engrossed in the struggle of life to believe, has been felt and experienced as a fact by many a devout soul. It corresponds to that strange experience of St. Paul when, as he says in 2 Cor. xii. 4, he was "caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter." Probably the nearest attempt to express it adequately in human language is found in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine:

"If the tumult of the flesh were hushed, hushed these shadows of earth, sea, and sky: hushed the heaven and the soul itself: if all dreams were hushed, and all sensuous revelations, and every tongue and every symbol: if all that comes and goes were hushed—and that He alone spoke, not by them, but for Himself, and that we heard this word, not by any fleshly tongue, nor by an angel's voice, nor in the thunder, nor in any similitude. Suppose we heard Him, without any intermediary at all, and with one flash of thought touched the Eternal Wisdom that abides above all. Suppose this endured, and all other far inferior modes of vision were taken away, and this alone were to ravish the beholder and absorb him, and plunge him into mystic joy—might not eternal life be like this moment of comprehension?"

Such was the mystic's longing and dream of inward vision and communion with Christ which, if granted, is a foretaste of heaven itself. To attain this he sought to withdraw the soul from the world with its temptations and allurements, and to raise it above the passions and affections of his own nature.

Two ways presented themselves. The true mystic sought it by such a discipline of self as should bring the human will into complete harmony with the Divine, remove all barrier to communion, and thus attain that perfect peace and bliss which comes from rest in God. To this class of mystic à Kempis belonged. The false mystic sought it in the total suppression of the will, in a sort of self-hypnotism which should end in the loss of all personal consciousness and in absorption in the Divine.

If we bear in mind, as the object at which the true mystic aimed, the self-revealing presence of God in the consciousness of the soul prepared to receive it, we can easily see that the method of the *Imitation* resulted from this aim.

It consists of four books, and these are so many stages in which the preparation is to be made, and communion with God attained so far as is possible. To use a favourite comparison, they are so many steps in the ladder reaching upwards to God.

The first book deals with the outward life—the withdrawal, so far as positive duty allows, from the world, resistance to the temptations and distractions of social life, resigning its luxuries, giving up the learning on which philosophers pride themselves, forsaking the disputings of theologians, the attractions of Art and Science, and enduring the world's scorn and contradiction. To do this the soul must humble itself and listen only to Christ, it must study Scripture, avoid many words, and too much familiarity. It must not pride itself in any attainments and gifts, not even in the Grace of God. It must learn how to behave in temptation, and how to treat others who are tempted, not to

deal roughly with them, but to comfort them; to judge itself and not others; to bear with the faults and provocations of other men; to remember that "dress and tonsure profit little, but change of heart and mortification of the passions make the true monk." It must find time for prayer and meditation by withdrawing from idle talk and gossip.

These and similar maxims in the first book of the *Imitation* are given as guides and helps to the outward life—the life of the world; for from that we cannot altogether withdraw, not even if we enter a convent. Its duties claim us, and its temptations follow us.

After this the second book follows with admonitions concerning inward things—that is, the preparation of the heart for the visit and indwelling of Christ. Here again, humility is at the root of all progress. It is as needful for the conquest of self as for victory over the world. Then there come instructions concerning inward peace, purity of heart, a good conscience, for moderating our longings and desires, for patience, for submission to the will of God, for the love of Jesus, for enduring the loss of comfort, and for taking up the Cross.

Having by this discipline made conquest of the world and of the inner man, and thus prepared the heart so far for receiving Christ, the book on the Holy Communion* follows with instruction preparatory for its reception, and the demand it makes for the complete oblation of ourselves which is the condition needful for the highest state of spiritual attainment. This book is generally printed last from a misconception of the aim and method of the *Imitation*. Even Hirsche, who printed his edition from the autograph MS. at Berlin, adhered to this mistaken order, under the impression that there was "nothing to be gained by going against long settled custom." But the order of books as given

* An interesting translation of this book from the French was made by the Princess Margaret, mother to King Henry VII., and printed long with Atkynson's translation of the first three books.

by à Kempis himself is essential to the process of thought which leads in book I. from the outer world; in book II. from the inner world; in book III. through the Holy Communion; to the last, book IV., on internal consolation gained in the highest stage of religious life in personal converse with Christ.

Here the end of the mystic is supposed to have been attained. The soul is now in most intimate communion with its Lord. It is no longer the voice of the human teacher admonishing, encouraging, or reproving. The faithful soul hears Christ, "hidden from the world, speaking inwardly in the voiceless silence of the heart." And so the book opens, "I will hearken what the Lord God will speak *in* me. Blessed are the ears which gladly receive the pulses of the Divine whisper, and give no heed to the many whisperings of the world." And again, "Let not Moses speak to me, nor any of the prophets, but rather do Thou speak, O Lord God, the inspirer and enlightener of all the prophets; for Thou alone, without them, canst perfectly instruct me, but they without Thee can profit nothing."

After this Christ speaks directly to the soul, addressing it as Son, and the soul holds converse with Christ and receives His comfort, His reproof and exhortation, and answers to Him in acknowledgment and prayer. And the inward consolation comes from Christ, sometimes in snatches of joy, flashes of thought, momentary realization of the Divine presence and love: but also sometimes in reproof, and in the withholding of spiritual comfort in order to test the soul. For the outward world and the affections of the soul with their temptations and frailties still exist and continually thrust themselves in, and strive to get between the soul and Christ, and to break up their communion, which can thus be only enjoyed partially and as it were in snatches. And so the monitions against the world and the lower self, with its affections and passions, have to be renewed again and again, and the life of internal consolation is not wholly one of joy, but has struggle and sadness mixed with it,

for "there never was saint so highly rapt and illuminated, who first or last was not tempted." Hence the book closes with the prayer: "Protect and keep the soul of me, the meanest of Thy servants, amid the many dangers of this corruptible life, and by Thy grace accompanying direct me along the way of peace to the land of everlasting light. Amen."

Such is an outline in brief of the method of the *Imitation*. To understand it properly and judge it fairly it is, as we have said, absolutely necessary to bear in mind the aim of the mystic—the desire to realize personal conscious communion with God as the most blessed thing that the creature can enjoy—the cry of the soul, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth, that I desire in comparison of Thee." From this aim follows the discipline of life and the use of the means of grace, by which it is sought to prepare the soul for this attainment.

But it is evident that in proportion as the mystic is thoroughly in earnest there is a danger that his language (for he speaks in a dialect strange to the world) will be liable to misinterpretation, and his withdrawal from the world, and his struggle for self-mastery may look to some as neglect of duty, shrinking from the real work of life, and even selfish absorption in securing his own salvation, regardless of others. The ardent politician, the pushing merchant, the historian whose interest lies in tracing the rise and fall of empires, the conflicts of races and rivalries of kings, and even the novelist whose attention is concentrated on the action and passions of individual men and women—none of these are likely to have much sympathy with a man who like à Kempis simply and unaffectedly regards their pursuits as valueless in comparison with what he considers the highest aim of human life.

Thus we need not be surprised that Milman charges the *Imitation* with "beginning in self, and terminating in self," or that Thackeray wrote, "The scheme of that book carried out would

make the world the most wretched, dreary, dotting place of sojourn; there would be no manhood, no love, no tender ties of mother and child, no use of intellect, no trade or science, a set of selfish beings crawling about, avoiding one another, and howling a perpetual *miserere*." Milman and Thackeray were, no doubt, honest enough in making this accusation, but it is plain that they made it without understanding the man and without having even read his book carefully. It never occurred to them to ask whether the character of the author corresponded with the gospel of selfishness which they ascribed to him, whether he had not had friends and relations, masters and pupils whom he dearly loved, and by whom he was loved in return. They forgot that in that part of the *Imitation* which deals mostly with renunciation of the world he had laid it down that "for the welfare of one that standeth in need a good work is sometimes to be intermitted without any scruple. For God weigheth more with how much love a man worketh than how much he doeth. He doeth much that loveth much. He doeth well that rather serveth the common weal than his own will." How far à Kempis was from encouraging the neglect of the duties of active life may be seen from his acceptance of office in his monastery—he was twice subprior, and once steward—and also from his treatise concerning *The Faithful Steward*. "To serve," he says, "especially belongs to Martha, even as to be still is the portion of Mary: but then these two sisters ought not to be separated from one another, neither ought they to contend about their respective states. . . . Wherefore, Martha, be of good cheer, for great shall be thy reward in heaven: only be thou faithful in thy ministrations."

Nor was a monastery necessarily an abode of idleness. "Generally speaking, a great monastery was like a great college, and teemed with the most varied industries. The whole of the book trade was carried on there, and within its walls were to be found musicians, artists, medical men, architects, statesmen,

historians, poets, schoolmasters, at a time when these arts did not, and could not, exist anywhere else.”*

It is, indeed, incredible that if the effect of the *Imitation* had been the inculcation of spiritual selfishness it could have taken such hold upon the hearts of men. Men are selfish, no doubt, but they never admire a purely selfish man, nor listen with approval to the preaching of selfishness.

We may wonder, indeed, that this accusation has not been brought against the *Pilgrim's Progress*, which on its face lies much more open to the charge. At the very outset, when Christian sets out to flee from the City of Destruction and his wife and children begin to cry after him, what does he do but “put his fingers in his ears, and run on, crying, Life! Life! Eternal Life!” and so leaves all behind him. And this was written not by a monk, but by a Puritan. The fact is, we must judge these books from the standpoint from which they were written. If this be ignored, it is easy to find not merely one or two, but many sentences which seem to be open to the charge of selfishness. But for all that, the charge is unfair. In the first place à Kempis was a monk writing for monks, and though the title “de Imitatione” seems to address itself to all Christians, we must remember that that was not given to the book as a whole by Thomas; it was simply the title of the first half of the first chapter. In the next place, à Kempis all along takes for granted the discharge of the necessary duties and calls of the outer life. The offices of love, and help, and public service are not enlarged on because he is not writing the whole duty of man, nor a treatise on the organization of charity, but only speaking of the growth of the soul upward towards God. He deals with the soul's sorrows, temptations, and weaknesses, and how to overcome them, and to rise from earth to communion with Christ.

This was the real object of à Kempis, and of Walter Hilton and the kindred mystics. They lived in an age

* Bigg, Introduction, p. 27.

extraordinarily bad, when the confusion and misery and wickedness of society were so great, and the corruption of the Church so deep, that they saw no remedy unless a reformation could be brought about which would once more kindle in men's hearts the aspiration after God. To add to the distress of the age and the disorders entailed by the rivalry of Pope against Pope, and Emperor against Emperor, famines and floods devastated the land, and pestilence terrified the multitude who saw in it a mysterious visitation from an offended God. Out of all this misery and confusion there sprang up in Germany and the Netherlands a revival of religion, and out of that revival the *Imitation* was born. It was a voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." It summoned men from the world back to Christ. It opened before them a refuge from the catastrophe which seemed to threaten all human society. "The mystic ideals of à Kempis were, in fact, a path of spiritual escape from the soul-destroying and awful social conditions of the Middle Ages."* The *Imitation* cried then, as it does now, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose himself?" It held up the Cross of Christ as a thing not to be gazed and wondered at, and used as a superstitious talisman, but to be shared in crucifixion with Him to sin and the world and the devil. It set before that age, as it sets before this, God, as the only one in whom the soul can find an answer to its wants, peace from its inquietude, and rest from its weariness. It taught what the world so badly needs now to be taught—self-denial, humility, purity of heart, patience under suffering, and a noble disregard of fashion, and opinion, and the praise of men.

The use of the *Imitation* was not confined to that particular age. It has a use for our own day. Not only in its message to the careless, selfish, money-loving, pleasure-seeking, and luxurious, but in its quieting and comforting influence on hearts that are disturbed and troubled, whose faith has perhaps been

* De Montmorency, p. 276.

almost shaken, and their peace of mind broken by the upheaving of religious thought that characterizes the present age. There are many who are conscious that they are not qualified to investigate the results of this great change themselves. They almost feel that if they were, they would shrink from doing so as an irreverence. It would be, to use Dr. Salmon's simile, almost as if they had been set to make a dissection of the body of their mother. And yet they know that a great conflict is going on. They are like men who hear from a distance the noise and shout of some mighty battle, in which they can take no part, but the issue of which must be fraught with infinite concern for them. To such people the practical piety, and the unwavering faith of the *Imitation* may be a great spiritual help. "It is a blessed simplicity," says à Kempis, "when a man leaves the difficult ways of questions and disputings, and goes forward in the plain and firm path of God's commandment." Whatever doubt may trouble us, there can be no doubt as to the claim of duty. And he tells a story of how once when he was in anxiety of mind on the thorny question of final perseverance, often wavering between fear and hope, he prostrated himself in church, and cried, "O, if I knew that I should yet persevere!" and presently he heard within himself an answer from God, which said, "If thou didst know it, what wouldest thou do? Do now what thou wouldest do then, and thou shalt be secure." Again, he says, "Truly at the Day of Judgment we shall not be examined as to what we have read, but as to what we have done: not as to how well we have spoken, but as to how religiously we have lived."

And may not the very subjectiveness of the *Imitation*, its dealing so much with the inner life, be a corrective to what we may call the too objective character of much Christian life in these days. There is so much for the religious man to do in the world, so much sin and misery to be fought with and relieved; and the workers are so few in proportion to the work to be done, that

societies, missions, guilds, and a whole host of organizations have of necessity sprung up, which absorb every energy, and leave the workers no time or strength for study, meditation, and prayer. They come home tired and dispirited, overpowered with the daily burden which seems beyond their strength to bear. In such cases the sound, practical advice of à Kempis should be listened to: "It is sometimes expedient to use a restraint even in good desires and endeavours, lest through unseasonable effort thou incur distraction of mind." Certainly the cultivation of the inner life, and the continual return to prayer and communion with God is absolutely needed when there is such a call for incessant outward work, even though it be of a religious nature. The harassed worker needs to hear the Master's words, "Tarry ye here and watch."

To those, too, whose life is one of much active business and contact with the world the *Imitation* offers a wholesome corrective, searching out the soul's secret weaknesses, and self-deception, reproving its self-will and self-seeking, stimulating its devotion, quickening its love, and cheering it in moments of depression and discouragement. "Write," it says, "read, mourn, keep silence, pray, suffer crosses manfully. Peace shall come in the day which is known unto the Lord, and it shall be neither day nor night, such as now is, but everlasting light, infinite brightness, steadfast peace, and secure rest."

There will always be persons to whom the *Imitation* will seem to take a morbid view of life and to lack the Christian grace of joy and cheerfulness. But let them consider the sadness and evil of the time in which it was written, and the fact that all men are not constitutionally alike, and that some have a deeper sense of sin than others, and they will not be disposed to visit à Kempis with severe blame on this score.

There is, however, a question suggested by some words in the fourth book which demands an answer. A Kempis says there, "Let not Moses speak to me, nor any of the

prophets, but rather do Thou speak, for Thou alone, without them, canst perfectly instruct me." The question is, what does à Kempis mean here? Does he, now that he has reached the final stage of his discourse, throw aside Scripture and external revelation and the authority of the Church, to depend only upon some inner light and knowledge specially vouchsafed to him? If that were so he would forfeit all claim to be acknowledged as a teacher, and must be classed with the false mystics. But when we read on a little further we see that such a pretension is far from his thought. He means nothing more than is found in the words of the Master Himself, "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing." And so he goes on to say, "Beautifully do they (the prophets) speak; but if Thou be silent they kindle not the heart. They teach the letter, but Thou openest the sense. They bring forth mysteries, but Thou unlockest the meaning of sealed things. They show the way, but Thou givest strength to walk in it." Is there anything in the book that professes to be a new revelation? On the contrary, one of its most remarkable features is the profuseness of its quotations from Scripture. It has been reckoned that in this fourth book of the *Imitation* there are 550 quotations or references to Scripture. Thus à Kempis hears Christ speak, but what He says is either an actual word from Scripture or something gathered from it.

What does he mean, then, by saying, "Speak Thou to me and not Moses or the prophets"? Evidently this—that what he has before heard or read or collected from Scripture, is now in his closer communion with Christ borne in upon him with a new power of conviction, with the force of a direct revelation. Old things, old truths, become new to him. They are not simply remembered, but they come to him with fresh vividness, and clearer insight. His spiritual sense is quickened and attuned to catch their meaning. It is now Christ speaking in him. Is there anything strange or fanatical in this? Have there not been times when most of us have heard

this which à Kempis calls "the Divine Whisper"? When some moment of trial, or sorrow, or of joy has stirred our souls to their profoundest depths, and taught us things about God, and about ourselves that we never knew before; when we have been ready to say with Job, "I had heard of Thee with the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee"—at such moments truths that lay dead seem to quicken and become alive—we perceive for the first time their full meaning. Then Christ speaks to us, and not Moses or St. Paul. He opens our understanding to perceive what lay before us all along, but lay unnoticed or misinterpreted. Such moments are indeed moments of real revelation, when truths before hidden flash in upon our mental sight, or pierce the conscience like a two-edged sword; when words familiar to our accustomed ears strike us with new and strange force, and as we listen we confess that for the first time we truly hear them, and we understand our Lord's cry, "He that hath ears to hear let him hear."

W. SHERLOCK.

EDWARD HINCKS, D.D., EGYPTOLOGIST
AND ASSYRIOLOGIST.

In the year 1767, Edward Hincks, an official in His Majesty's Customs, removed from Chester to Dublin, and in the same year his son, Thomas Dix Hincks, was born. In 1790 the latter entered the ministry of the Presbyterian Church as assistant to Rev. Samuel Perrot at Cork. He also opened a school, which he managed from 1791 to 1803. In 1821 he removed to Belfast, on being appointed Classical Head Master of the Belfast Academical Institution, a position which he held until 1836. He married Miss Anne Boulton, of Chester, by whom he had seven children, five of whom were sons, and all men of marked ability.

Edward Hincks, the subject of this article, was the eldest, having been born in 1792.