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THE CRIME OF THE TEMPLARS.

AMONG the essays which Mr. Froude has recently collected and published in book form¹ is one about the Templars, and some of the most interesting pages in it are those in which he discusses the crimes the famous brotherhood were accused of.

They were of all shades and varieties, but the crime that most prominence is given to, if crime it was, was the curiously sacrilegious one of spitting on the crucifix.

It is of it, and it only, that I mean to treat here. For while most of the other charges brought against them were denied, and, where a fair trial was possible, triumphantly disproved, the Templars themselves, with very few exceptions, admitted that they had gone through the ceremony of spitting on the cross at their initiation, although they strenuously denied all impious intention in doing so.

How this confession was received by their judges is a matter of history, while how to reconcile their denial of intended impiety with the common and everyday custom of spitting on a person, or thing, to show contempt for it, has been a question which has puzzled every historian who has written about this famous order. Now it seems to me that this is just one of the cases where a great deal of assistance may be given by the anthropologist, and that much of the difficulty felt by the historians is of their own creation, and arises mainly from their persisting in regarding the spitting rite as necessarily an impious one; and as having always, and under all circumstances, been performed with no other motive than the conveyance of contempt and disgust. How very far wrong the holders of any such idea not only may be, but really are, is proved by the following example.

“Spitting, it may be remarked,” says Mr. Thompson (“Masailand,” p. 166), “has a very different signification with the Masai from that which prevails with us, or with most African tribes. With them it expresses the greatest goodwill and the best wishes. It takes the place of the ‘compliments of the season,’ and you had better spit

¹ *Spanish Story of the Armada, and other Essays* (1892).

upon a damsel than kiss her. You spit when you meet, and you spit when you part."

I wish in this paper to show that anthropological evidence all points to the motive of the Templar rite being rather expressive of the greatest goodwill and the best wishes than of the grossest disgust and contempt. One of the main difficulties those persons have to face who start with the fixed idea that the rite must necessarily have been performed from a motive of impiety is to account for the presence of such an impious rite in the ceremonial of an order reputed to have been drawn up by St. Bernhard and approved by more than one Pope. They cannot conceive it possible that St. Bernhard, or any other truly religious person, could have permitted or approved anything so wicked as spitting on the crucifix, and so they are thrown back on a theory to account for the presence of such a rite, which Mr. Froude states, and criticises, in the following passage.

"It has been supposed," he says, "that the Templars, by their long residence in Syria, had ceased to be Christians, and had adopted Eastern heresies—that they were Gnostics, Manichees, or I know not what. This is a guess, and I do not think a likely one. They were mere soldiers. They were never a learned order. They left no books behind them, or writings of any kind. The services in the Templars' churches were conducted with peculiar propriety. Every witness declared that the very crosses which they said had been spat upon were treated afterwards with the deepest reverence. Nor was there really any attempt at concealment."

It is a little difficult to gather from this passage exactly what explanation Mr. Froude himself would give of the rite. If its introduction is not due to Eastern influence at a later period, is it due to Western influence at a later period? If there is no trace of any such practice at that time, then it must surely have been of still earlier introduction, and it is possible that St. Bernhard himself, if he did not actually sanction it, may at least have not condemned it. The Christian Church has absorbed many a pagan rite in its ritual before this. And if he did sanction such a rite, or if he did not condemn it, or if none of the equally pious men who joined the order condemned such a rite, then clearly they cannot have regarded it as necessarily impious. And if they did not regard it as impious, then evidently there must have existed in their days a state of matters in regard to the intention of spitting not very dissimilar from the state of matters in Masailand as described by Mr. Thompson, and widely different from our own. The question, therefore, for us to decide

is whether any such rite, performed with any motive other than as a sign of contempt, has ever existed in the West. Then, if we can produce evidence of its existence, either about the time of the formation of the order or prior to it, and show that it was a common custom among the community at large, surely it will be admitted to be more likely that the Templars learned the practice at home and carried the ceremony away with them to the East, and brought it back again, than that they learned it there for the first time. Such a theory, if it can be substantiated, will explain many of the contradictions which so puzzle Mr. Froude, while it will not in the least detract from the possibility of a Western tribunal of the fourteenth century feeling and expressing genuine disgust at the performance of such a rite. For it will be readily admitted that a rite allowable enough, and perhaps differently understood, in the twelfth century, might well have fallen out of general use by the fourteenth, and its real meaning been forgotten ; while an order like the Templars, made up of mere soldiers, destitute of literature, and therefore largely dependent on and attaching great weight to tradition, would be just the quarter to which we would look for the preservation of old notions and old ideas, long after they had been lost to the world at large.

But even if we accept the generally received explanation of the Eastern origin of the practice, the evidence is not all so decidedly in favour of the theory as its adherents imagine. It is, of course, an undeniable fact that spitting as a mark of contempt is a common practice in the East ; but even there, although frequently expressive of contempt, still it is not always regarded in that way. For instance, Burckhardt, in his account of the Bedouins, gives a curious illustration of this. He says that if a man, whom we will call A, has caught another, B, in the act of stealing his property, and is chastising him ; and should some friend of A's, whom we will call C, come along, and B, the thief, manage to spit on him, and invoke his protection, C, even though he is A's friend, is bound to accord it. On such an analogy the Templars might have learned in the East to spit on the crucifix and invoke Jesus' name without any impious intention whatever. Or, to take another. In Russia, and Turkey, and Greece, and anciently among the Romans, it was, and is, considered a serious breach of etiquette to praise an infant and omit to spit either on it or near it, to show the spitter bore it no ill-feeling. Taken in connection with Mr. Froude's explicit statement, that the crosses spat on were treated afterwards with the greatest respect, it is just possible that an innocent motive may have underlain the curious Templar

rite, for which they suffered so much, even if they did learn it in the East. But it seems to me that those who attribute this rite to Eastern influence at all, take two things for granted—first, that the Templars were specially given to adopting meaningless and disgusting heathen practices, a supposition which, if it were correct, would lead us to expect to find their creed honeycombed with all sorts of barbarisms ; second, that the practice of spitting with a ritualistic motive was a custom confined to the East alone. Neither of these suppositions are quite in accordance with facts. The creed of the Templars does not appear to have been extraordinarily full of barbarous anomalies, and spitting is not an essentially Eastern rite. On the contrary, some of the strongest evidence that can be produced of a saliva rite comes from the North of Europe. For example, we read in the “Edda” that the Æsir and the Vanir, when they were making a most solemn compact, spat together into a vessel. Spitting at the taking of an oath—and it was at the taking of the oath of the order that the spitting by the Templars admittedly took place—was thus a practice in Scandinavia long before the Templars were ever heard of. That it was once common in England too is, I think, a fair assumption, judging at least from the traces to be found in out of the way corners and in popular custom. In Newcastle, for example, among the colliers, as Brand, in his “Popular Antiquities,” informs us, a strike for a rise of wages used never to be begun till the men had testified to their intention of standing by one another by spitting on a stone.

Then Mr. Henderson, in his “Folk-lore of the Northern Counties,” relates how in his schooldays the boys used to spit their faith when required to make asseveration on any matter deemed important, and says :—

“Many a time have I given and received a challenge according to the following formula : ‘I say, Bill, will you fight Jack?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Jack, will you fight Bill?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Best cock spit over my little finger.’ Jack and Bill both do so, and a pledge thus sealed was considered so sacred that no schoolboy would dare to hang back from its fulfilment.”

Lastly, part of the Scottish betrothal ceremony consisted in the contracting parties wetting their thumbs with saliva and pressing them together, at the same time as they swore to be good and true. Nor was this practice confined to marriage contracts only. Blackstone and Erskine both assure us that it was once common at the making of all sorts of bargains.

But in no single one of these instances was it the simple act of

spitting that conduced to the sacredness of the oath. It was the commingling or interchange of the contracting parties' salivas that made the vow or the bargain binding, and the following quotation from Mr. Thompson's work on the Masai (p. 166) may not be without interest, as showing how similar their idea is to ours. Talking of the difficulty of purchasing a bullock, Mr. Thompson writes : "The buying, moreover, was an exhausting labour, no bullock being secured under an hour or two's haggling and debate on the general lines which rule all such business operations. *The final seal was put upon the bargain by the Masai spitting on his bullock, and my men doing the same on the senenge and beads. Once that was performed, not another word passed on the subject.*" Now, there must have been some reason for this commingling of, or exchange of, saliva at the making of a bargain or the taking of an oath. And, therefore, if we can discover the motive of the practices I have just enumerated, it is conceivable that the same motive will explain the alleged crime of the Templars. For, recollect, it was at the taking of the most solemn oath that the Templar spat. The first step to be taken, with a view to discovering it, is to examine all the records left us by travellers of the practices witnessed by them at oath-taking in different parts of the world. And here our attention is at once attracted to a very significant and very widely spread ceremony, in which the blood of the contracting parties plays a most important rôle.

In many parts of the world, and Scandinavia is one of these (Gummere, "Germanic Origins," p. 174), two men, in taking a very solemn oath, used to open a vein and allow the blood which exuded to trickle down and mix in the same hole in the ground. Among the Uniamuezi of the Lake district of Africa we meet with an exactly similar custom ; while Martin, in his description of the "Western Isles" (Pinkerton, iii. 610), writes as follows :—

"Their ancient leagues of friendship were ratified by drinking a drop of each other's blood, which was commonly drawn out of the little finger. This was religiously observed as a sacred bond, and if any person, after such an alliance, happened to violate the same, he was from that time reputed unworthy of all honest men's conversation."

It would be easy to accumulate examples. Those I have given will, I trust, be sufficient to show that in some parts of the world the blood of the contracting parties was employed much as saliva was in others, being made to commingle at the taking of a very solemn oath. This leads us at once to ask, why should the mutual

absorption or commingling of blood be an essential on those occasions? That has been so well explained by Professor Robertson Smith, in his "Religion of the Semites," p. 295, that I feel I cannot do better than quote the passage in full.

"The notion," writes Professor Smith, "that by eating the flesh, or particularly by drinking the blood, of another living being, a man absorbs its nature or life into his own, is one which appears among primitive peoples in many forms. It lies at the root of the widespread practice of drinking the fresh blood of enemies, . . . and also of the habit observed by many savage huntsmen of eating some part (*e.g.* the liver) of dangerous carnivora, in order that the courage of the animal may pass into them. . . . But the most notable application of the idea is in the rite of blood brotherhood, examples of which are found all over the world. In the simplest form of this rite two men become brothers by opening their veins and sucking one another's blood. Thenceforth their lives are not two, but one. This form of covenant is still known in the Lebanon, and in some parts of Arabia." The same idea, I am convinced, lies at the bottom of the saliva rite at the taking of an oath. In other words, if there is a blood brotherhood, there is also a saliva brotherhood.

But, it may be contended, the very idea of the blood rite is the mutual absorption and consumption of the blood, and none of the examples of spitting which have been brought forward answer this requirement. True, but was it always essential that the blood of the contracting parties must be drunk? The Uniamuezi rite, where the blood from the legs was allowed to flow together, and the Scandinavian parallel, are no less good specimens of the blood covenant than the Arab one of the Lebanon, because the blood was not actually absorbed. They are simply different phases of the same idea.

Again it may be asked, granting the theory of the saliva rite and the blood rite being parallel, how does the theory explain the Templar rite? There we have no two individuals concerned at all. There is only one actor, the person to be initiated—the cross he spits on is simply an accessory.

At the first blush the position is hopeless, but the believer in the theory of the blood covenant has to face a precisely similar difficulty. We must not forget that the cross, to a Christian of those days at any rate, was something more than an accessory; it was the sacred tangible emblem of his faith. Now, the anointing of a sacred image or object with the blood drawn from the person of the suppliant is a feature of primitive religion so common and so well known as hardly to require

even a single illustration. Two, however, may be given. Herodotus, iii. 8, tells of an ancient Arab form of oath where blood is drawn from the palms of the contracting parties' hands and rubbed on several sacred stones, with invocation to the gods (compare this with the Newcastle miners' custom). And Rajendralala Mitra, in "Indo-Aryans," ii. 111, 112, says: "In all Bengal there is scarcely a respectable house the mistress of which has not at one time or other shed her blood under the notion of satisfying the goddess Candika. On the occasion of an illness a vow is made that on the recovery of the patient the goddess would be regaled with human blood, and on the first Durga-puja following the lady performs certain ceremonies, and then bares her bosom in the presence of the goddess, and with a nailcutter draws a few drops of blood from between her breasts and offers them to the deity."

In both examples the act is a sacrificial one, while the idea is that the deity or deities resident in the shrine or image partake personally of the suppliant's blood, and by so doing establish a bond of relationship, or strengthen an existing one, between themselves and their worshippers.

Of course it is only a crude, materialistic religion that can conceive such a practice, and if we do not understand the symbolism and the animism that underlies it, we are apt to look on it as a disgusting and meaningless rite, and nothing more. But if we have the key, it seems to me that it will appear in a different light altogether, and, while we admit its utter paganism, we shall deny the least vestige of sacrilege in the rite. And if we can concede the hypothesis that at one time there has existed a widespread belief that a man's life is in some way bound up in his saliva, as has undoubtedly been the case with blood, and if it can be shown that a definite ritual existed with saliva, it certainly appears to me that it will throw an entirely new light on the so-called crime of the Templars. For then, by spitting on the crucifix, the emblem of his Redeemer, the Templar, if he really understood the animistic significance of the performance, would be symbolically offering himself as a sacrifice, just as the Bengal woman did, and actually following out the received and usual rite of reuniting his life with that of his Deity, strengthening the mutual relationship, which we even recognise when we address Him as "an Elder Brother," and testifying by this simple act to his desire to be one with his God, as far as in him lay. And even if he did not—and I for one should think it highly improbable that he did—still with the evidence before us, and with our knowledge of the extraordinary vitality of ancient rites, and their survival long after the

creed, or motive for their performance, has been forgotten—I think we ought to hesitate before we convict the Templars of studied impiety in spitting on the cross. Had there been no evidence of people spitting except as a mark of derision and disgust, it might have been a different story. But when we consider that spitting at a secular contract was a common occurrence, and that the motive was to make it more binding; when we consider that probably the Templars themselves did it at the making of their ordinary contracts with this motive, it seems a much more logical conclusion to come to that it was with this motive also that they spat on the crucifix when they took the oath of the order and enrolled themselves as soldiers of Christ.

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