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JULY, 1929

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VOLUME XLIII NUMBER 878

Price 20 Cents

The Open Court Publishing Company

Wieboldt Hall, 339 East Chicago Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

THE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW

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Published Bi-Monthly

LONGMANS, GREEN & CO.

Lancaster, Pa.

55 Fifth Avenue, New York

Single Numbers \$1.00 (5s.)

Per Annum \$5.00 (25s.)

THE OPEN COURT

Volume XLIII (No. 7)

JULY, 1929

Number 878

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Published monthly by
THE OPEN COURT PUBLISHING COMPANY

337 East Chicago Avenue
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Subscription rates: \$2.00 a year; 20c a copy. Remittances may be made by personal checks, drafts, post-office or express money orders, payable to the Open Court Publishing Company, Chicago.

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Address all correspondence to the Open Court Publishing Company, 337 East Chicago Ave., Chicago.

Entered as Second-Class matter March 26, 1897, at the Post Office at Chicago, Illinois, under Act of March 3, 1879.

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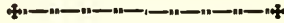
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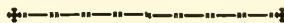
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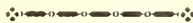
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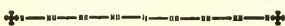
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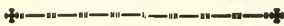


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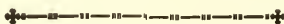


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THE OPEN COURT

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and
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Volume XLIII (No. 7) JULY, 1929

Number 878

CHRISTIANITY IN ITS CONFLICT WITH FREUDIANISM

BY GEORGE YEISLEY RUSK, PH.D.

DURING the past decade Freudianism, directly and indirectly, has been gaining a dominating sway over the thought of our age. During the past year its very success has aroused the militant opposition of orthodox Christianity—as revealed especially by the recent conviction of Mrs. M. W. Demmett for sending thru the mails her booklet, *The Sex Side of Life*. The success of Freudianism, as well as the opposition which it has aroused, renders it imperative that its attitude to Christianity be given wide publicity and be subjected to a careful examination. Professor Freud in his book, *The Future of an Illusion*, maintains—to quote him freely—that religion is the universal neurosis; that it has never succeeded in making men even happy; that it is responsible for the relative degeneration of the adult over the normal child; that the legitimate demands of culture can be enforced upon all individuals—except the hopelessly insane—by the same rational methods as those by which they are now enforced upon the neurotic, so that religion is no longer necessary for that purpose. And he believes that in view of the results so far achieved by psycho-analysis, when its appeal to the reason to observe laws evidently necessary for our social good, is generally substituted for the authoritative commands of religion to observe a medley of laws—many of which are contrary to social advantage—mankind will enter upon an experience of social order and individual peace such as it has never known in the past.

Is Professor Freud justified in his condemnation of religion? In considering this question we should notice three admissions that he makes in the course of his discussion: (1) That in the past religion has aided man to control the world by personalizing it. (2) That dogmas are “fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most in-

sistent wishes of mankind." (3) That we can "know reality by our senses because our senses are the product of reality and we are not interested in other worlds." But, in the first place, since it is the task of mankind to control the world (inanimate, personal and social), and since the ability of psycho-analysis to do so is the reason why Freud claims that *it* gives us a real knowledge of truth, religion also must be said to do so, since it has aided us in the same project. And, in the second place, it used to be said by agnostics that the dogmas of religion are not true because they do not appeal to what the agnostics considered the only fundamental power in the human constitution, that is, pure reason. They regarded their own beliefs as valid because, they claimed, their beliefs *were* in accord with an ineradicable faculty of the human soul. But now when with a broader knowledge of the constitution of the soul, it is discovered that the dogmas of religion do appeal to one of its constituents, namely the desires, the fact of such appeal is no longer held to be important, as decisive for the affirmation of their truth. The fact that the natural history of a belief can be traced should cast no aspersions upon its truth. But the fact that a belief rests upon a fundamental power of the soul provides it with a foundation which no human being can ever escape far enough from consistently to deny. Various desires may pass away or after many days be satisfied. But desire for some form of redemption and vindication—the only necessary constituents of religion—cannot pass away as long as the human soul survives. And, in the third place, if we "know reality by our senses because our senses are the product of reality," then we know reality by our desires because they, too, are the product of reality.

We must conclude, therefore, that some religious faith is possible in spite of the findings of psycho-analysis. But what shall be its form? What specific dogmas may we entertain? What doctrines will aid us to achieve personal unification, and integration into society—the necessary aim of every living creature,—an integration which implies a corresponding reform of society to permit the integration? In the present paper we cannot hope to formulate a creed, but we can determine the general nature of a creed to which men acquainted with psycho-analysis may subscribe and so resolve the conflict between it and Christianity. In order to do so let us study that article of faith most likely to appear in every creed: that God is at once infinite in His justice and mercy and inscrutable

in His ordering of human lives. (See, for instance, *A Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith*, adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1902.) The conclusions at which we shall arrive from our study of the one article, a study of any other article would but confirm.

The first response to the article of faith which we have chosen for study must be the conviction that it is self-contradictory. A person whose actions cannot be understood cannot be declared to be morally perfect. It would therefore seem that we must reject our typical article of faith in toto altho it is fundamental to every other article of faith which could be devised. And yet, if we think about the nature of experience, with which all creeds must accord, we must acknowledge that it contains a contradiction precisely analogous to that which we find in the creed. To act at all in experience we must presuppose that it has meaning, and so that every part is justified as a constituent part of the whole, that is, that life is just and even good,—although at every step there are evils which blind us to the final purpose and cannot be justified piecemeal. But this is essentially what the credal article affirms, and is quite as self-contradictory as the article. Since the article is self-contradictory but is true to essential experience, and so cannot be completely discarded, we must conclude that its helpfulness to a person in achieving personal and social integration would depend upon his state of mind at the time of his employment of it, and so upon the aspect of the article which he would select to apply to his own life. If at the time of employment, he were overwhelmed by the inherent injustice of life—caused, for instance, by unfortunate love affairs or inability to earn an honest living in a world of which John Jay Chapman declares: “The attention of everyone in the United States is on someone else’s opinion, not on truth,”—then belief in God’s justice and love might cause him to refurbish his infantile father-image, which would prevent his reacting practically to the real world,—till, with greater misfortunes and more extreme dependence upon the father-image for protection, he might lose all sense of reality, thus being insane.

Or he might turn his libido in upon itself to determine wherein he has so deeply sinned as to deserve the evils he has experienced,—all greatly intensified because of their moral implications in his thought, and develop a highly overwrought conscience, which cannot judge relative values, but hour after hour torments itself over trifling misdeeds of the past.

Or again, his mind might become centered upon the problem of how ineluctable evil can lead to an experience of peace and vindication for himself and all men—which infinite love should guarantee as the guerdon for “the end of days,” and at length in despair turn away from the real world to one of delusion.

Or the article of faith which we are studying might cause the bewildered man to consider that in it he finds confirmation for his despair of finding any meaning, purpose or value in life; and so, again, force him to turn in upon himself till he reaches his primitive self, which was not sensitive to hopes and fears but lived only in the sensuous present. To such a person God is just and God is love, but He wields an inscrutable justice and He woos us to Himself with an insane love.

Or the believer might be caught between the various fates which I have described; and in order to avoid them, momentarily tend to lose faith in his creed, and so merely become one of that vast army which Professor Freud has thus described from his knowledge of the souls of multitudes of men laid bare: “Countless people have been tortured by the same doubts, which they would fain have suppressed because they held themselves in duty bound to believe, and since then many brilliant intellects have been wrecked upon this conflict [between doubt and belief] and many characters have come to grief through the compromises by which they sought a way out.”

But if the would-be believer comes to his creed with smug self-satisfaction; if success has made distress seem only a far-off possibility, then belief in a holy but inscrutable God might cause him to receive his success as the badge of distinguished merit from his God. Gradually he might separate himself altogether from the ranks of humanity and conceive himself an incarnate God with all power given to him in heaven and in earth. Indeed, this often happens. The inscrutability of God’s providence would protect him from ever having to stop and ask himself why God had chosen him for supreme honor and glory. As a devout and consistent believer he could give himself up without reserve to what is known among psychiatrists as “the delusion of grandeur.”

Or, what is much more common than any of the reactions to the fundamental article of faith described above, a man might feel that God had commissioned him to make known God’s justice and love; had called him to endure the utmost of sacrifice for its wide

proclamation and successful application; had demanded that he incarnate the divine nature in his own life as the only effective means of its revelation to men. And when the people do not respond, being concerned in making practical adjustments to life and not in following abstractions, the prophet again might be thrown back upon himself, conclude that he is much abused and develop a marked persecution complex. He may not realize that his essential message is absurd: that men are naturally wicked and so need to turn to his God for salvation; for if they were, then they could not turn; and if God must be depended upon for the initial revolution, then it would be impious for the sinner to do anything about it himself. All of the emotional appeals which the prophet addresses to his audience, having small effect there and having no foundation in a reasoned view of the world, must react upon himself, mightily stirring up the foundations of his nature (ancestral and primitive as well as personal) till there is left nothing assured in his whole being. At length, if utterly sincere, he must become sadly baffled at the world, secretly wonder about the validity of his message (a question which he dare not frankly face), give himself up to mystic visions, and increasingly separate himself from the calm confidence of normal human living.

While I have been writing the past paragraphs, I have been seeing the kettle bubble—the kettle of my readers' impatience. I suppose that they all are eager to exclaim as with one voice: "But the psychological effects of a belief in God may be very different from those which you have so far described." And to this objection I wish to yield immediate assent. Thus the person overwhelmed with a sense of the injustice of life, its constant thwarting of purpose, might find in God a refuge and a fulfillment—perfect and complete, which the world cannot give. The inscrutability of God's providence would relieve him from all sense of sinfulness in the event of misfortune, and God's justice and mercy ever find new fulfillment in the repeated sanctification of sorrow which comes from personal communion with Him. Fortified by such a faith a man might pass through life with no smell of fire upon his garments, and through the waters of death without fear. But we must insist that to achieve this end such a person would have at every point to make arbitrary selections, carried out to just the right degree, of the intellectual possibilities contained in his faith in God.

And, in like manner, the person whose cup had been filled with success might find in the doctrine of the divine inscrutability a rebuke to all his pride, and in God's justice and love an urgent command to social service—in ways immediately practical and successful. Such deductions are possible but not necessary. The primal doctrine of religious faith may lead the believer to increasing integration or to destruction. One deduction is as logical as another. Acceptance of a doctrine does not guarantee any predictable result in life. Hence the strife of tongues about religious doctrines and their fruitage in practice.

Even when the extremely unfortunate results from a bad choice of inferences from a theistic faith, such as I have described, do not follow, yet many twists, strains and dogmatisms of character do result. Often with vast effort from other parts of one's creed or from a common sense reaction to life, they are pressed far down into consciousness or disguised. But even when they are so dealt with, though no longer recognized for what they are, they profoundly interfere with practical efficiency and with one's essential peace as a loving child of the living God and a simple friend and brother to all the sons of men.

All of this, naturally enough, religious people have repeatedly acknowledged. They have realized that their doctrines do not work *ex opere operato*. At times, in various phrases, they have insisted that the letter is dead, that the spirit alone gives life. Jesus declared that in order to behold his kingdom one must be born again. In other words, the acceptance of no doctrine is in itself sufficient for salvation. Paul declared "we are fools (*i.e.* reject logical reasoning from a single aspect of doctrine) for Christ's sake." And yet, when the attempt is made to bring to a troubled human soul the integrating power of religion, necessarily it finds expression in credal articles such as the one which we have discussed,—articles which may have diametrically opposite effects upon different people. We must therefore conclude that no general statement can be made with regard to the practical effect in life of any specific article of religious faith.

What should we conclude in the face of the facts at which we have so far arrived, namely:—(1) that psycho-analysis cannot disprove the truth of religion but must leave it embedded in the very constitution of our natures, and (2) that no estimate can be made of the value for life of belief in any specific religious doctrine? We

must conclude, in the first place, that whenever a person makes a deduction from his creed which is harming his life, he should be analyzed by a psychiatrist to find the reason for his deduction and then be reeducated to see the other possibilities implied in his creed. And, in the second place, the hydra-headed nature of religious doctrines should be freely admitted by the devout at all times. They should insist that true doctrine must be complex because life is complex. That it may not be purely rational because life is not thus rational.

Life is not a rigid following of any abstract truth however august. Life is a problem in adjustment. And by adjustment I do not mean an oily conformity. I mean something too complex to permit of consistent definition. I mean an unwillingness to misstate facts, yet a willingness to live pleasantly with those who deny the facts. I mean a willingness to sacrifice much for the public good, yet not more than it can profit by and than one can offer without growing bitter at its ingratitude. I mean conformity when no essential issue is involved, while reformation is gathering from the four winds of heaven. I mean purposive endeavor, but also appreciation of the plans of others. If the good life is as complex as this, then so must true doctrine be. And we should be intolerant only of such doctrines as shut out at the final Kingdom of the Spirit any who have gained peace and triumph through a different ordering than our own of the tiles of the fair mosaics of their lives.

The only use to which an article of religion may rightly be put is the employment of its various aspects in correct proportion to right the floundering boat of a human life and bring it to its desired haven—in company with a vast flotilla, which no man can number. Any attempt to render any doctrine absolute, that is, as always pertinent in everyone of its aspects to every life, would cause religion to be of inestimable harm in the lives of those who chance upon an aspect toward which they already lean to heavily. They would be confirmed in error to their final destruction. Man was not made to be offered up as a victim upon the altar fires of an abstract religion; but religion was made for man, for his redemption, both now and unto all the ages.

So conceived, religion is in no conflict with the findings of psychoanalysis. On the contrary, psycho-analysis, by forcing the thought of the Christian church to the question of the effect of doctrines

upon the secret springs of human conduct, has forced religion to turn from a weary round of abstract debates, necessarily unending, to face what is evidently its essential problem,—but a problem which it has not before dared to face for lo! these many centuries. Having now at length faced its problem, religion will solve it. It will offer each human life what it most desperately needs. It will be as personal as was Jesus in its dealing with men—and as tender. It will reinforce with its divine sanctions every undeveloped possibility of the human soul, and it will hold within bounds every urgent desire. Religion, liberated at length from its primitive dread of its own credentials, will in the ages which are upon us accomplish all that it has striven—but not according to knowledge—to do in ages past. First philosophy, then natural science, then historical criticism, and now in these latter days, psychoanalysis, have harrowed the soil of religion. Ever planted with the new life of the rising generations, it will bring forth harvests which will appear of supernal beauty to the contemplative mind.