

THE SUPERPERSONALITY OF CHRIST.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE question of the personality of Jesus has come most powerfully into the foreground since liberal Christianity has spread more and more. Since the beginning of Christianity there has been a party who object to miracles and myth. They were led in the third century by Arius (256-336), and so this faction in the church was called Arians.

The Arians may be characterized as old Unitarians. Arianism had its strongest hold on the more sober-minded northern nations, especially the Goths, while the orthodox doctrine had its roots mainly in the southern peoples, the Greeks and the Italians.

The Arians' objection to orthodox Christianity is mainly based upon their rationalism. They want the truth in literally true statements. They object to allegory, and for this reason they throw out all ideas which are on the face irrational. They are religious free-thinkers, and object to believing that a man can be a god. Accordingly all the ideas connected with it, such as divine incarnation or the idea that God can be born, that there is a mother of God, that God can die, are blasphemies in their eyes, and since these notions are the characteristic features of the ancient paganism, since all pre-Christian religions possess a hero-worship which tells us of the birth of a son of some god, mostly of Zeus, of his deeds of valor, of his martyrdom and of his return to life, the Arians look upon the dogmas of orthodox Christianity as a revival of paganism.

This old contrast between the liberals and the orthodox is revived to-day in the discussion about the personality of Jesus. Modern criticism beginning with Bruno Bauer, the head of the so-called Tübingen school, and finding a classical representative in David Friedrich Strauss, resolved Christianity into an efflorescence of myth, and this movement has found new strength in the denial of the historicity of Jesus. The latest phase of this view has reached its

climax in William Benjamin Smith, who found an able prophet in the German professor Arthur Drews. Smith's work on "The pre-Christian Jesus" made a deep impression on Drews, and he by his scholarly and more popular methods gained the ear of the German public, claiming that Christ never lived, and that his figuring in history was due to the formation of a myth. These views he published in his two books, *The Christ Myth* and *The Witnesses to the Historicity of Jesus*. Drews found favor in the eyes of the masses, but naturally neither Smith nor Drews were recognized by theologians.

Our own position in this controversy has been set forth repeatedly on different occasions¹ and we may here summarize it thus: Christianity is a religion similar to its pagan forerunners. In fact Christianity is the sum total of pre-Christian pagan religions purified through the rigorous Jewish monotheism which served as a protest against polytheism and other outgrowths of superstition which had become unacceptable even to the uneducated masses of the Mediterranean nations. At the time of the beginning of the Christian era there were several rival religions among which Mithraism was most prominent. They resembled each other in tendency and doctrine, but in the struggle for survival Christianity conquered because it was the most vigorous protest against the objectionable features of the ancient paganism and also because the figure of its Saviour was more human and less mythological than the Greek heroes.

There were several saviour ideals, but Christ assumed a more concrete and definite personality than others such as Mithras, Apollonius, Seth and Hermes Trismegistus. Christ crystallized around the figure of Jesus, the Galilean, and there is a concreteness in the humanity of Jesus and in his martyrdom on the cross which endeared him most to the large multitudes of the lowest classes, the slaves, many of whom were quite prepared to end like Jesus on the cross. This feature is not sufficiently appreciated but is attested in the Roman comedy when Davus speaks of his prospective death on the cross with great indifference, stating as a matter of little concern that his father and grandfather had also died on the cross. This recalls the story of the captain who with carelessness speaks of his death in the ocean as a man would speak of his death in bed, and yet the bed does not for that reason become an object of disgust

¹ See the writer's little book, *The Pleroma*, and several discussions of the New Theology in *The Open Court*: especially "Pro Domo," Vol. XIX, 577; "Christ and Christian," Vol. XXII, 110; "Modern Theology," Vol. XXII, 234, 407; "The Nazarene," Vol. XXIV, 26; "The Synoptic Gospels," Vol. XXIV, 600.

to the people whose ancestors have generation after generation quietly found their end in bed.

We must distinguish between Jesus and Christ. Jesus is the man, whether historical or not does not concern us here, of whom the Gospels tell us that he was born in Bethlehem, was educated in Nazareth, that he preached in Capernaum his city, that he wandered through the country healing the sick and preaching to the poor, that he went to Jerusalem, offended the priests and Pharisees, drew upon himself the suspicion of the Romans, was crucified, buried, and rose from the dead on the third day.

Christ is a superpersonality. It is the Saviour ideal, the incarnation of God, the God-man, and the claim of the Apostle St. Paul consists in this that Jesus is the Christ. The Gospel story has been accepted by Christians with more or less belief in the several details; the resurrection story especially has given offense to the Arians or people of their kind. The healing miracles have been doubted or explained in a natural way. The birthplace and the virgin birth have been subjects of fierce controversies, and the myth theory has almost at all times found many advocates. Scholarly critics have discovered traces in the detailed items of the Gospel story which are repetitions of pre-Christian saviours. One of the most obvious of them is the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem, and for other details the temptation, the transfiguration, the raising of Lazarus have been declared to be inventions of pious imagination, which arose on the ground that Christ could not have performed smaller miracles than other prophets before him. Others have done or said this or that; therefore Christ must have blessed his enemies on the cross, therefore he must have raised the dead, therefore he must have had a supernatural birth, etc.

If we understand the nature of religious psychology, we must know that all people have a need of ideals. The Greeks admired Heracles as the Babylonians cherished the legend of Gilgamesh, as the Teutonic nations enjoyed listening to the stories of Siegfried, and such figures are most potent presences in the minds of the growing generation. Whether or not Heracles ever lived is indifferent. The Greek people of classic antiquity certain believed in his reality, and later on when rationalism made religious notions of the gods and other superpersonal presences fade away the decay of ancient Greece set in. At the same time there developed a dualistic soul-conception which replaced the ideals of heroism by a new and more ascetic conception of the saviour. The hero type changed into the healer type, the transition being formed by such a demigod as Æs-

culapius in Greece. The courageous leader in battle, the bold muscular conqueror changed into an ascetic, a wandering preacher, a man without a wife, without family, without property. It is natural that the religious ideals of the different ages change with our world-conception and we find such superpersonalities individualized by different nations in the same phase of development in a quite similar way all over the ancient world.

With the breakdown of the old religions and with the rise of a monotheistic religion a new saviour type was needed, and found expression for instance in the life of Apollonius, a wandering preacher, of whom stories were told very similar to those about Jesus. Apollonius was a kind of ascetic. He was not a hero like Heracles. He was the product of the same age as Jesus, hence the similarity of the picture, and Apollonius was not a mere myth, he was a real living personality. The historian does not believe the miracles attributed to him, and we need not believe that the sermons attributed to him are his own words, but no critic has as yet come forward to doubt his historicity.

The truth is that the mythology of superpersonalities very easily crystallizes around historical figures which resemble them and play a prominent part in history. Such figures are most drastic where they appear in the field of action, men like Alexander the Great, Cæsar, Napoleon. And how easily legends cluster around them, how naturally the stories of similar deities, of the incarnate son God, and even anecdotes are attributed to these extraordinary personalities may be seen in the fact that all the legends of Gilgamesh and of sun-heroes were attributed to Alexander the Great in books which were finally reduced to poetic shape in the Middle Ages. How easy was it for M. Pérèz and for Archbishop Whately to prove that Napoleon was a mere myth, and that therefore there is no inkling of historical fact about him.

It seems to me that the Christ-ideal has settled on the figure of Jesus in the same way as the myth of the similar heroes clustered around the persons of Alexander and Napoleon. What the scholars do is to trace the origin of the Christ-ideal back to its various historical sources, and when they have exhausted the whole figure of Jesus they come to the conclusion: *Ergo*, nothing human is left; there is no truth in the historicity of Jesus. This seems to me a *non sequitur*. On the contrary the existence of Jesus is plausible for the very reason that the most reliable and oldest Gospel reports of Jesus possess several features and a few mention sayings of Christ which stand very strongly in contrast to the later Christ-ideal. This

proves that there is a nucleus of the life story going back to a tradition which was not invented for the purpose of proving that Jesus was the Christ, but is a tale of a wonderful preacher and healer called Jesus.

We do not consider it probable that the stories which betray a Judaic character in Jesus have been invented by the Christians. Incidentally we will mention here that the existence of Jew-Christians was really a fiction of the church. The Jew-Christians were the Nazarenes of whom Jesus was apparently a member, and this little sect was decidedly a Jewish sect. It is not probable that the Nazarenes changed their entire creed and their communistic institutions into a Christian religion, such as was evolved in later days among the Greeks and Romans. The religion of the Nazarenes was apparently absolutely Jewish, and several passages critically examined prove that Jesus was a Jew of the Jews. He had no idea of preaching his Gospel to the world in spite of the passage in Matthew xiii, which has long been recognized as a very late interpolation. We can not assume that the passages which make Jesus believe in every diacritical dot and dash of the Mosaic law were inventions of the Gospel writers, they must be historical, and the same is true of the story according to which Jesus calls the Gentiles dogs. In fact we read that Jesus was opposed to casting pearls before swine, which latter word was a common epithet among the Jews to denote Gentiles. There is enough in the Gospel, although means have been found to cover it, which goes far to prove an original Jewish tradition that can not be the product of a mythological fiction.

The properly Christian sayings of Jesus are very questionable as utterances of Jesus. It stands to reason that the beatitudes and other passages of the Sermon of the Mount were transferred on Jesus because according to the logic of the times he as the Christ must have uttered them. The Gospel of St. Mark by no means reflects a Christ-personality after the type of the Christian Christ-ideal. Were we to read the Gospel of Mark through in one sitting as if it were a new book to us, we would find that the personality here portrayed is by no means very sympathetic. It is not exactly Jewish, but may very well be Galilean, a mixture of Judaism with the notions of surrounding nationalities. But upon the whole there are enough features in the story which make it probable that a certain Jesus existed who was the leader of a Jewish sect, and having offended at the same time the priestly authorities of the Jews and the Roman governor, fell a victim to political prejudices. It is not impossible that such a Jesus existed. In fact I deem it more probable than

not, but so far as I can see the historical existence of Jesus is as indifferent as the historicity of Osiris in Egypt, or Heracles in Greece, or Siegfried among the Teutons. The potency of the ideal is the real actual fact in the soul-life of believers, and I grant that to many people it is essential to believe that this ideal has been an actual historical man. So far as I can see the believers in the non-historicity of Jesus can only prove that the rise of the super-personality of Jesus is the rise of an historical development, and that the several features which have entered here can be traced to definite sources.

The orthodox conception that the main part of the Christian Saviour was his character as Christ, remains standing and will remain forever, while the theory of the Arians, of the rationalists, and all their kin is untenable from purely *a priori* considerations. What is the use of believing that a little more than 1900 years ago Jesus was born in Bethlehem, or died on the cross of Calvary? The mystics have preached that whether or not Christ lived and died, and rose to life again is indifferent. The main purport of the Gospel story is that every believer in Christ should make his life an imitation of Christ, and this is the burden of the most typical Christian preacher Thomas Aquinas. Angelus Silesius expresses these sentiments in some of his quaint rhymes:

God as a child is born
 In stillest, darkest night,
 Whereby He has restored
 What's lost by Adam's plight.
 Thus in a creature dark,
 Here in thy soul so still,
 God is becoming man
 And that will mend all ill.

I say it speeds thee not
 That Christ rose from the grave,
 So long as thou art still
 To death and sin a slave.

The resurrection is
 In spirit done in thee,
 As soon as thou from all
 Thy sins hast set thee free.

Golgotha's cross from sin
 Can never ransom thee,
 Unless in thine own soul
 It should erected be.

Thou must above thee rise
 All else leave to God's grace:
 Then Christ's ascension will
 Within thy soul take place.

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In connection with the subject here discussed I have to mention that one of the most prominent defenders of the historicity of Jesus is Professor Benjamin W. Bacon of Yale Theological Seminary. Rather thoughtlessly and in a rash and ungentlemanly way he pitched into my propositions of the origin of Christianity published in my little book *The Pleroma*, and I answered him carefully, thanking him for corrections of little details, and calling attention to the

failures of his own logic. At the same time I invited him to state his views more fully in *The Open Court*. His main argument, explained at great length in voluminous works on his specialty, New Testament Criticism, is briefly the old theological method of constructing a Jesus ideal. He tells us much about the sane mind of the carpenter's son, and this carpenter's son, the man of the working people, must have done this or that and must have preached thus or so. Such argument is convincing only to men of his own type, and shows poor judgment before the tribunal of a scientific treatment of history.

I do not blame Professor Bacon for his errors, but I regret to find that the *furor theologicus* is also a powerful factor in his character. Instead of either accepting or rejecting my invitation to answer my reply and express himself more fully, his only method of justifying himself is by disposing of my answer with a shrug. But an insult is no argument. I will quote literally the few lines in which Professor Bacon refers to me. They are hidden in an article entitled "A Mythical Collapse of Historical Christianity," in which he disposes in like manner of other opponents. Very incidentally in speaking of "mythological theology" he says: "Whether Dr. Paul Carus, editor of *The Monist* and its satellites in Chicago, entertains similar theological ideas, those must tell who are better acquainted than we with the thousand or more publications to which he confesses." A footnote is added thus: "In reply to a review of one of these by the present writer pointing out a series of inaccuracies, Dr. Carus presents voluminous explanations and a counter-attack, offering the columns of his own publication, *The Open Court*, for reply. We do not require so much space. A footnote here will suffice. We refer Dr. Carus to a well-known saying of Josh Billings: 'It's better to be ignorant about a few things than to know such a terrible lot of things that ain't so.'"

It is a common experience that the scholar who has no arguments calls his adversary names. Professor Bacon in the same passage shows that he is unfamiliar with my writings, and yet by inference he classes them among "a terrible lot of things that ain't so."