

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CHRIST-IDEAL.

BY THE EDITOR.

DR. George Holley Gilbert contributes to this number of *The Open Court* an article on "The Peril in the Christmas Legend," which may be regarded as reflecting the spirit of the Arian sect and, in modern days, of the Unitarians who prefer the straight historical truth and insist on the human character of Jesus, believing that mankind does not stand in need of myth. Thus they construct a human Saviour in place of the supernatural Christ, or in other words they prefer to let Christ be an ideal man, whose divinity differs practically not at all from the divine sonship of any human being. The present article, however, is more than a mere repetition of the old Arian controversy. It is a straw in the wind which indicates that religious thought has entered into a new phase, and this is especially true if we consider the prominence of the author in theological circles.

The importance of Dr. Gilbert's position is set in a clearer light by the article of Mr. Amos Kidder Fiske on "The Mythical Element in Christianity." Though these writers differ in details they agree on the main point in attributing the origin of Christianity to a personal Jesus.

Dr. Gilbert can not be called one of the higher critics; nor is he famous as an original investigator among New Testament scholars, but he probably represents the congregational life better than most other theologians. He echoes the belief of the pews more than that of the pulpit, not of the pews indifferent to theological questions but of the thoughtful man who watches the controversies concerning biblical problems with intense interest, and honestly aspires to form an independent opinion as to the truth. Thus it appears that he is perhaps more representative of modern Christianity than either extreme, the independent church-goer who allows himself to be called a Christian from sheer habit and tradition, and the learned theologian, such as Wellhausen or Harnack. In him pulsates

the religious life of Christianity, and he is a true combination of both common sense and faith in the essential truths of the Christian doctrines as they are still held among educated men as instanced by Mr. Fiske.

Dr. Gilbert wants to know the historical truth about Jesus, and he has come to the conclusion that Jesus is historical and that the gist of his doctrine is found in the Gospels. He believes "that Jesus was of humble parentage and sprang from the Galilean village of Nazareth," but this remains rather indifferent. Of greater, indeed of paramount importance, is it that Jesus was the "first Christian." He regrets that the historical Jesus has been obscured by legendary accretions in which the supernatural plays a conspicuous part. Of this Jesus of the legends, of which the Christmas story is perhaps the most typical instance, Dr. Gilbert goes so far as to say that he, this mythical personage of miraculous events, "never lived." He further adds: "We may also say that Jesus as analyzed and presented to faith by the Greek theologians of the early church never existed, but," adds Dr. Gilbert, "who can seriously question that back of the Sermon on the Mount there was a prophet unapproached in the purity and power of his teaching, that underneath the Christian movement of the first century there was a great personality who profoundly stirred the hearts and minds of men, and that the early Christian consciousness of the nearness and goodness of God and the early Christian eagerness to spend and to be spent in the service of mankind resulted from contact with some one to whom the nearness and goodness of God were absolute verities and in whom the spirit of service was a consuming passion?"

Here Dr. Gilbert has proposed the vital argument of the liberal Christian view of the present day. This same thought is uppermost in the minds of all those who are opposed to supernaturalism and insist that the divinity of Christ is merely his ideal humanity. This class of religious thinkers has always been in the minority. The large masses revel in supernaturalism and gladly accept a literal belief in myth or what stands for myth, mysticism and the poetical representation of the religious movements that determine man's life. The student of history, the scientific theologian and the philosopher study the facts of the religious development of mankind; they analyze the myth and trace its development from former myths. With regard to Christian legend they have come to the conclusion that the Christ-ideal has been inherited from pagan prototypes, that it existed before Jesus. When Jesus, the Nazarene, became recognized in a narrow circle of the Nazarene sect as the Messiah, the idea that he

was the Christ took hold of Paul. Paul, like other teachers of his time, as for instance Apollos, possessed the ideal of a Christ whom he with other Jews identified with the Jewish Messiah. The ideal existed first and it gained concreteness by being attributed to Jesus.¹

Paul's conversion means that he identified Jesus the Nazarene with this traditional ideal of Christ, the Lord, and his preaching found a ready acceptance because mankind at that time was prepared for it. Paul only put in the keystone by rendering the vague Christ-ideal definite and allowing it to concentrate around a human personality. He made the Christ-ideal historical, or at least he gave it such a shape that the people to whom he preached could form a clear idea of the Christ as a human being who had actually lived, had died, and had risen from the dead, in a similar way as so many pagan saviours, Osiris, Baal, Marduk, Dionysus, Heracles and Zeus himself, have done according to pagan mythology in pre-Christian times.

Paul's contemporary, the preacher Apollos, knew all about the Lord, viz., the Christ, but, says Paul, he did not yet know that the Lord was Jesus of Nazareth.

The formation of the legendary Christ was the result of the natural tendency of mankind to construct an ideal. Whatever may have been true of the life of Jesus became indifferent, the features of the Christ-ideal were superadded to the traditional story of the Carpenter's Son, and it seems to be impossible now to analyze the two elements and show what belongs to the original fact and what is legendary.

It appears that the supernatural features added to the simple story of the life of Jesus became naturally the most important portion of the Gospels. They were insisted upon with greater vigor than the historical facts, and here we may say that the historicity of these features of which Dr. Gilbert speaks is more subject to doubt than of others.

There have been critics (among whom I will mention first of all Prof. William Benjamin Smith, of Tulane University, and his German follower, Prof. Arthur Drews) who deny the historical Jesus altogether and bring forth weighty arguments in favor of the mythical character of the Gospels without leaving any historical residuum.² In my opinion Christianity would not suffer if this were true, because the main element of Christianity is the very feature which makes Dr. Gilbert believe that there was such a powerful

¹ Acts xvii. 24 ff.

² See W. B. Smith, *Der vorchristliche Jesus*, and A. Drews, *The Christ Myth*.

personality as Jesus. But these very doctrines incorporated in the Sermon on the Mount and other noble sayings, have been derived from a source which Wellhausen called "Q," the initial of the German word *Quelle*, and this mysterious source "Q" does not appear to have contained any reference to the life of Jesus, to his personality or to the very characteristic surroundings and facts of his or any saviour's individual existence. It seems to have been a collection of religious contemplations, and from it the Gospel writers have derived the grand world-conception of a noble ethics. This very feature in combination with the spirit of the Fourth Gospel has assured the final victory of Christianity over its rival religions, such as Mithraism and the reformed paganism of Julian, surnamed the Apostate, or any other faith, such as the religion of Mani which grew up almost simultaneously with the Christian era. We have no evidence whatever that the Sermon on the Mount and other sayings of Jesus derived from the source "Q" should really be attributed to Jesus, and if he really used them the greater probability would be that he adopted them and made these religious sentiments his own.

We know now that the Gospels and other books of the New Testament contain many portions which are, perhaps literally, traditions that have come down to us from the first century, and we believe that exactly those passages which contradict the Christian spirit of later centuries are most assuredly genuine. It is very probable that the extreme Judaism of Jesus is historical, for pagan Christianity would not have invented that. But the typically Christian passages, the nobility of Christian ethics, as for instance the Sermon on the Mount, have been added to the New Testament by the Christian church as the need arose among its members not to be inferior in ethical ideas to rival religions. Think of it, that the grand words of Christ at the cross, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do," do not appear in the New Testament before the ninth century; and we cannot doubt that they were inserted by some thoughtful scribe who did not want to let Christ be surpassed in nobility by Socrates who died without any animosity against his enemies.

Incidentally I ought to add here that these superadditions and later insertions should not be denounced as corruptions of the text. Even the mythical features have been superadded in good faith and with the best intentions. It is noticeable that even to-day theological scholars use the argument that the personality of Jesus must have been such or such, because (they argue) that corresponds best with

the noble sane mind of the carpenter's son of Galilee. Arguments of this kind are common among fairly good theological scholars. Neither is this uncritical method of constructing history according to the ideals we have in our own heart foreign to the biographers of the great heroes of history. Man naturally argues from the ideas he has of the subject in which he is interested. This being true in the secular field, we need not be surprised that it is true even to a greater extent in the field of religion.

And now in conclusion we wish to emphasize that Jesus as the Saviour and the Christ was not merely an historical personality, he was a superpersonality; and superpersonalities are formed naturally in the course of historical developments and become potent factors in determining the character of all the generations in whom they become a living presence. We shall never philosophically and scientifically understand the significance, the potency and also the concrete and definite actuality of Christ until we have understood the nature of superpersonalities.³

The story of Heracles was certainly a myth, but the Heracles ideal was a potent factor in Greece which accomplished much in shaping the convictions and aspirations of Grecian youths, and in the same sense Christ is an actuality in the Christian church; he is a superpersonal presence in the minds of his followers, more important than any historical person, Jesus, or Paul or any apostle and all the saints.

The Heracles ideal exercised a great moral influence upon ancient Greece and has produced many inspiring and noble sentiments among which the best known is that much quoted verse,

τῆς δ' ἀρετῆς ἰδρῶτα θεοὶ προπάροισεν ἔθηκαν
ἀθλίνατοι μακρὸς δὲ καὶ ὄρθιος οἶμος ἐπ' αὐτήν.

"Truly 'tis sweat the Olympian gods have placed before virtue;
Long is the path that leads to its height and full of exertion."

There is no need of assuming that there must be the personality of a great teacher or a real Heracles behind such sentiments. Like many other wise saws it is the product of the collective wisdom of the ages. It is not the visions of the believers in Christ which have produced the belief in the resurrection of Jesus, as Mr. Fiske believes, but *vice versa* the belief in the resurrection of the Lord has given rise to the Easter story. The world-conception of a worldwide religion was worked out with the beginning of the

³ This subject has been treated in the writer's little book entitled *Personality*. See especially the chapter on "Superpersonality."

Christian era when all the nations from the Pillars of Hercules to the frontiers of the Persian realm were united into one great empire, and this new cosmopolitan faith with its pretty definite saviour-ideal clustered round the figure of Jesus. This resulted in Christianity which was consummated through the missionary labors of St. Paul. If instead of Christianity some other religion, whether Mithraism, an idealized paganism or any other faith, had gained the upper hand, its doctrines would read very much like the Christian creeds.

The influence of Christianity and the significance of the personality of Jesus is much obscured by the wrong attitude which is commonly taken by theologians of many different creeds, mainly by the old orthodox but it is also greatly misunderstood by the liberals, especially by the Unitarians, by the radicals and the infidels. The orthodox generally cling with a nervous anxiety to a belief in the personality of Jesus because they fear that if certain parts of the gospel story or even the entire fabric could be proved to be an historical fiction, the foundation of their faith and their ideals would be gone. On the other hand radicals and unbelievers also think that the cause of Christianity will be lost as soon as the New Testament stories can be proved to be unhistorical or even if they are merely dubitable or incredible. A philosophical analysis of the nature of superpersonality promises the possibility of a compromise between the most radical unbelief and the traditional orthodoxy. It is true that the similarity of Christianity to non-Christian religions will have to be accepted, but this does not mean that Christianity ought to be considered as low as the pagan religions; on the contrary it would raise the various pagan views more or less to the dignity of the Christian conception.

As to the personality of Jesus, the question for Christian faith is not whether there lived in Palestine 1900 years ago a Jew by that name who actually did what the Gospels report of Jesus, but whether or not the superpersonality of Jesus Christ, such as has risen in the minds of the Mediterranean people and has been transferred to Northern Europe, is or is not a good and true exposition of the eternal ideals of mankind; and further whether or not this superpersonality is the right guide in life. From this point of view new vistas open to Christianity, and the Christian churches may build higher upon the old traditions, on the ground of this greater liberty. Without destroying their historic past they may grow beyond the narrowness of medieval Christianity and even of the more progressive Christianity of the Reformation.