

PROGRESSIVE THEOLOGY

DR. KAUFMANN KOHLER—AT HIS EIGHTIETH
BIRTHDAY

BY HAROLD BERMAN

WE ARE living in an age distinguished by the neglect of book-learning and the deep concentration on business. Meticulous attention is being paid to matters practical and the scantiest to despised abstract reasoning and the studies that are but remotely related to the production of wealth and the promotion of comfort. The solemn declaration of the Constitution in its guarantee to all of us of our "inalienable right" to "the pursuit of happiness" has been interpreted to mean the pursuit of material happiness and bodily well-being, but the "pursuit of happiness" in the spiritual realm scarcely does exist for the most of us, especially as an object worthy of being fought-for and bled for. The worker in the field of the Ideal, as distinguished from the concrete and the material, usually receives his meed of recognition in the form of a pitying nod of the head; a silent commiseration with the man who is wasting his gifts upon things that are, at their utmost, harmless to the human race and, at their worst, a sheer waste and dissipation of both brains and energy that could go towards the manufacturing of hardware or shoes.

This has been—and largely still is—the traditional American viewpoint; the outlook upon and the evaluation of the work of the man who deliberately chose the life of the scholar and the producer of spiritual wealth in preference to that of the producer of physical wealth. That this mood is changing, if but slowly, we find evidences here and there. The man engaged in pure scholarship is gradually coming into his own, if but slowly and despite the fact that he still lags considerably behind the village-boy who went into the Metropolis and became a millionaire, or the whitem corner-grocer who today controls five score of stores wherein cheese and butter are being weighted out to exactly 11,869 pleased patrons daily.

One of the few representatives of the little-thought-of scholarly caste of America is now about to celebrate the eightieth anniversary of his birth, crowning a long life busily spent in faithful labor in the field of Jewish theology and fruitful research in the inexhaustible storehouse of Jewish literature, both the old as well as the new. Dr. Kaufmann Kohler, President Emeritus of the Hebrew Union College at Cincinnati, is even now being honored by American Jewry on the occasion of the attainment of his eightieth milestone (on May 10th), still vigorous in mind and body and still bent upon the diligent pursuit of his favorite study.

Doctor Kohler has ploughed deeply the field of Jewish theology. He has cultivated his soil with such meticulous care that it has produced for him an unusually fine crop of fine fruits. He has discovered ever-new beauties, age-old yet ever-new truths in the old, old field.

His system of theology is a progressive one. He believes that theological thought and principle are not the cut-and-dried formularies handed down to us, of this and succeeding generations, by men living at a time and age that could not possibly—with all their greatness and claim to inspiration—foresee the many changes—fundamental changes—brought into our life by the gradual, yet effective, forces of evolution as well as by the more revolutionary and epoch-making discoveries and inventions.

While he believes that the underlying principles of the Jewish system of ethics and creed are immutable and as changeless as the very elements of nature or man and are to be the guide-posts of the Jewish people for all time during their existence upon this earth, his theory is predicated upon the belief in growth; the development and expansion of our credal and ethical conception in consonance with the growth of our general cultural life and the opportunity granted us for a gradually extending spiritual life and the broadening of our mental horizons.

Creed, then is not static but dynamic; not at all a thing handed down to us, in its finished and final shape, to be used in its identical form by its votaries to the end of days but rather a living well tapping an underground spring whose living waters keep ever welling up and renewing themselves despite the steady drain by human hands. And if a creed is a growing organism instead of a finished product; a handiwork of God in place of the artificial and once for all limited creation of man it follows that it will continue to grow together with all the forces and life, and that all the elements, hidden and seen,

that continually operate to keep every living creature—and force in nature as well—from becoming a finished and stunted object will at the same time and in the same manner operate to keep a religion from becoming fossilized; but, on the contrary, will preserve its elasticity as well as adaptability to life. In brief, even as there is no finality in nature so is there none in the realm of thought, in all its many branches, creed included.

Viewing matters from this vantage ground, it follows that there cannot possibly be any quarrel between revealed religion and science, because the *Raison D'etre* of that quarrel, the underlying principle of that quarrel—the irreconcilable and opposing positions of the two towards our cosmic viewpoints and outlooks—has been removed. The antagonistic and hostile feeling of the two towards one another has been motivated by their inherently-opposite attitudes towards life and the composition of their being. The one has been static and other dynamic; the one has assumed an air of finality and consummate ultimateness, the other, one of flux and accretion; two viewpoints that are utterly disparate and impossible of conciliation in any rational sense despite the many and futile attempts. But if one views theology, and creed as well, as but one of the many abstract sciences in none of which has the final word been spoken or the *ultima Thule* been achieved, then the greatest as well as the most potent source of mischief is automatically removed. Theology simply keeps on growing, together with the natural sciences and man's cosmic philosophies; and the two dwell harmoniously side by side. What is one's meat thus never becomes the other's poison!

Had this belief been general among the educated three or four decades ago, what a lot of stress and storm we would have been spared! What a dreadful and long-drawn-out series of battles we would have been spared during all these years, and more especially in the days immediately following the announcement of the Darwinian theory! Parenthetically, it may be added that this Battle of the Books is by no means ended as yet; at least, not in this country. On the contrary, it is even now a very live question in certain sections of the country and is engaging the legislative attention of certain law-makers let alone the hosts of lay preachers and various political Phoenixes. The very fact of the persistence of this dispute at this late day and the added phenomenon of a discredited political leader successfully keeping himself politically alive by tenaciously and desperately holding on to the boot-straps of this discredited sophistry is an eloquent commentary of the benighted atti-

tude of great multitudes of people, as well as an indirect advocate of the cause of dynamic theology.

It is also the belief of Doctor Kohler that Judaism represents a creed pure and simple; a Divine law and nothing more. Jewry, as he conceives it, is not a national unity, nor has it any Nationalistic basis or philosophy. It is merely a creed; a faith; a philosophy of life or code which its acknowledged votaries are expected to follow. The Great Dispersions in the days of Titus and Hadrian had duly said *vale* to the Jewish nationality as such, and since then the practitioners of the Jewish faith and followers of its traditions have simply been members of the respective nations in whose midst they were born and dwelt and not excluding even the mediaeval—and some of the modern—days when full and equal citizenship was denied to the Jew in most lands of Europe. For even then, he was merely a member of an oppressed class, clan or family, but boasted allegiance to no other state of the present, past or future; one actually on the map or situated in the realm of the dreamer's vision.

Acknowledging such views, it is rather strange that Doctor Kohler should have so frequently quarreled with the theories of Moses Mendelssohn and his immediate disciples who earnestly strove to rationalize Judaism and thus bring it into harmony with life as lived at the present day. But, his quarrel with these apostles of modernity is motivated not by any opposition to that modernity—that is, in fact, the very viewpoint to which he held fast all through his life—but rather to the method; the system of thought by means of which they duly arrived at that desired destination. And the systems of the two are entirely disparate. Mendelssohn was a child of the eighteenth century whose ear-marks were Rationalism and Scepticism, while Doctor Kohler is a child of the more mature nineteenth, which witnessed the birth of psychology as a science, and hence, was in a position to appraise the human emotions—as distinguished from mere cold reason—and assign to them their proper place in the cultural life of man. The one dealt with a negative and limited force, the other deals with a positive and practically limitless one; the one is essentially destructive in its work, the other constructive. Rational thought may properly be employed in undermining a time-hallowed creed or a system of ethics; but to attempt to use it as a means of bolstering up that which primarily is the child of emotion nursed by tradition is futile and certain to be barren of results.

A creed never, in all human history, did spring from the rational thought and the cold logic of its creators. Rather was it in each

and every known and unknown instance, the product of great emotion; a great and inexpressible longing after the indefinable something; a great fear or a great joy in something impalpable yet real; a quaking and a stirring of the heart and the fancy; an overpowering something within the man which motivated by alternate mystification, fear and joy, results in the formulating a certain philosophy of life as a means of clarifying once for all, man's relationship to the great universe and to the spirits that rule it. And for man to expect that negative and sceptical Rationalism will serve as the lodestone with which to draw forth the steel hidden away in dogma—much less act as a prop to its tottering foundations—is sheer nonsense indeed.

Doctor Kohler, as befits one brought up in the school of Holdheim, Einhorn and Geiger, is a firm believer in the mission theory, the theory so elaborately developed by these Nestors of the Reform Movement in modern Jewry as to the persistence of the Jewish people as a body through the ages. Having discarded the belief in the national entity of the Jewish group as well as discarded the belief and hope of a Messianic Redemption at the End of Days, they evolved the Mission-theory; i. e., the belief that the Jews have been providentially scattered to all lands for the express purpose of spreading the Monotheistic belief among the people where this faith is not, or was not, yet known or widespread. When this mission will finally be achieved the *Raison D'être* of their existence as a *separate and distinguishable body* of people will have disappeared and they will be ripe for the entering into the crucible that will finally and ultimately dissolve their historical and separatist constituents, and they will then be absorbed into the physical and spiritual body of the people among whom they variously live. One may, as a matter of course, accept or reject this article of faith according to his own native predilection or temperamental inclination.

This, in essence, constitutes the sum total of Doctor Kohler's philosophy of religion; his theological system and his interpretation of the Jewish creed and its place in human thought as well as in life, as it is variously expressed in the hundreds of his monographs and addresses, and more especially in his *magnum opus* which he has named "*grundriss einer systematischem Theologie des Judentums und Geschichtlichen grundlage,*" published at Leipzig in 1910.

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