

THE SECRET OF CHRISTIANITY.¹

BY WILHELM VON SCHNEHEN.

CRITICAL theology long ago recognized a strong symbolic element, not only in the accounts of miracles but also in other parts of the Gospels, without however observing that in each particular case the assumption of a symbolic intent unavoidably implied the surrender of the historic content. Moreover, before all else it lacked any fixed principle for distinguishing the symbolic from the supposedly historic. At all times its judgment as to what should count as "historic" has been determined only by subjective whim, caprice, or prejudice. Whatever chanced to correspond with the "Jesus-idea" (*Jesusbild*) of the critic in question or of his school or theological party, was without further ado stamped as "certain" or at least probable. Any justification of this "Idea" was not only not given, it was not even attempted, and the "Idea" was left floating in the air as an unproved presupposition of the whole scheme. Hence we cannot find fault with the learned and brilliant (*geistvollen*) American, William Benjamin Smith, author of "The Pre-Christian Jesus," when in his new work *Ecce Deus*² he parts company with this queer theological-historical "science," and in the explanation of the Gospels themselves strikes into entirely different paths.

The starting point of his investigation is found in the well-known words of Mark (iv. 33 f.): "And with many such parables he spake unto them the Word, as they were able to hear it. And without a parable spake he not unto them" (Compare Matt. xiii. 34 f.). Here, says Smith with justice, we have the sure unambigu-

¹ This extract is translated from a remarkably clear and able article entitled as above, written by the distinguished critic and man of letters, Wilhelm von Schnehen, and published in the *Volkserzieher* of Berlin, a fortnightly journal of education, June 9, 1912.

² Eugen Diederichs, Jena, 1911, pp. xvi, 315. English version (enlarged) Open Court Pub. Co., Chicago, 1912.

ous proof that the primitive form of the Christian preaching was exclusively symbolic. But why was this so? The reason is laid bare in Mark iv. 11; Matt. xiii. 34; Luke viii. 9. The doctrine was expressed in parables especially to this end, that it might not be understood by strangers, by "those without": only to the "disciples," to the initiated was it "given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God"; for to them "all was explained privately" (Mark iv. 34). Any other interpretation of these clear unmistakable words is impossible. Consequently historical theology is at a loss what to do with them, but stands here before the dilemma openly avowed by Juelicher: "Either Jesus—or the Evangelists," and must reject the combined testimony of the three Synoptic Gospels, in order to save its conception of Jesus. For any such intentional secrecy of the teaching of the kingdom of God, any such systematic concealment of meaning from the uninitiated body of the people, is consistent neither with the orthodox nor with the liberal conception of Jesus. But this conception of Jesus loses all historical basis as soon as we throw aside the testimony of the Gospels, and is then seen to be precisely what it really is, namely, a mere creature of theologic fancy, an "Idea" either arbitrarily fashioned in direct contradiction of the Gospels or else foisted upon them by violence. And Smith proceeds with perfect logic when he dismisses this "Jesus-Idea," whether orthodox or liberal, and planting himself on the clear, unequivocal, and consistent testimony of the three first Gospels, maintains that in the case of the original evangelic teaching, with its parables and accounts of miracles, we have to deal with a mystery-religion, with the dialect of a religious society, which was intentionally kept unintelligible to the uninitiated outsiders.

But what was then the inner essence, the peculiar content or leading thought of this secret primitive Christian proclamation? It was, answers Smith, simply a protest against pagan idolatry, and therefore a campaign for monotheism. And accordingly also the call to repentance, with which in the Gospels everywhere the glad tidings of the approaching kingdom of God begin, is, exactly as with the prophets of the Old Testament (Jer. xxv. 5 f.; xxxv. 15; Ezek. xiv. 6; Zech. i. 3 f., and a hundred similar passages), not to be understood ethically but religiously, as a call to conversion from the many false gods to the one true God, the Father of all men. See Rev. xiv. 6, 7; Acts xx. 21. But such a crusade against the officially recognized gods of heathendom, including the emperor himself, could not at first be conducted otherwise than in secret unless its champions wished to collide instantly and everywhere with the

Roman authorities. And by this necessary secrecy of the primitive Christian proclamation are explained at once the symbolic dialect and the preponderance of parables in the didactic portions of the Gospels. So too the previously cited and otherwise wholly unintelligible verses (Mark iv. 11, 33 etc.) are explained easily and naturally. The expulsion of demons, which plays such an important rôle in the Gospels, and which appears as the first task of the preacher of God's kingdom (Mark iii. 14 f. ; Matt. x. 1 ; Luke x. 14), is, like all the other wonders, only a part of this symbolic mode of speech. The sin of idolatry, as already was the case in the Old Testament, was represented as a disease, as possession by Demons, and the One God, who heals this malady, was worshiped as the Healer or Saviour, conceived personally, named symbolically with the appropriate name Jesus, and in accord with universal custom represented as a Man. Hence the appearance of Jesus in the flesh was originally meant only figuratively. But afterwards the figure was further elaborated and misunderstood as historic fact. Hereto was added the idea of a divine Sufferer or of a God offering up himself for mankind, an idea suggested by Isaiah, Plato, and the heathen mysteries. So the Christian drama of redemption arose.

In this way does Smith essay to reveal to us the secret of primitive Christianity, and to make its true nature intelligible. And I am certain that every one who takes his work in hand will be as much amazed at the acumen with which the author establishes his conception in detail as at the multitude of new insights that he affords us. In fact his *Ecce Deus*, no less and in truth still more than his "Pre-Christian Jesus," casts a totally new and surprisingly clear light on the New Testament and the whole history of early Christianity. We understand now the seemingly sudden and almost simultaneous appearance of the new cult in numerous different and often widely separated regions. We comprehend the swift triumphal march of the young religion through the whole world of Greek-Roman civilization. No longer do we wonder that Paul in Acts so often finds "brethren" at places he visits for the first time. We are no longer astonished that according to the same authority the learned Alexandrian, Apollos, proclaims zealously "the doctrine of the Jesus," "though knowing only the baptism of John," and therefore manifestly knowing naught of any history of Jesus. We comprehend why, aside from four or five doubtful passages in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, all the Epistles of the New Testament along with the Revelation of John, as well as all the apologists of the first centuries, make no mention of the life or the teaching of any

man Jesus. And above all we now understand correctly and for the first time the deeper sense of the Gospels themselves and many otherwise wholly unintelligible details of their narratives. In particular we no longer take offence at the miracles of Jesus, since they are only symbolically meant, are only figurative representations of purely spiritual events. We understand why the Saviour meets with demons and those possessed of demons only in half-pagan Galilee but not in Judea. We see, for instance, that the demoniac of Gerasa, with his whole "legion of unclean spirits" is nothing else than heathen humanity, which through belief in countless false gods has been robbed of sound reason and now wins it again through the cult of Jesus. We recognize that the man with the withered hand is only Jewish humanity, lamed by tradition and healed by the new teaching. We perceive it as self-evident that the rich man also, who had kept the commandments from his youth up, but is unwilling to divide his possessions with the poor, is again nothing else than the people Israel, which refuses to renounce its spiritual prerogatives and enter on like terms with the Gentiles into the kingdom of God. And we find also the same symbolic representation of the relations between Jew and Gentile in the story of the Prodigal Son, in the parable of the beggar Lazarus, in the account of Lazarus and his two sisters, and finally in the treason of Judas Iscariot.

But enough of particulars. He who seeks for deeper insight must betake himself to the works of Smith. And whoever does so will then without question agree with me in the judgment that the American may confidently match himself in learning with every theologian of our day, and that in genius (*Geist*) he overtops them—well, pretty much all. This appears especially clearly also in the Appendix to his work, where he repels with equal skill and high-bred gentility the odious attacks of Weinel upon his earlier work, "The Pre-Christian Jesus," and visits upon the hostile specialist an overthrow that is really annihilation.