

CHRISTIANITY AS THE PLEROMA.

BY THE EDITOR.

WE read in the Epistle to the Galatians (iv. 4) that "When the fulness of the time¹ was come, God sent forth his Son"; and in the Epistle to the Ephesians (i. 10) we are told "that in the dispensation of the fulness of times² He might gather together in one all things³ in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth." Such is the impression which the early Christians had of the origin of Christianity, and they were not mistaken in the main point that Christianity was a fulfilment, or, as it was called in Greek, a "pleroma," although we would add that this pleroma was neither mystical nor mysterious as they were inclined to think; it was not supernatural in a dualistic sense; but the result of natural conditions.

We propose to discuss the origin of Christianity and will point out in a condensed and brief exposition the main factors which combined to produce it. Christianity ushers in a new period, and its conception of life is so absolutely different from the past, that with the date of Christ's birth mankind began a new chronology. Its origin was attributed by many to a personal interference of God with the affairs of the world, and we wish to explain how the new faith grew naturally from the preceding ages whose converging lines were gathered into a head in the figure of Christ and all that was thereby represented.

Christianity might have borne a different name and Christ might have been worshiped under another title, and yet the world-religion which originated when the converging lines of the several religious developments in the East as well as in the West were combined into a higher unity, would not and could not have become greatly different from what it actually turned out to be. Its char-

¹ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου.

² πλήρωμα τῶν καιρῶν.

³ Literally "all things had come to a head."

acter was in the main predetermined according to the natural law of spiritual conditions, and in this sense we say that Christianity was indeed the fulfilment of the times, the pleroma of the ages.

THE GENTILE CHARACTER OF CHRISTIANITY.

Christianity is commonly regarded as the daughter of Judaism, and this is taught not only in Sunday schools, but also in profane history. It is deemed an established fact that Christianity, the religion prevailing all over Europe and among the races that have sprung from the European continent, is the lineal descendant of the religion of Moses, especially of its later form, Judaism, and it is treated as a foregone conclusion that this little nation of Israel was by divine dispensation chosen to prepare the way for the appearance of Christianity. But this view is not correct in spite of its plausibility, or to say the least it needs so many qualifications that its re-statement would amount to a radical reversal of the theory. The traditional view seems plausible only because we have become accustomed to it, and yet we shall be compelled to grant that it is not in agreement with the facts of history. A consideration of the actual development of religious thought forces upon us conclusions which are very different.

Without denying the enormous influence which Judaism exercised on Christianity from its very start, we make bold to say that Judaism did not bear or bring forth Christianity but that Christianity is, so to speak, a grandchild of ancient paganism, and the motherhood of Judaism is by adoption merely. At the time of the birth of Christianity, the new faith, while still in the process of formation, was groping for some religion under whose guidance and authority it might proceed on its historical career, and Judaism appeared best fitted for the purpose. A world-religion of the character of Christianity would have originated in the same or quite a similar way, with the same or quite similar doctrines, with the same tendencies and the same ethics, the same or quite similar rituals etc., etc., even if Judaism had not existed or had not been chosen as its mother. The spirit of Christianity is pagan, not Jewish;—yea, it is un-Jewishly pagan, it is Gentile, and it continued to retain a very strongly pronounced hostility towards everything Jewish.

The current view of the origin of Christianity would have us look upon Jesus as its founder and that is true in a certain sense, but not so unconditionally true as is generally assumed. Christianity is a religion which originated during the middle of the first century of the Christian era through the missionary activity of the Apostle

Paul. He founded the Gentile Church upon the ruins of the ancient pagan religions, and he took his building materials not from the store house of the faith of his fathers, but from the wreckage of the destroyed temples of the Gentiles.

The old creeds were no longer believed in and a new religion was developing in the minds of the people. The single myths had become discredited and the gods had ceased to be regarded as actual presences; but the world-conception which had shaped the pagan myths had remained unimpaired; yea more, it had become matured by philosophy, and it could still reproduce a new formulation of them in such a shape as would be acceptable to the new generation.

We know that in the Augustan age, shortly before and after, there were several religions and religious philosophies. Almost every one of them was kin to the spirit of Christianity and contributed its share, large or small, to the constitution of the new faith that was forming itself in the Roman empire.

There was a great variety of gnostic sects, Mandæans, Ophites, Therapeutes, Manichæans, etc. at this time. The main centers were Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt. The gnostic doctrines are not Christians heresies, as Church historians would have it, but on the contrary, Christianity is a branch of the gnostic movement. Gnosticism antedates Christianity, but when Christianity finally got the ascendancy, it claimed a monopoly of the beliefs held in common with the gnostic sects, and repudiated all differences as aberrations from Christian truth.

The Gnostics, however, were not the only ones in the field. There were the Sethites, worshipers of the Egyptian Seth who was identified by the Jews with the Biblical Seth, the son of Adam. Further there were the believers in Hermes Trismegistos, a Hellenized form of the Egyptian Ptah, the incarnation of the divine Word. A purified paganism was taught by stoics such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, representatives of which are Hypatia and Emperor Julian the Apostate. Kin to this idealized paganism was the school of neo-Platonism as represented by Philo, Plotinus and Porphyry. Moreover there were not a few who revered Apollonius of Tyana as the herald of the new universal religion that was dawning on mankind.

In the second century of the Christian era still another faith grew rapidly into prominence and promised to become the established religion of the Roman Empire. This was Mithraism, the Romanized form of the ancient faith of Persia; but at the moment when it seemed to have attained an unrivaled sway over the Roman

army and its leaders, Christianity, the religion of the lowly, of the broad masses, of the common people, came to the front, and having found a powerful leader in Constantine, wrongly surnamed the Great, it dislodged all its rivals and permanently established itself as the sole universal religion in the Roman world.

We will not investigate here the claims of these rival religions, we are satisfied to state the fact that Christianity remained victor and survived alone in the struggle for existence, because it fulfilled best the demands of the age. Whatever may be said in favor of one or another of the conquered creeds, Christianity satisfied the needs of the people better than either Mithraism or gnosticism, or a reformed paganism of any kind.

There is one point worth mentioning, however, which is this: The better we become acquainted with these several rival faiths, the more we are compelled to grant that whatever the outcome of their competition might have been if Christianity had not carried off the palm, the religion that in such a case would have finally become recognized as the universal religion, would in all essential doctrines, in its institutions and ceremonies, have been the same as the religion of the Christian Church. No doubt it would have differed in important details, but the underlying world-conception, the philosophy of its creed, the theology of its dogmas, and above all its moral standards together with its ethical principles would have been almost identical. These essentials were not made by one man; certainly not by Jesus who does not even so much as hint at any of them, they are the hoary ideas and convictions which had prevailed among the nations since times immemorial, remodeled in the shape in which they appealed to the then living generation. The old traditions of past ages, cherished in the subconscious realms of the folk-soul, constitute the foundations of Christianity and they are pagan, not Jewish.

By "pagans" we mean here the Gentiles, i. e., the nations outside of Judaism and we ask the reader not to attach either a derogatory or eulogistic meaning to the word. In other connections we have used the word "pagans" in the sense of unprogressive people to whom the superstitions of former ages are still clinging, who take symbolical expressions of religion, myths, dogmas, rituals, etc., in the literal sense, to the neglect of their spirit and significance. In this sense we look upon men such as Socrates and Plato not as pagans, while we may very well speak of "Christian pagans" to characterize those who have not understood the meaning of Christian dogmas, but accept the letter of dogmas unthinkingly. There are

not a few Christians who are ready to agree with us that Christianity is not yet fully Christianized. In the present article "pagan" is a synonym of Gentile and means non-Jewish. We have come to the conclusion that the spirit of paganism which is that of natural mankind, is the same as that of Christianity with the sole difference that in Christianity many pagan traditions are fused together and on the background of Judaism constitute a summary of the most essential, the noblest and finest traditions of pre-Christian paganism, thus representing the matured grain garnered at the time of harvest.

It is often claimed that ancient paganism is monistic while Christianity is dualistic, but that is an error. Paganism appears monistic only to those modern sympathizers who assume its naturalistic naiveté to be an indication of the pagan's love of nature and of a repudiation of supernaturalism; but the ancient Greeks believed in supernaturalism as much as did the early Christians, and neo-Platonism is as dualistic as any Christian philosophy. There is only this difference, that pagan dualism is not as yet so emphatic, nor is it so ascetic as Christian dualism.

Judaism is less dualistic than either Greek paganism or Christianity; and it is certain that Christianity does not owe its dualism to the Jews, but adopted it because it was the spirit of the age. A monistic conception of religion would have had no chance of success whatever. Dualism in a well-defined form was in the air, so to speak, since Plato, and prevailed absolutely in neo-Platonism, but in the beginning of the Christian era it spread everywhere. Read Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius or other pagan philosophers, and you cannot help being impressed not only with the dualism, but even with the Christian character of their thoughts.

Students of the history of religion find enough evidence of the pagan origin of Christian ceremonies, sacraments, rites and symbols. Baptism and a eucharist seem to have been practiced by several religions, and Epictetus quotes the litany of pagan soothsayers to have been *Kyrie Eleison*, which has been adopted by the Christian Church and is sung even to-day by both Catholics and Protestants.

Monks existed in India and in Egypt, and the pagan priests of these same countries shaved their heads or wore the tonsure. The rosary is unquestionably of pagan origin, while none of these institutions are Jewish.

Among the religious tendencies worked out in the minds of the Greek people since the days of Plato, there was one which was most powerful—the idea of monotheism, and here we have the only point of contact. The Jews had become the representatives of mono-

theism. In acknowledging the God of the Jews as the only true God, the new faith adopted Judaism as its mother, but Judaism refused to recognize Christianity as its child, and we think rightly so, whereas the strangest thing about it is that the aversion is mutual. The Jews looked with disdain upon the Gentiles, and the Gentiles held the Jews in contempt. In Esdras the statement is made repeatedly that God created the world for the sake of the Jews,⁴ and there are passages in the Talmud referring to the Christians which express the same view in a most severe form, while the innumerable persecutions which the Jews had to suffer from the hands of the Christians are facts of history.

It is true that Judaism exercised an enormous influence upon Christianity, for from its start its development took place with constant reference to the Old Testament, but the attitude of the Christian Church was always opposed to everything that was typically Jewish. The Church selected from the Hebrew Scriptures what appealed to her and interpreted their meaning in a way to suit her own purpose.

The Christians worship Jesus as the Christ, i. e., as the saviour and as the son of the only true God. The fact that Judaism was the religion of Jesus rendered the connection between Judaism and Christianity indissoluble. The God of Jesus has become the God of Christianity, and so his religion has been regarded as the root from which Christianity has sprung; but we shall see that this is an error.

THE OLD PAGANISM.

Let us first see what are the main features and the mode of growth of ancient paganism.

In every little state of Greece, in every province of Egypt, in every district of Asia, and so far as we can see also in Italy,—yea even among the Teutons and barbarians of the North we can trace stories of a God who walked on earth unknown. The stories of Thor who visits the humble as well as the mighty, the rich and the poor, and watches them in their daily life, leaving behind him punishment for the wicked and blessings for the good, are paralleled in the tales of "Thousand and One Nights," where Harun al Rashid, the Sultan or omnipotent ruler, mixes with the people *incognito* so as to utilize his experiences for the dispensation of justice when these same individuals appeal to him as a judge in court. Similar stories are known in India and among the pagans of almost every land.

⁴ 2 Esdras, vi. 55; vii. 11.

The same ideas also underlie the legends of mythological religion. In Egypt Osiris, the god of the Nile and fertility, of agriculture and civilization, lives as a mortal man among his people and bestows his blessings on mankind. He is the inventor of religion, of science and the arts, and of moral instruction, but his enemies conspire against him, they slay him malignantly, and he has to pass down into the land of death. The powers of evil seem to conquer the powers of good, but Osiris does not stay in the underworld. He is the first one to break the bonds of death and reappears in the domain of life. His slayers are punished and his kingdom is restored in Hor the Avenger, his son and his divine reincarnation.

The three divinities, Osiris, Isis and Horus, constitute the trinity worshiped in most temples of Egypt; and we know that the Egyptian puts his hope of immortality in his faith in Osiris. The transfigured dead follow Osiris in his passage through the land of death by identifying themselves with their leader, and this identification finds expression in the custom of assigning the name Osiris to each man at his death and combining it with his own name. Like Osiris they die and with Osiris they rise again to renewed life. The scrolls of religious writings which the Egyptians placed in the coffins of their dead, contain magic incantations for the preservation of the soul. Scholars have combined the several chapters into a book which is commonly called "The Book of the Dead"; but according to the Egyptian conception it ought to bear the title *Reu mu pert mem hrw*, which means "Chapters of Coming Forth by Day," implying the soul's resurrection from death, which is accomplished in a similar way as the rise of Osiris, symbolized by the morning sun.

It is touching to see in hymns and prayers the simple faith of the Egyptians so much like our own, and in spite of their numerous and gross superstitions, we learn more and more to appreciate their fervor and piety. We will call attention especially to the worship of Isis, called "Mother of God," "our Lady," "the Holy Lady," etc., terms which are literally repeated afterwards in Christianity with reference to the Virgin Mary.

We know that the religion of Babylon, of Syria, of Phœnicia and of Greece were very similar. We know that Marduk was a saviour god; we know that he died and conquered death; that he came to life again and entered his temple in festive procession; that his marriage feast with Istar was celebrated; and we know that the cyclical repetition of the festivals of Marduk's life constituted the Babylonian calendar, and the same is true of other countries. In both ancient Babylon and Phœnicia a kind of Good Friday as

well as an Easter day were celebrated, and it is noteworthy that the resurrection took place three days after the god's death.

A similar allusion that the soul has to remain three days in the domain of death, is also made in distant India in the Katha Upanishads, which indicates that this notion of the number three and a fraction is common to the ancient world and dates back to hoary antiquity. We may be assured that the number three and a fraction is nothing more nor less than the oldest approximation of a calculation of the circle, representing any period or cycle. It is the number π , the importance of which has been recognized even in prehistoric ages.⁵

We will not lose ourselves in details, but we will refer the reader to the mention of Tammuz in the Old Testament as being wept for by the women in the temple, which indicates that even the Israelites celebrated a kind of Good Friday, a day of lamentation on which the death of the god was commemorated before the day of his resurrection which changed the gloom of the ceremony into a joyous holiday. Tammuz is the god of vegetation who dies in winter and is restored to new life in the spring.

Similar customs prevailed in Syria where the dying god was worshiped under the name of Adonis, in whose honor little gardens of the quickly sprouting pepper-grass or cress were planted in small boxes and carried in processions.

In Tyre an analogous feast was celebrated in the name of Melkarth, which means "the Lord (or king) of the City." Melkarth is the Phœnician Samson, and we can not doubt that in Israel, or rather in the tribe of Dan, Samson represented the same idea and his death and resurrection were commemorated in religious festivals.⁶

The various reports of the different countries in Asia Minor indicate that the same ceremonies prevailed everywhere even also in the North, for we must remember that the word Easter is a Teutonic word and that the festival of the goddess Ostara (compare *Ostern*, the German "Easter") has been identified with the Christian-Jewish passover on account of the many resemblances which rendered the two synonymous.

Most conspicuous is the similarity between Mithras and Christ.

⁵ See the author's article in *The Monist*, "The Number π in Christian Prophecy," XVI, 415.

⁶ For details see the author's *The Story of Samson* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1907). Note especially how it must have happened that the story of Samson's resurrection was omitted from the Biblical report and left the story in the shape in which we now have it, a torso.

Although nothing is known of the death and resurrection of Mithras, there are otherwise many striking parallels, for like Christ Mithras is the mediator between God (Ahura Mazda) and mankind, the vicegerent of God on earth; he is the judge on the day of resurrection; he is born of a virgin and is called "Righteousness Incarnate." He is the saviour of mankind and he leads the good in their battle against the hosts of Ahriman, the evil one. It is certainly not an accident that the Mithraists celebrated a sacrament which Justin Martyr calls "the same" as the Christian Lord's Supper.

The Mithraist eucharist is apparently a pre-Christian institution, or the same or a very similar ceremony existed in the ancient Mazdaism of Zoroaster, and we are told in the sacred books of Mazdaism that the holy drink, *haoma*, and the consecrated cake, *myazda*, were taken for the purpose of nourishing the resurrection body. It seems not unlikely that the Christian "Lord's Supper" has originated under Persian influence and that the word "mass" (Latin *missa*) is the same as the Persian *myazda*, which corresponds to the Hebrew *mazza*, the sacred unleavened bread.⁷

We will add one further comment upon a doctrine which has become very dear to Christians and is generally regarded as typical of the Christian faith, but which is nevertheless common to all Gentile religions, being glaringly absent in Judaism only. We refer to the doctrine of the trinity. Although the idea was obliterated in Greece and Rome during the classical period, it nevertheless existed. We know, for instance, that in ancient Rome a temple on the Capitoline Hill was devoted to the trinity of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, a triad worshiped everywhere in Etruria under the names of Tinia, Thalna and Menrva.⁸ Other well-known trinities were taught, as in Egypt, Osiris, Isis and Horus; in Babylon, Anu, Bel and Ea; in India, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva; and in Buddhism in the doctrine of the Triratna, the three gems, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

Similarities between Christianity and paganism are more frequent than is commonly supposed. Prof. Lawrence H. Mills, the great authority in Zend literature, has written an article entitled "Our Own Religion in Ancient Persia," but other religions as well contain ideas which have always been regarded as typically Chris-

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tian. We will here mention only one more of these because it is not limited to one religion but repeats itself almost everywhere. It is the doctrine of God as the Word or the Logos and can be found in China and India, in Persia, in Greece where it is developed by neo-Platonism, and in ancient Egypt. Plutarch calls Osiris the Word⁹ and mentions the existence of the books of Hermes which became the sacred scriptures of the worshipers of Hermes Trismegistos, also called Poimander, which presumably means "the shepherd of men, and which was a mythological figure very much like the Christ ideal of the Christians."¹⁰

PAGANISM REDIVIVUS.

Augustine's saying that Christianity is not a new fangled thing but that it existed from the beginning of mankind, is not to be taken in a general sense but must be understood literally. It reads in its original as follows:

"Res ipsa, quae nunc religio Christiana nuncupatur, erat apud antiquos, nec defuit ab initio generis humani, quousque Christus veniret in carnem, unde vera religio, quae iam erat, coepit appellari Christiana."

We translate literally:

"The very thing which now is called the Christian religion existed among the ancients, nor was it absent in the beginning of the human race before Christ came into the flesh, since when the true religion which already existed began to be called Christian."

We must ask the question, What constitutes Christianity in the opinion of a man like St. Augustine?

St. Augustine would presumably find no fault with the following answer:

Christianity means the belief in Christ as the son of God, the god-man, the sinless man, the saviour, the mediator between God and men, the divine teacher, the king, the hero, the ideal man, the martyr of the great cause of salvation, he who struggles for mankind, yet succumbs to the intrigues of the enemies of justice. Christ dies on the cross and descends into hell, to the place of death and the powers of evil, but hell can not hold him. He breaks the gates of hell and thereby opens the way to life for his brother men. He is therefore regarded as the leader, the firstling,¹¹ and he who clings

⁹ *De Isi et Osiri*, Chap. LXI.

¹⁰ See also the author's "Anubis, Seth and Christ" in *The Open Court*, XV, 65.

¹¹ The Christian term ἀπαρχή, i. e., "firstling," translated "first fruits" in 1 Cor. xv. 20, sounds like an echo of a more ancient pagan expression.

to Christ in faith will follow him through death to life and will partake of his glorification and bliss. Christ is now enthroned at the right hand of God whence he will return to earth as a judge of mankind at the end of the world.

What of all this is contained in Judaism? Judaism knows nothing of any of these doctrines; on the contrary it repudiates them. The idea that God should have a son would have been an unspeakable blasphemy to a Jewish rabbi of the time of Christ.

The Jews expected a Messiah, not a saviour. Christians have identified the two terms, but they are as heterogeneous as, e. g., a henchman is different from a physician. The Messiah was expected to restore the kingdom of David and take revenge upon the Gentiles that had oppressed the Jews. An echo of these hopes still rings through the Revelation of St. John the Divine, (Revelations xii), which we shall quote further on.

It is said that the Jews did not understand the spiritual meaning of their prophecies. But is it not but a poor makeshift to explain to them that the kingdom of Judah does not mean either their country or their nationality, but the Church, not even the Jewish Church but the Gentile Church? Bear in mind that the congregation of Jewish Christians did not last long and that the Gentile Church was as hostile to the Jews as ever Assyrian, Babylonian, Syrian or Roman conquerors had been. We might as well say that the prophecies for the restoration of Poland were fulfilled when the bulk of Poland was incorporated into Russia, and when the Czar added to his many other titles that of *Rex Poloniae*.

The idea of a saviour is purely pagan; it was so little Jewish that even the very word was unknown to the Jews. There is no Hebrew word to correspond to the Greek term *soter*,¹² the Latin *salvator*, the Zend *saoshyant*, the German *Heiland*, the French *sauveur*, and the English *saviour*.¹³

In the time of Christ the inhabitants of the Roman Empire looked for a saviour who would bring back to them the blessings of the Golden Age, and when order was restored after the civil wars, Augustus was hailed in official inscriptions as this saviour. The very word *augustus* is not a name but a title. It is translated into Greek *sebastos*, which means "the lofty one," "the auspicious one," "the venerable one." It not merely possesses a political but also and mainly a religious significance and may be compared to

¹² σωτήρ.

¹³ See also a further discussion of the origin of terms in the article "Christ and Christians" in *The Open Court*, XXII, 110.

the Buddhist term Tathagata, the Blessed One. A remarkable instance of the hope for the appearance of a saviour and the return of the Golden Age which then generally prevailed, is Virgil's fourth eclogue, written in the year 40 B. C., which has frequently been regarded by Christians as a prophecy of the advent of Christ.¹⁴

There is scarcely any Christian doctrine which can be reconciled with Judaism, either in letter or spirit. The trinity is certainly incompatible with the rigor of Jewish monotheism, and the Christian sacrament called the Lord's Supper is a horror and an abomination to any one reared in the spirit of the Old Testament.¹⁵ The eating of flesh and the drinking of blood, even if the act is purely symbolical (as Calvin and Zwingli interpret it to be) would have been a disgusting idea to a Jew to whom the body of a dead person is unclean and who was forbidden to drink blood. And the Church as well as the German reformer Martin Luther teach that the bread and wine of the sacrament *are* the real flesh and blood of Christ; they have been changed by a mystical act of transubstantiation. How is it possible that the institution of these ceremonies can have been derived from the Jews?

We know that St. Paul celebrated the Lord's Supper, and there is good reason to believe that he instituted it, and we may grant that St. Paul was a Jew. But he was born in Tarsus. He must have imbibed in his childhood and youth many pagan notions. How un-Jewish he was in his convictions appears from the fact that he regarded the Mosaic law as of mere temporary value. To be sure he believed it to be ordained by God, but having been fulfilled once he deemed it no longer binding. Think of the lack of logic in his argument that a law if but once thoroughly obeyed, may thenceforth be set aside! But his explanation suited his Gentile converts and it has been accepted without the slightest scruple by generation after generation—not among the Jews but among the Gentiles.

Parallels to the Christian conception of the eucharist can be pointed out in the sacraments of many pagan religions but scarcely in the institutions of the synagogue. The very spirit and the mode of its celebration are absolutely un-Jewish.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

¹⁴ See "The Christ Ideal and the Golden Age" in *The Open Court* for June 1908, p. 328.

¹⁵ See "Food of Life," etc., *Monist*, X, p. 376.