

GOETHE'S POLYTHEISM AND CHRISTIANITY.

BY THE EDITOR.

GOETHE was sometimes a pantheist after the heart of Spinoza, and sometimes a polytheist who found the most perfect exposition of his religious views in Greek mythology, and then again a Christian and a theist. To be sure he did not believe in the gods of Greece in the crude sense of paganism or idolatry, but recognized their presence in life after the fashion of the Greek sages, or perhaps better, of modern naturalists, conceiving the gods as factors that shape our lives. Goethe himself calls them "blissfully creating forces."¹

Goethe discussed the nature of the deity with his friend Jacobi and it is well known that the poet's pagan spirit frequently proved offensive to the piety of this devout Christian; but it would be wrong to think that Goethe was an enemy to Christianity, for he was both Christian and pagan at once.

Goethe's religious attitude has mostly been misunderstood. Though he gave ample evidence of his sympathy with Christian sentiment, he was not a Christian in the narrow sense of the word. To him Christianity was one form of religion like others, and he attributed greater importance to polytheism on account of its creative and artistic tendencies than to any doctrine of monotheism. Goethe had no objection to Christianity itself, but in his Christian friends he denounced the narrow spirit which would brook no other religions and would condemn as an object of abomination any different attempt at comprehending the divine. The Christian god-conception was to him one aspect only which needed correction by considering the truth of the pagan view, and, argued Goethe: Is not the Christian view after all quite abstract and imaginary in comparison to the concrete figures of the Olympian pantheon? If God is a spirit, his existence must be purely spiritual, i. e., he must live in the brain of man.

¹ *Selig mitschaffende Kräfte*. "Unterhaltung mit Falk," January 25, 1813.



DIANA OF THE EPHESIANS.

From an illustration by H. Knackfuss in Düntzer's German edition of Goethe's Works.

...“behind
Man's foolish forehead, in his mind.”

This spirit God would be subjective and could not be found outside in nature, in the concrete world of objective existence.

This idea is expressed in the poem “Great is Diana of the Ephesians,” in which the artist's attitude represents Goethe's own sentiment. The artist chisels his ideal, the great goddess of the Ephesians, while Paul is preaching against idols.

GREAT IS DIANA OF THE EPHESIANS.

(Acts xix. 28.)

“At Ephesus in his workshop sat
A goldsmith, filing and beating
A golden statue; he wrought thereat,
Still improving and further completing.
As boy and as youth at the goddess's shrine,
He had knelt and adored her form so divine;
Below the girdle there under her breast,
He saw so many creatures rest,
And faithfully at home he wrought
The image, as his father taught.
So did the artist with skill and patience
Conduct his life and art aspirations.

“And once he heard a raging crowd,
Howl through the streets, and clamor loud
That somewhere existed a God behind
Man's foolish forehead in his mind,
And that He was greater and loftier too,
Than the breadth and the depth of the gods he knew.

“The artist scarce noted the words of the throng,—
He let his prentice boy run along,
But he himself continued to file
The stags of Diana without guile,
Hoping that worthily and with grace,
He might succeed to chisel her face.
Should any one hold a different view,
He might in all as he pleases do;
But the craft of the master he must not despise,
For in disgrace he'll end otherwise.”

Tr. by P. C.

With reference to this poem Goethe writes to Jacobi (March 10, 1812):

“I am indeed one of the Ephesian artists who spends his whole life in the temple of the goddess, contemplating and wondering and worshiping, and representing her in her mysterious formations. Thus

it is impossible for me to be pleased with an apostle who forces upon his fellow citizens another and indeed a formless god. Accordingly if I published some similar writing (to Jacobi's book *On God*) in praise of the great Artemis, which, however, I will not do because I belong to those who prefer to live quietly and do not care to stir people to mutiny, I should have written on the reverse of the title page, 'No one can become acquainted with what he does not love, and the more perfect our knowledge, the stronger, the more vigorous, and the more vital must be our love, yea, our passion.'"²

In the same spirit Goethe writes in his diary of 1812:

"Jacobi's book *On Divine Things* does me no good. How could I welcome the book of a dearly beloved friend in which I found the proposition that 'nature conceals God'? Is it not natural that according to my pure, and deep, and inborn, and expert conception which has taught me unfalteringly to see God in nature and nature in God, so that this conception constitutes the foundation of my entire existence,—is it not natural that such a strange and onesided and limited exposition must alienate me from the noble man whose heart I dearly love? However, I did not indulge my painful disappointment, but sought refuge in my old asylum, making Spinoza's *Ethics* for several weeks my daily entertainment."

Goethe mentions his love of polytheism in his autobiography when speaking of the poem "Prometheus." He says:

"The Titans are the foil of polytheism, as the devil is the foil of monotheism, but neither the devil nor the one-sided God whom the devil opposed are striking figures. Milton's Satan, although he is characterized as sufficiently goody-goody,³ labors under the disadvantage of subordination when he attempts to destroy the glorious creation of a supreme being. Prometheus, however, possesses the advantage that, in spite of superior beings, he shows himself capable of creating. Moreover, it is a beautiful and poetic thought which provides that men be produced not by the highest ruler of the universe, but by an intermediate character who, however, being a descendant of the oldest dynasty, is worthy of and great enough for the task."

² Translated by the author.

A convenient collection of all the passages that have reference to Goethe's world-conception and religion is found in Max Heynacher's book, *Goethe's Philosophy*. For the present quotations see pp. 72-73.

³ Goethe here uses the word *brav*, and I regret that the *brav genug* is almost untranslatable in English. The word *brav* in German means "good" or "goody" in the sense of Sunday-school morality. A good boy is called *brav*, and the use of this word in its application to Satan is extremely humorous.

Goethe speaks of Satan's "subordination," because in the Christian conception God alone is sovereign, and Satan lacks independence and freedom. He is a mere puppet in the hands of the Almighty, for even his revolt is ultimately the result of God's plan of creation.

Prometheus is not the only rebel whom Goethe admires. He adds further down in the same passage:

"The other heroes of the same kind, Tantalus, Ixion and Sisyphus, also belonged to my saints. Having been received into the society of the gods, they did not show sufficient submissiveness, and as overbearing guests, provoked the wrath of their condescending hosts, whereby they were forced into a dreary exile."

Goethe had to suffer not a little from the narrow spirit of the dogmatic Christians among his contemporaries, and not the least irritations consisted in ill-advised attempts at converting the "great pagan," as he was called by pietists. He smiled at the impudence and folly of those who concerned themselves about his future destiny, for he was confident that the cloven foot of his paganism would not render him unacceptable to God, the Father of all mankind, Jew and Gentile. Here is the fable which Goethe intended as an answer to his Christian friends:

"In the wilderness a holy man
To his surprise met a servant of Pan,
A goat-footed faun, who spoke with grace:
'Lord, pray for me and for my race,
That we in heaven find a place:
We thirst for God's eternal bliss.'
The holy man made answer to this:
'How can I grant thy bold petition,
For thou canst hardly gain admission
In heaven yonder where angels salute:
For lo! thou hast a cloven foot.'
Undaunted the wild man made the plea:
'Why should my foot offensive be?
I've seen great numbers that went straight
With asses' heads through heaven's gate.'"

—*Tr. by P. C.*

Goethe devoted another short poem to the pious ass who in all religions will remain an ass forever. He says:⁴

"If the ass that bore the Saviour
Were to Mecca driven, he
Would not alter, but would be
Still an ass in his behavior."

—*Tr. by Bowring.*

⁴ *Hikmet Nameth, Book of Proverbs.*

Goethe was more of a Christian than is generally assumed or might be inferred from his own preference for paganism. To be sure he was not a dogmatic Christian in the sense in which the term Christianity was used in those days. But Goethe would have been rejected also by polytheists and pagans, by Greek as well as Oriental devotees, on account of his latitudinarianism, for he was a sympathizer with all religions and could not be counted exclusively an adherent of any special faith.

How greatly Goethe appreciated Christianity appears from many poems and prose passages of his writings. If we consider that as a matter of principle he never wrote poetry unless he had experienced the sentiment himself, we will understand how devoted he must have been in the days of his youth when he still accepted the Christian miracles and mysteries in unquestioning faith. He outgrew the childlike confidence in the supernatural and lost his belief in miracles, but he remembered the sacredness of his devotion and the hours of pious bliss,—a reminiscence well described in the first scene of his "Faust." When Faust in his despair decides to drink poison, he is interrupted by the Easter message of the angelic choirs and the ringing of the Easter bells, and the sweet recollection of the faith of his youth restores in him the love of life.

What deep sentiment is also expressed in the third scene of "Faust"! He has returned from his walk with Wagner, his famulus, and sits down to find comfort in the Gospel of St. John. The monologue is again and again interrupted by the noise of a poodle, in which shape Mephistopheles approaches him. The diabolic nature of the animal appears in growls by which he expresses his dissatisfaction with Faust's religious sentiments. The passage reads in Bayard Taylor's translation as follows:

(Faust entering with poodle.)

"Behind me, field and meadow sleeping,
I leave in deep, prophetic night,
Within whose dread and holy keeping
The better soul awakes to light.
The wild desires no longer win us,
The deeds of passion cease to chain;
The love of Man revives within us,
The love of God revives again.

"Be still, thou poodle! make not such racket and riot!
Why at the threshold wilt snuffing be?
Behind the stove repose thee in quiet!
My softest cushion I give thee.
As thou, up yonder, with running and leaping

Amused us hast, on the mountain's crest,
 So now I take thee into my keeping,
 A welcome, but also a silent, guest.

“Ah, when, within our narrow chamber
 The lamp with friendly lustre glows,
 Flames in the breast each faded ember,
 And in the heart, itself that knows.
 Then Hope again lends sweet assistance,
 And Reason then resumes her speech:
 One yearns, the rivers of existence,
 The very founts of Life, to reach.

“Snarl not, poodle! To the sound that rises,
 The sacred tones that now my soul embrace,
 This bestial noise is out of place.
 We are used to see, that Man despises
 What he never comprehends,
 And the Good and the Beautiful vilipends,
 Finding them often hard to measure:
 Will the dog, like man, snarl *his* displeasure?

“But ah! I feel, though will thereto be stronger,
 Contentment flows from out my breast no longer.
 Why must the stream so soon run dry and fail us,
 And burning thirst again assail us?
 Therein I've borne so much probation!
 And yet, this want may be supplied us;
 We pine and thirst for Revelation,
 Which nowhere worthier is, more nobly sent,
 Than here, in our New Testament.
 I feel impelled, its meaning to determine,—
 With honest purpose, once for all,
 The hallowed Original
 To change to my beloved German.

(He opens a volume and commences.)

“'T is written: 'In the Beginning was the *Word*.'
 Here am I balked: who, now, can help afford?
 The *Word*?—impossible so high to rate it;
 And otherwise must I translate it,
 If by the Spirit I am truly taught.
 Then thus: 'In the Beginning was the *Thought*.'
 This first line let me weigh completely,
 Lest my impatient pen proceed too fleetly.
 Is it the *Thought* which works, creates, indeed?
 'In the Beginning was the *Power*,' I read.
 Yet, as I write, a warning is suggested,
 That I the sense may not have fairly tested.

The Spirit aids me: now I see the light!
 'In the Beginning was the Act,* I write."

In addition to this scene which incorporates Faust's reminiscences of his former faith, we will quote a few poems and sentences from his rhymed proverbs, which characterize Goethe's Christianity in his mature years. Here is Longfellow's translation of Goethe's two songs, each entitled "The Wanderer's Night Song," of which the second has been most beautifully set to music by Schubert:

"Thou that from the heavens art,
 Every pain and sorrow stillest,
 And the doubly wretched heart
 Doubly with refreshment fillest,
 I am weary with contending!
 Why this rapture and unrest?
 Peace descending
 Come, ah, come into my breast!"

"O'er all the hill-tops
 Is quiet now,
 In all the tree-tops
 Hearest thou
 Hardly a breath;
 The birds are asleep in the trees:
 Wait: soon like these
 Thou, too, shalt rest."

Under the title "God, Sentiment and the World"⁵ Goethe published some rhymes which breathe a simple and almost childlike confidence in God. One of them reads:⁶

"Who on God is grounded,
 Has his house well founded."

Another rhyme is translated by Bowring thus:

"This truth may be by all believed!
 Whom God deceives, is well deceived."

Goethe was one of the few poets who dared to introduce the Good Lord upon the stage, which he did in the Prologue to "Faust." This remarkable scene reveals before our eyes the heavens where God is enthroned among the angels that appear before him in praise

* Perhaps "Deed" would be a better translation.

⁵ *Gott, Gemüth und Welt*.

⁶ Bowring's translation,

"Who trusts in God,
 Fears not his rod."
 is perhaps better English, but does not render the original which reads,
 "Wer Gott vertraut,
 Ist schon auferbaut."

of his creation. There has scarcely been in Christian literature a more dignified description of God in poetical form, over which even Milton can not claim superiority.

The Lord is greeted by the three archangels in these three stanzas which we quote after Bayard Taylor's translation:

RAPHAEL.

"The sun-orb sings, in emulation,
'Mid brother-spheres, his ancient round:
His path predestined through Creation
He ends with step of thunder-sound.
The angels from his visage splendid
Draw power, whose measure none can say;
The lofty works, uncomprehended,
Are bright as on the primal day.

GABRIEL.

"And swift, and swift beyond conceiving,
The splendor of the world goes round,
Day's Eden-brightness still relieving
Night's darkness awful and profound:
The ocean-tides in foam are breaking,
Against the rocks' deep bases hurled,
And both, the spheric race partaking,
Eternal, swift, are onward whirled!

MICHAEL.

"And rival storms abroad are surging
From sea to land, from land to sea.
A chain of deepest action forging
Round all, in wrathful energy.
There flames a desolation, blazing
Before the Thunder's crashing way:
Yet, Lord, Thy messengers are praising
The gentle movement of Thy Day.

THE THREE.

"Though still by them uncomprehended,
From these the angels draw their power,
And all Thy works are grand and splendid,
As in Creation's primal hour."