

WHO IS TO BLAME?

IN ANSWER TO MR. A. J. R. SCHUMAKER.

BY THE EDITOR.

A FEW weeks ago I received a letter from Mr. Albert J. R. Schumaker, expressing his indebtedness to me as his first teacher in philosophy, and at the same time his disappointment in having finally discovered that I was not the guide in life he had expected to find. He had taken me for a good orthodox Christian in the traditional sense of the word and when he became better acquainted with my conception of God, the soul and immortality, he found my religion all hollow, and so he accuses me of having misguided, perhaps deceived, him. Now I ask myself, Who is to blame, he or I, or both of us?

After some personal remarks of how he had gradually acquainted himself with my writings Mr. Schumaker recapitulates his case thus:

“In summary, your philosophy was the first which my growing mind appropriated. After all I feel that I thus received a pretty fair introduction to the philosophical disciplines.

“I still read *The Monist* and *The Open Court*, but with very different feelings from the first. And so, while I write to thank you for the splendid introduction to philosophy your works afforded and for the impetus to study which their vigor, enthusiasm and manifest love of the subject imparted, it is to say also that I have learned to disagree with you.”

One of the greatest advantages an author, and especially a philosopher, can have, is the chance of explaining all the most important misconceptions of his readers. Therefore, as a matter of mere prudence, I have published all the criticisms of my position that in my opinion were worth a hearing, and I deem it a great

privilege to receive them and to have a chance of replying to them. So far as it lies within my power I shall always be glad to explain my views more specifically or, if I find that I have made mistakes, to retract my errors. For these reasons I requested Mr. Schumaker to let me have a statement of his objections for publication and in this number I am able to submit his strictures to our readers.

It would be wrong to dispose of Mr. Schumaker's objection simply by stating that he is mistaken, for it might lead to the opinion that I am un-Christian or opposed to Christianity. I have no reason to say that I am not a Christian, only my Christianity is such as to allow also the recognition of the truth in other religions. I am perhaps just as much a Buddhist, or a pagan in the way that Goethe was. For this reason I feel inclined to be more explicit in my answer.

The main reason for Mr. Schumaker's disappointment, so far as it is not due to a mere misunderstanding on his part, may be the peculiar position which I hold in the present generation of writers, and it is this: I combine two extremes which are generally assumed to exclude one another. I am at once both radical and conservative. I rule out of court all evidence of a non-scientific nature, based upon belief either in mystic phenomena or upon special revelation. I am more radical than the agnostic who does not dare to rely on his own reasoning and is too timid to have an opinion of his own. But I believe in evolution and in growth. I believe that the history of mankind is somewhat analogous to the life of an individual and that there are successive stages in the development of religion.

Just as the age of childhood with its incompleteness and ignorance (including the love of fairy-tales), its mistakes, and even a sprinkling of childhood diseases, is a natural phase in man's life, so the mythological and dogmatic periods are indispensable in the history of the mental development of mankind. We need not repudiate our childhood. On the contrary we must utilize it and build upon it if we want to attain the full stature of manhood. For this reason we must learn to comprehend the past, but not ignore nor reject it; we must continue the work done by our ancestors, not disown their aspirations; we must build higher upon the foundations laid, not rescind them and begin the work anew.

A grave but quite unwarranted accusation is raised against my honesty, but nothing can be farther from me than the intention of misleading, deceiving, writing between the lines,* or making evasions.

* To write between the lines is a practice that has gradually become established among modern theologians who try to avoid giving offense to those

I am anxious to let all thinking men understand my position, because I am confident that I have something to say. I have a message to the world, and I want that message well understood. I clearly discern some important truths, and wish to have them generally known. Whatever I say I mean, and I have never shirked the truth. I grant that, albeit in a very limited way, I use the old religious nomenclature for a new world-conception, but I have repeatedly discussed the advisability of doing so, and I do it with a good conscience and not without weighty reasons.

Mr. Schumaker speaks of *my* "claim" of being a Christian. But certainly I have nowhere made that claim; on the contrary, I have insisted that it was for the Christians to say whether or not I was a Christian,* and in response to that statement made without any thought of eliciting replies, I received letters from orthodox Christians who claimed me as one of their own in spirit, though not in doctrine. I refer my readers to the letters of the Rev. R. J. Campbell of the City Temple, London, the Rev. John Harrington Edwards of Brooklyn, and Mme. Hyacinthe Loyson (*O. C.*, XIX, 765, 766), and also Dr. William E. Barton, of Oak Park (XX, p. 57).

I am pleased to know that there are Christians in the orthodox camp who have not excommunicated me, although I freely confess that I am not a Christian in the current sense of the term. Yet fear of excommunication is absolutely foreign to me. I would not alter one line in my writings for the sake of pleasing the orthodox, even if all Christians would *unisono* condemn me as a heretic, a pagan, or an infidel, and I would bear the fate without discomfiture, for there is no longer either any danger or any dishonor connected with excommunication.

On the other hand I have not changed my tactics because some unbelievers and freethinkers have reproached me for my indulgence with the faith of traditional Christianity.† If it may truly be said of their students and readers who still cling to the old way of thinking. In my article on "Modern Theology" I have explained the reason why they must do so and am prepared to defend the method. I do not say that they should mislead or pronounce untruths, but I would not deem it wrong if they are guarded in their expressions, and hold back the results of their investigations whenever they feel that their audience is not sufficiently matured for the truth. In his letter Mr. Schumaker refers to the passage in *The Open Court* (November, 1907, p. 684) and assumes that "writing between the lines" was a method practised by myself, but he is mistaken. What I deem excusable in a theologian or a teacher and educator, I would not allow a philosopher.

* See for instance my article "Pro Domo" in *The Open Court*, XIX, p. 577 ff., especially page 583, where the statement is very explicit.

† See the editorial article "Destructive or Constructive," (III, 2107), where Mr. H. B. Green's vigorous objections are quoted; and "Is Dr. Carus a Theist?" by Amos Waters, *Monist*, IX, 624.

that I am a Christian, I am a Christian of the Christianity of the future which is just developing now at the present time under the influence that science exercises upon the Christianity of the present.

I may state in this connection that I had the same experience with Buddhists. They urged me to say that I am a Buddhist, but I answered that I would not do so, for it is for the Buddhists to say whether or not I am a Buddhist. I have expounded my philosophical convictions and my views of Buddhism as I understand it, and if they agree with me, let them claim me as a Buddhist. It is not impossible that the Buddhism of the future will be very much like the Christianity of the future, and the same may come true of other religions.

I do not care to discuss here Mr. Schumaker's slurring comments on my solution of the freedom of will. He seems familiar with Presbyterian traditions only, for he says that "the scientific theologians are all strict determinists." Apparently he does not know that Calvin and his followers take an exceptional position on this special point and differ from the Roman Catholic and Lutheran views. I will only add that I no more confuse willing with doing than with mere wishing. Will is a tendency to act according to one's character; and I would not deny that even when confined to a cask stuck around with nails a man might refuse to yield to compulsion and thereby preserve the integrity of his character. Mr. Schumaker has apparently not grasped the meaning of my exposition.

From his standpoint of Christian belief, Mr. Schumaker imagines that I look with contempt upon theology and theologians. He represents me as having said that they had committed the sin against the Holy Ghost which, according to my exegetics, is a hopeless stultification of reason. Some theologians certainly are in my opinion guilty of this offense. I may even say that the stultification of reason was in certain periods deemed as the only true orthodoxy, but Mr. Schumaker is nevertheless grossly mistaken when he assumes that I condemn all theologians. I know too many truly great men among them both of the past and of the present to make so sweeping an assertion, and some theologians, both orthodox and heterodox, I count among my best and dearest personal friends. I have repeatedly called attention to the scientific labors done by the theologians and the admirable work they have accomplished.*

Mr. Schumaker requires that every article of mine should be

* See e. g. "Theology as a Science," *Monist*, XII, 544, XIII, 24; and "Heinrich Julius Holtzmann," *Open Court*, XVI, 257.

complete; I ought to state, and restate in every book all the most important points of my philosophy so as not to mislead the trustful reader. I will say in reply that so far as that is possible I do it, and I even fear that I do it more than is advisable, for I neglect to enter into the discussion of only those arguments which, I may take it for granted, are quite familiar to my readers.

* * *

I claim that the subtlest philosophical conception of to-day is nothing but the outcome of a long evolution and all its phases in mythology and dogmatic theology were not aberrations (though aberrations may have been connected with it) but necessary steps in the progress towards truth. The facts of our religious experience remain the same to-day as they have ever been. The interpretation only is different, and naturally becomes more refined, more scientific, more exact, more truthful. It discards mythology and pagan conceptions, and replaces allegorical and poetical descriptions by sober statements of fact.

I insist on the continuity of development and I feel that I myself with my own conception of religion am the product of a long history. I have discarded much that was deemed essential in former ages. There was a time in my life when I was in a state of rebellious infidelity having just discovered the untenableness of religious dogmas, but I have grown more sober, and while I retain all the radicalism of that period, while I continue to negate the literal conception of traditional symbols to the same extent as I ever did, I now understand that my own development is the last link in a long chain, and that after all as I am the son of an orthodox father, the present liberalism is but the outcome of a dogmatic past. While still correcting the errors of the past, we are apt to assume the attitude of bitterness and resentment, perhaps also of ridicule, but that is only a symptom of the irritated state of our own mind. As soon as we have passed through the crisis of the transitional state, as soon as we have to overcome the potent spell of tradition, as soon as we begin to know ourselves better and our connection with former modes of thought, we will naturally become just towards the past and will discuss with impartiality the points in which we differ from our ancestors and our objections to their doctrines, and we shall no longer overlook those very important features which are common to both sides.

Taking this standpoint it is natural that I no longer hesitate to use certain terms that have become household words in our religious life, such as "God," "soul" and "immortality." Especially the term

"God" is a word whose significance it would be difficult to rival by any new word or combination of words which after all would remain meaningless to the majority of people.

On former occasions I have justified the method of retaining old terms by calling attention to the fact that such was the natural course of our intellectual development not only in religion but also in common life and in science. When a new conception of things or phenomena dawns upon us, when new ideas sprout and throw a better light upon our interpretation of the world, we rarely coin new words but we use the old ones and fill them with new meaning. The method of progress is always that of pouring new wine into old bottles, and we do this in our interpretation of the commonest facts of our experience as well as in our more subtle scientific nomenclature. We still speak of sunrise and sunset, although we know that sunrise is caused by the rotation of the earth and not by a rising of the sun. After all the sun rises if the place where we are is taken as the point of reference. At the same time physicists still speak of electric currents, although we know very well that the ether waves which to our eye create the phenomenon of light are not currents or streams like the flowing water of a river. They are waves which are transmitted through the stationary ether. But it is justifiable to retain the old words and fill them with new meaning on the simple ground that it is easier to change the meaning of a word than to invent a new word for every new shade of meaning.

Our mental development would be poorly served if we had to change our terminology and invent a new language with every new departure in our intellectual life. The continuity of our comprehension of the world is a most significant factor, for we build upon the foundation laid by former generations. Their notions are the first and tentative statements which continue in our conceptions. Our ideas are theirs, only further developed by a deeper insight, and we can not get rid of our past without depriving ourselves of the start we have gained, which is the pedestal on which we stand.

It would have been wrong on my part if I had used any one of the traditional words with the purpose to mislead and make my readers believe that I still retained the old views, but I trust that such is not the case, and that Mr. Schumaker insinuates this simply because he has misunderstood me in the immature period of his development.

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However, the most important point of Mr. Schumaker's criticism is not the question whether or not I am a Christian and whether

or not it may be right to consider me as such, but whether or not my philosophy is true; and I regret to say that I would have to repeat all the main tenets of my position in order to prove my case. I must leave the judgment of that question to those students who take the trouble to study my conception of the world, of life, of the soul, of God, of religion, of art and of ethics.

The basic issue which seems to me the main cause of all misunderstanding is the question as to the significance of form. Here lies the key to the whole situation, and I trust that a proper explanation of the significance of form will justify both my radicalism and my conservatism.

It seems strange that in spite of the bold stand I take in the line of liberalism, taking fearlessly the ultimate conclusions of free thought, I do not iconoclastically condemn the traditional forms of religious aspirations. Far from being an enemy of historical Christianity, as Mr. Schumaker thinks, I am its best friend and supporter. However, I am not willing to be limited by the institutions and views of the past, but propose to build upon them a better, higher, and truer conception of religion and so to develop a nobler future out of the best that the present has inherited from the past.

It takes a fairly well trained mind to understand the significance of the purely formal, but its effects are palpable even to the crudest intellect in spite of the subtlety of its nature, and even the savage stands in awe of that miraculous power which sways the fate of the world and also shapes his own destiny even in minute details. Man is a creature of sense, he overrates feeling, and the fleeting phenomenon of consciousness is to him the most important reality of his experience. In agreement with his sensuous nature he likewise overrates the importance of matter. We must bear in mind that matter is that something in the objective world which corresponds most closely to sensation. Matter is the sense-perceived and sensation is that subjective phenomenon which is caused through impact with a material body. There is a further similarity between the two in that both are in their very nature particular and concrete; both are located in time and space and possess a definite form. Every material object, like every sensation, is somewhere, somewhen and somehow. How different are the norms of formal relations as they appear e. g., in geometrical propositions! They are nowhere, yet apply generally; they are universal in their nature; they are not particular, not concrete, not material, yet they determine the actions and forms of all that is particular, concrete, and material.

Man being first of all a material body, concrete and particular,

is by nature a materialist. Whenever he sees effects he represents them as being due to some substance, to an entity, or a person, and if he learns to resolve his comprehension into exact scientific statements, proving them to be the result of form, he would be inclined to think that they have lost their reality, for to the unsophisticated man matter alone is real, perhaps also energy, but form to him is a mere accidental phenomenon which comes and goes and has no lasting significance. He witnesses the changeability of form but he can not perceive with his senses (only with his mind's eye) that back of all forms there is the eternality of a norm which is the formative law that dominates the formation of all single instances. This background of the eternal norm is the most potent reality in life, and so in the folk-lore state of the development of mankind it is personified in the shape of superhuman beings who are conceived as endowed with mental intelligence after the analogy of man. If now science appears in the field and explains the nature of the normative factors of existence the personification of the gods disappears, and the conservative religionists grow indignant at the impiety of the philosopher who deprives the people of their religion. Under such conditions Socrates was called an atheist and was compelled to drink the cup of hemlock. He was deemed dangerous to the religion of Athens.

Under the monistic tendency with which all thought is possessed the polytheistic conception has changed into monotheism, the belief in one comprehensive personality of whom the old gods are mere attributes. This was an important progress, but it was not yet the attainment of a scientific conception. The paganism of mythological religion was not overcome thereby, for the principle of personification has been retained. God was not conceived as God, but as a huge omnipotent monarch, as a benevolent and paternal ruler of the world. That was the solution of the God-problem satisfactory to minds who were still pagan in their souls, i. e., who still retained the need of parables and allegories, and could not yet see the truth except in a mythological symbol. But to-day we have become more and more familiar with the nature of the cosmos and comprehend that the laws of nature are intrinsically necessary norms, and this holds good not only with reference to the physical laws but also those phenomena which belong to the mental and moral spheres of our life and also those far-reaching influences in history which we may classify under the term of providence. All these profounder interrelations teach a lesson to the thoughtful, and we may call them by a phrase much used in traditional theology, "the still small voice of God." From

a rigidly scientific standpoint we can furnish an explanation of what is called divine providence, but we expect the reactionary spirit to rise up in indignation and call the philosopher who proposes these explanations an atheist. He takes away the personification of that something which governs and directs and guides the world, of that something which has molded mankind, and into the image of which man's soul has been formed, but the reason of this alarm consists simply in the lack of an appreciation of the significance of all that is formal. The man untrained in abstract thought looks upon mere form as a nonentity and so a more scientific conception of the world naturally presents itself to him as nihilism, atheism, and infidelity.

The alarm found in hyper-reactionary circles is quite excusable and I can appreciate it because I have passed through the same development. I understand that it can not be otherwise. It is the natural attitude during a transitional period. It is the counterpart of the attitude of the infidel who having found out that the symbols of our religious traditions are allegorical, and not literal truths, throws off the restraint of moral injunction and declares it to be a yoke which has been imposed upon human society by pious fraud and priestcraft. Their attitude too is natural and, since the social order of humanity is a product of experience, we ought not to grudge to them the right to have their grievances discussed and investigated. It will help us to do away with all those restrictions which have been a hindrance to the development of the human soul, while it will insist the more rigidly upon all that is essential in our moral standard.

The former factors that have swayed the world from eternity will continue to remain its norm forever and aye, and the same power that shaped human society and brought punishment upon sin in the days of savage life is as active now as it was in the past, and though we now understand that it is not an individual being, it is as truly omnipotent and irrefragable as it was to the barbarian who bent his knee before an idol in which his conception of the deity was symbolized.

We can do away with symbols in the measure that we understand the truth, but those who do not yet possess the truth had better retain the surrogate of truth in the shape of symbols. The religious symbols of the past ages have not been errors but they were tentative formations of the truth. They were frequently adulterated by errors leading to superstitions, but in the sieve of competition which in the struggle for existence selects the best for survival, the wrong forms have been discarded and mankind has developed a nobler and truer

conception of that divine omnipresence in which we live and move and have our being.

Mr. Schumaker finds special difficulty in my conception of immortality, and here I can only say that I do not expect Christians of the old type to take to it kindly until they have really acquired a thorough scientific maturity. It is the last prejudice that has to be overcome, but the time is sure to come when even this view will be generally accepted.

All religions insist on an immortality of some kind in one form or another and rightly so, for if a man regulates his life with the idea in his mind that death is a finality, and that the end of his individual career blots him out entirely, he will naturally act in a selfish and perhaps even truly thoughtless way; but even if people are not capable of understanding the nature of the soul, its origin, its destiny, and its interrelation with the society in the past and in the future, they will notice that the results of their actions are carried far beyond the range of their individual lives. The individual actually consists of his relations to his fellow men, and in main outlines other men are molded after the same pattern, a truth which in religious language is stated in the doctrine of the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. Here again the formal concatenation of events is such as to force upon us the idea of a continued life.

I will not enter upon the subject itself, because I would have to repeat myself and incorporate long quotations from my booklet *Whence and Whither*. I will here only insist on the fact that the after-life of man's career is so important that any ethical system which leaves out a consideration of that vista would miss the main point and would fail to explain the ethical problem. I grant that the traditional terminology may be improved and that we might e. g., make a difference between such terms as "life after death" and "immortality," but both expressions have good sense and a true meaning even from the standpoint of a most radical conception of the nature of the soul. Every soul that has accomplished something on earth, even the babe that has died at birth, leaves some definite influence upon the living which will affect the future fate of mankind in its onward march; and on the other hand as all types of existence have their prototype in the realm of eternal norms, so too human souls are mere incarnations of eternal ideas which partake of the same divinity as the other formative factors of the world at large.

Every idea that impresses the mind of man as of special significance has become a center of myth-formation. Legends cluster

about great persons and about the discovery of important theories. Think of the tea-kettle of James Watt, of the falling apple that caused Newton to ponder over the law of gravitation, and many other instances. There are actually people who believe that if Mrs. Watt had not made tea on that momentous evening, we would have no steam engines to-day; that if the apple had not fallen just at the moment when young Newton was standing under the branches of the apple-tree we would know nothing of the law of gravitation. He who explains myths to be poetic figments need not as yet deny the historic facts for the adornment of which they have been invented. He who denies that Zeus is an actual personality does not deny that there is such a dispensation in the destiny of the world as if it were governed by a kind ruler such as Zeus was described to be by the Greek poets.

All things are what they are through form. The table is a table, because of the shape and the purpose which it serves. A watch, a steam engine, a dynamo, a motor, are what they are because they have been constructed to be what they are, and man too with all his thoughts and aspirations is a product of form. Form is not an unessential accident but the most essential feature of all concrete existence. And in the history of life there is a transformation and preservation of the forms of life, and this preservation of form by transmission from generation to generation makes evolution possible. All lives are interconnected, the life of bygone ages pulsates in the life of to-day and we ourselves build mansions for our souls in the generations to come.

The form of man's sentiments, thoughts, and strivings is called his character, and his character constitutes his personality. The very personal features of a man are preserved in the development of the race; they are incorporated in the lives of posterity, while his bodily existence, his individuality, passes away.*

This view of life and this conception of form, especially of the preservation of life-forms, of thought-forms, of aspirations (or will-forms) is no mere fancy, but it is an important fact which we must bear in mind if we wish to understand the meaning of existence.

You may answer (and the same answer has been made by several people) "What do I care for my personality if I can not have my individuality along with it, including the continuity of conscious-

* Note the difference I make between personality and individuality. Man's personality is his character. Man's individuality is that which makes him a concrete, definite and bodily being, an individual. There is no inconsistency in my statement of the transiency and finiteness of the individual, while I claim that there is a preservation of personality.

ness and a remembrance of my past in its very details?" I say, "It may be that you care more for your individuality than for your personality, but God (or whatever you may call the dispensation of the world and of the development of mankind) cares only for your personality and utilizes your individuality only for the good you accomplish. What you accomplish is your spiritual self, your soul, the quintessence of your being. Your body together with the function of feeling, of consciousness, is but a means to an end. Your soul is like the contents of a book, your individual existence (your body) is like the paper on which the book, i. e., the words and sentences possessed of a definite meaning, are written. The author who writes a book cares for the ideas which he presents, and the several individual copies are the means for rendering his thoughts intelligible. Every copy possesses a value, and some copies may possess more value than others on account of their qualities in paper, print or artistic ornamentation, but every copy is perishable while the book endures.

The contents of a book, its soul or spirit, is not a nonentity, but it is its most important feature. It is a mere relational quality, and there is no substance of which it has been made; yet it bears an analogous significance to that of a man's soul. The words of a book express meaning, they possess a tendency, a will of a definite direction, a purpose.

I will not try here to persuade Mr. Schumaker that he should accept my view of immortality; he would better retain his own until he finds it wanting and feels the need of a broader and (what is more important) a truer view. I will only point out that I am not inconsistent and know very well what I said when I insisted that the individual, the particular, the bodily, will pass away, while the personality, that which constitutes a comprehension of the universal, the spiritual, the very soul of man, perseveres.

May he who is not yet able to see face to face, see as through a glass darkly; his vision may be dim, but dim vision is better than blindness.