THE PRIME OBJECT OF ORIGINAL CHRISTIANITY.

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THAT Christianity in its origin was a purely eschatological religion intended only for the time of its origin, is a fact which clearly stands forth in the writings of the New Testament. It is only the unhistorical sense of the church from a very early date down to our own days that has covered up this fact by twisted interpretations of the numerous passages of the New Testament clearly expressing the firm expectation of the approaching end of the world and the coming of the kingdom of God from heaven. These interpretations dominated Christianity for 1800 years.

It is natural that the church took refuge in such wholly unfounded interpretations, for to understand them as they were intended to be understood would have been to grant that Christianity in its origin was founded upon a great error, namely upon the non-fulfilment of that expectation—an error which Jesus and Paul and their immediate followers alike shared—and this would have been to assume the purely human origin of Christianity. Although the fact of that great error, and therefore the purely human origin of Christianity, is at present acknowledged by all unprejudiced Biblical scholars, nevertheless the great majority of Christians are not acquainted with this fact, not even the majority of the ministry. Even religious radicals who have grown up under the traditional interpretation of the eschatological passages do not seem to be clearly acquainted with their original meaning. Otherwise they would not always center their attacks upon other points of Christianity instead of upon this fact, which more than anything else clearly establishes the perfectly human origin of Christianity, at the same time showing that it can be understood in a truly natural and historical way, without assuming interested priestly motives as many unreasonable rad-
icals of the old type still do; or without looking for other secrets supposed to have mainly given rise to Christianity, as for instance the purpose to establish monotheism and to destroy paganism and idolatry, for which object Judaism was better fitted than Christianity and pagan philosophy itself offered weapons enough. I think it is not too daring to say that the historical understanding of the eschatological passages of the New Testament and their import for the origin of Christianity is as little known or felt among those attacking Christianity or seeking for secret motives for its origin in other directions, as among those who still see in Christianity a directly divine revelation once established for all times. In my personal experiences with ultraradical enemies of Christianity I have observed that they are as much under the ban of the orthodox traditional interpretations of the Bible as are its faithful believers. As an example I will give that of a radical writing fiercely against Christianity, who faithfully accepted the orthodox explanation of Gen. vi. 4, that the "sons of God" were Sethites and the "daughters of men" Cainites. I therefore look upon this article as a contribution to a true historical understanding of the origin of Christianity both for believers and unbelievers, not pretending to give anything really new—for Biblical scholars are acquainted with the facts—but only aiming to popularize results of historical Biblical research in quarters where there indisputably still exists a great necessity for a better acquaintance with them.

In directing our attention to the strong eschatological nature of original Christianity, much of its pensive, gloomy, ecstatic, enthusiastic and visionary elements will become clear to us. For it is a fact that at all times in the history of religions, when there existed a firm conviction that the end of the present and the beginning of a perfectly new world were near at hand, these elements were aroused, together with the wildest beliefs. Witness the Middle Ages when in connection with the immediate expectation of the Judgment there arose men of fanatical, apocalyptic-prophetical tendency, fiercely inimical to the papacy and its excrescences, who like Tanchelm (killed by a priest in 1124) assumed themselves to be incarnations of God, or like Eon (died in prison 1148), referred the phrase per eum, qui venturus est judicare vivos et mortuos ("through him who is to come to judge the quick and the dead") to themselves; or again witness such strange and gloomy phenomena as the rise of the brotherhood of flagellants.

Early Christianity was strongly impregnated with these mystical elements, and the cause of this was surely to a great extent the
firm belief in the approaching end of the world and the miraculous establishment of a glorious kingdom of God, when all unrighteousness, all social and political injustice, under which those times were severely suffering, would be for ever crushed.

In order to give a clear proof that Christianity at its origin was strongly eschatological in character and that the new belief was intended only for that time, we must pass in review those passages which clearly pronounce this. In doing so I shall proceed in historical order, giving first the earlier and dominant views of the eschatological hopes, and closing with those passages occurring in the later books (historically considered) of the New Testament, which because the earlier expectations were not fulfilled either discard them altogether, or if they speak of the last days, speak of the circumstances introducing them in a different way from the earlier writers: yes, in the latest books the doubt is even met in Christian circles that because the expectation that the end was near has not been fulfilled, there will be no end at all.

I will insert here the almost superfluous remark that the eschatological passages have originated from the quite general expectation prevalent among the Jews of the first century which was based upon a false interpretation of the book of Daniel as shown in my article “The Successive Stages of the Jewish Idea of the Kingdom of God” (Open Court, October, 1911).

It may also be superfluous to repeat here, that no twistings whatever of all the interpreters up to our time in the effort generally to spiritualize the term “Kingdom of God,” “Kingdom of Heaven,” as meaning a state of the soul, or the glad tidings of the Christian doctrine of salvation, can evade the original meaning of the eschatological passages, even if a spiritual ethical meaning of that form may be attached to such passages as Romans xiv. 17; 1 Cor. iv. 20 or Luke xvii. 21. The original meaning of that term is based on Daniel ii and vii, which speak of the final kingdom of God coming from heaven to destroy all previous kingdoms of the earth.

The teaching of John the Baptist, the stern preacher of repentance, is that this kingdom and its judgment are near, and Jesus follows him with the same note in the beginning of his preaching. But while these statements do not mention a definite date, Jesus proceeds to more particular statements, according to the Synoptics, saying that the end will come before the generation then living will

1 Any one interested in the efforts of interpretational acrobatics to get around the plain meaning of the eschatological passages will find numerous examples in the commentaries. It is a sad example of the unhistorical if not untruthful sense of the church.
have passed away (Matt. xxiv. 34; Mark xiii. 30; Luke xxi. 32); that there are some standing about him who will not see death, before the kingdom will come (Mark iv. 1); that his disciples will not even finish their preaching in the cities of Israel before the end will come (Matt. x. 23). The Synoptics further incorporate in their writings an apocalyptic document (in Mark xiii. 7-8, 14-20, 24-27, 30-31, called by critics "the small Apocalypse" and probably written during the last stages of the Jewish war and about the time of the destruction of the city), which reports Jesus to have predicted that event and that immediately after it (Matt. xxiv. 29) the end would come. Luke who incorporates the same document in his gospel, because the end did not come right away, assumes an interval between the destruction of the city and the end and says: "Jerusalem will be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (xxi. 24). Thereupon he says (verse 27): "then will come the Son of Man" preceded by cosmic signs, etc. (verse 25). According to Luke's expectation also therefore the end was soon to come.

Paul, who wrote his epistles (speaking of course here of the authentic ones) before the destruction of the city, clearly expresses his expectation that the end was near. Yes, he even expects to live to see it (1 Cor. xv. 52). Paul is so firmly convinced of the truth of his belief, that he calls it a mystery, i.e., a divine secret revealed to him (1 Cor. xv. 51). This is the meaning of the word "mystery" with Paul in other connections (compare Rom. xi. 25). He is firmly convinced that not all of his readers (including himself) will die but many will be transfigured. Those who shall have died, he says, will first be awakened at the blast of the final trumpet and then "we" will be transfigured. The same is stated in 1 Thess. iv. 16-17 with the addition: "Then we living and surviving will be snatched up with them (those awakened) in the clouds etc." To his Roman readers he reveals the other divine secret (Rom. xi. 25), namely that his own people, the Jews, had partly been hardened "until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." Then also the whole of Israel will be saved. Paul, like Luke, had an extremely limited knowledge of the extent of our globe; he naturally expected all this to happen soon.

In 1 Cor. xvi. 22, we have another proof of Paul's belief. In

2 The Greek γενέα in these passages never meant anything like "the Jewish people," "the human race," etc. as traditional interpretation would make us believe. This is an entirely unjustifiable interpretation of the grammatical meaning of the word.

χαύ θέου; Mark. xiii. 26, τότε.
zealous emotion he writes at the close of his letter: "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be devoted to destruction, Maranatha." This Aramaic expression means, "Our Lord is come," that he is near. The Hebrew preterite often has this meaning of something yet in the future but in fact near at hand, especially in asseverations.

In 1 Cor. x speaking of what had happened to the disobedient Israelites in the desert, he says (verse11): "This is written for us as an admonition, to whom the end of the world has come."

2 Cor. v. 4, though not speaking of the end of the world, nevertheless also corroborates Paul's expectation, for the apostle expresses in that passage, written from out of the remembrance of his fatiguing labors on which he dwells so much in this letter, the fervent wish not first to feel the pangs of death but to be transformed at the appearance of the Lord. In Phil. iii. 21, written in his captivity, this fervent wish seems again to have risen in Paul's mind to the former firm conviction of what would become of his body. It must have been especially consoling to him at a time when he was uncertain about the outcome of his captivity. He says: "The Lord will transform our lowly body, etc." (he does not speak of his dead body).

In 2 Thessalonians (even if it is not accepted as of Pauline authorship) we still have the earlier belief of Christianity expressed, that the final coming of God's kingdom will be preceded by an individual in whom evil will become incarnate. The language describing this individual is borrowed from the description in the book of Daniel of Antiochus Epiphanes, the one-time arch-enemy of God's people. After the destruction of that individual likewise (as was said of Antiochus E.) God's kingdom will appear Still no hint is definitely given as to who this individual may be, though from the obscure oracular language of the passage, and what we otherwise know of early Jewish and Christian views in this matter, a personality from the Roman government is hinted at.

The Apocalypse of John is more outspoken. In spite of all mythical language taken from more ancient and syncretistic pagan myths in which the book of Revelation is clothed, references to the history of the times are plain. Besides other plain hints mentioned in my article cited above and also in "The Number of the Beast" (Open Court, April 1909) in accord with other unprejudiced scholars, the references to "the great city having dominion over the kingdoms of the earth" (Rev. xvii. 18), and to the woman clothed in crimson sitting on a beast with seven heads, whose "seven heads are the seven hills, whereupon the woman sits" (Rev. xvii. 9), are so clear
that there ought no longer be any doubt that the book of Revelation points to contemporary Roman history. And even if the explanations of Revelation drawn from contemporary Roman history are not perhaps well founded in every case, still this fact stands out plainly that the Apocalypse is as definite and outspoken in its announcements of the approaching end of the world as any other book of the New Testament. The book declares right from the start that it is to reveal what will happen shortly (verse 1) and that “the time is at hand” (verse 3). After repeated utterances of this kind it closes with the words of the Lord himself: "Surely I come quickly," to which the answer is given: "Yea, come, Lord Jesus."

The letter to the Hebrews (of unknown authorship) also expects a speedy coming of the last day. After stating (i. 2) that "God has spoken to us in the last days" (namely the last world-period); that he had "suffered at the completion of the times" (ix. 26), it admonishes the readers to a steadfast and holy life, "and so much the more as the day is approaching;" i. e., the last day (x. 25) and because "there is yet a very very little while," the coming one will come and not tarry” (x. 37).

With the Fourth Gospel and the epistles attributed to John we come to a different stage of the eschatological idea. 1 John ii. 16 still speaks of "the last hour" being at hand, but while the Synoptics bring the end of the world in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem, and the Apocalypse, presumably also 2 Thessalonians, expects the incarnation of evil (the individual Antichrist) to arise from the Roman empire, the writer of this letter sees the sign of the last times in the arising of many Antichrists (ii. 18), under the form of heretics coming from the midst of the Christians themselves, who deny that Jesus was the Christ and that Christ had appeared in the flesh. The Docetae, to whom reference is very probably made, taught that the Aeon, i. e. Christ, as they expressed it, had not really appeared in the flesh, but only in a seeming body. This, says the writer, is the nature of the Antichrist. Similarly Polycarp (Ep. ad Philippenses) says: "Every one who denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is Antichrist, and who does not confess the testimony of the cross is of the devil." We have here a transformation of the eschatological idea of original Christianity; it is the beginning of the formation of church dogma in opposition to heresy.

In the Fourth Gospel the idea that the end is near has been

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4 συντέλεια τῶν αἰώνων the same as τέλος.
5 μικρὸν ὅσον ὅσον.
6 ἐζ ἡμῶν ἐξήλθον.
entirely discarded, a very interesting fact in distinction from the Synoptics since this gospel seemingly pretends to give a historical statement with regard to the person of Jesus. But as the Jesus of this gospel is a pure abstraction and the divine Logos, it would not have been in place to attribute to him such an erroneous prediction as the coming of the end during the lifetime of the generation among whom Jesus himself lived. We notice the purpose—a sign that at the time this gospel was written the previous expectation that the end was near had not been fulfilled. This element was therefore discarded. It is only in the appendix to this gospel (xxi.) that the saying is attributed to Jesus concerning the pretended author of the gospel: “If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to thee (Peter)?” The notice then follows: “Therefore this saying went out among the brethren, that that disciple would not die.” We are all acquainted with the legend of ecclesiastical history, that John was only slumbering in his grave and by his breath moved the earth. The writer of the appendix has unwittingly (though otherwise the Fourth Gospel discards all expectation that the end is near) had in mind probably the saying of Jesus in the Synoptics: “There are some standing here, etc.” and has unconsciously testified again to the erroneous hope. The belief of the still living John, by the way, was truly Oriental. J. G. E. Falls in Three Years in the Lybian Desert (Freiburg, 1911) says that the Senussi (a Bedouin tribe of the oasis Siwa) believe that the sheik Sidi Mahdi, who died 1902, still lives.

In the pseudepigraphic second epistle of Peter the doubts of scoffers that there will be an end must be met. They say (iv. 4): “Where is the promise of his coming? For since the time the fathers fell asleep, everything remains as from the beginning of creation.” The erroneousness of the expectation of original Christianity was clearly felt in Christian circles. The writer of the epistle feels it himself, but he explains the nonfulfilment of that expectation as being founded in the clemency of the Lord, “who does not wish that any be lost, but that all may turn to repentance” (verse 9).

The prime object of original Christianity, in spite of its erroneous expectation, was an ethical one, and we need not seek for any other secret of its origin. We may not consider the motive behind the ethics of original Christianity a very high one and may agree with Schweitzer in his Von Reimarus bis Wrede in calling the ethics of Jesus “interimistic,” i. e., intended only for the short interval remaining before the end. Still the object of original Christianity, in striving to awaken self-reform and repentance from evil ways and to offer a means of salvation to the repentant in the belief of a
Saviour, must undoubtedly be admitted to be an ethical redemptory purpose; and in this Christianity simply followed in the wake of more ancient religious faiths. The so-called Orphic faiths, from whose terrible descriptions of the torments of the wicked in Hades such Christian works as the Apocalypse of Peter of the second century have taken their shocking and extended representations of hell, according to Dieterich in his Nékya, besides other Greek "Mysteries," aimed at the same purpose as original Christianity, namely to awaken repentance and self-reform and to offer redemptory means. The well-known passage in Plato's Republic, where he speaks of mendicant prophets going around to offer means of redemption and producing Orphic books, has been cited in former issues of The Open Court, if I am not mistaken, by some writers, and I need not repeat it here. Dr. Conybeare is right when he says: "We make a mistake if we think, that the awful shadow of the belief in hell was not cast across the human mind long before the birth of Christianity. On the contrary it is a survival from the most primitive stage of our intellectual and moral development. The mysteries of the old Greek and Roman world were intended as modes of propitiation and atonement, by which to escape from these all-besetting terrors, and Jesus the Messiah was only the last and best of the lutherioi theoi, i. e., redeeming gods. In the dread of death and in the belief in the eternal terrors of hell, which pervaded men's minds, a few philosophers excepted, Christianity had a point d'appui, without availing itself of which it would not have made a single step towards the conquest of men's minds." The old Persian religion in calling Zarathustra "the healer of life" who is destined to heal again the life of mankind made sick by the evil demons of sin, as its later daughter Mithraism with its ascetic and rigorous practices, aimed at the same ethical redemptory purpose as original Christianity. The same must be said of Buddhism. In the Lalitavistara (I, 1 and I, 2) Buddha is called "the King of physicians." It says of him: "Thou true physician, experienced in healing, place thou the long suffering ones soon by means of threefold redemption into the blessedness of Nirvana." Thus we find the same prime object of original Christianity in more ancient forms of religion that of an ethical, redemptory purpose. The strong eschatological element of Christianity connected with this purpose, was also an element of the religion of Zarathustra, Mithraism and Stoicism, all of which believed in cycles at the end of which the destruction of the world would come and a new era. Christianity perhaps only differed from these beliefs in that it felt so certainly and definitely that the end was near, and this expectation marks it as
being intended only for the time of its origin without any idea whatever of a religion intended to go down into history for 1800 years. Original Christianity could not have any such idea or any such foresight into the far future. The Roman empire had to appear to the first Christians as the last empire, because it was reigning over the whole world as they thought. The succession of ancient world-empires seemed to have exhausted itself in the last, the Roman empire. There was no idea, at the utmost but a very hazy one, of great realms beyond the Roman world.

The eschatological ideas of original Christianity, like those of physical punishment for evil doers after death and of blessings of the new heaven and the new earth for the repentant and saved, are exploded once for all. Nobody, except those who still follow the old method of trying to determine on the basis of the Apocalypse and other parts of the Bible, just when the end is coming, is concerned about that time any more, not even the orthodox. From science we know that the worlds of the universe do not come to an end so fast, and that our earth may yet exist many cycles of time. Similarly we know punishment in a future life can no longer be conceived in the old way of excruciating physical pains. Whatever may be the ideas about the state of the individual after death, all will agree that a disembodied spirit, if individuality would continue in this way, could not be punished by physical torments in a limited locality in the underworld.

There is no question that just the explosion of the ancient ideas of the end of the world and of future punishment have contributed more than anything else to a disbelief in Christianity in modern times and also to relax morality with the majority. Still the moral maxims of Jesus and original Christianity, which in spite of all contrary assertions are the same maxims—even those of the highest order—as those taught by other ancient moral and religious teachers (for Jesus taught nothing essentially new) these moral maxims still remain in their full value and can not be sinned against without evil consequences. And here we find that the ancient motive of fear of evil consequences, expressed in the idea of a future retribution, shows itself as strong as ever. While the lower moral type of man, even if he no longer believes in hell, is restrained from evil deeds by fear of temporal punishment administered by law, and a higher moral type is restrained from immorality and vice by the fear of losing self-respect, reputation and honor among fellow-men, social standing and position, livelihood, or by the fear of bodily and mental ills attendant upon vice, etc., even the highest moral type of man is kept from
doing wrong by the fear of losing his inner happiness and bliss, even
if he is not governed by any fear of external consequences. It is
hard to see that any ethics can be anything else but eudemonistic or
not be guided by fear in some way or other. In order to bring every
individual to the highest moral type—for before this is accomplished
the general happiness of mankind will be little advanced—the doc-
trine of good or evil consequences in the soul of every man following
right- or wrong-doing, with the aim of arousing fear in this respect,
must be as strongly preached now as it was in original Christianity.
There is no more danger that such preaching will not tend to develop
the highest qualities of ethics, than the preaching of the fear of
judgment in original Christianity precluded the demands of genuine
forgiveness, mercy, charity and love.

Even the eschatological element of original Christianity, that
the end of the world is fast approaching with its judgment for the
individual and general humanity, will always retain its truth, though
not in an external physical reality as antiquity accepted it, yet a real-
ity nevertheless. Every individual is constantly nearing the end of
his existence where an inner judgment will declare to him whether
he has made his life a life of worth to himself or not and whether
he leaves blessings or curses behind him. Likewise the life of whole
generations or nations is constantly nearing periods in which their
own verdict will declare whether they have lived a life of worth to
themselves or not and whether they will leave blessings or curses
behind them, for as Schiller says, Die Weltgeschichte ist das Welt-
gericht ("The world's history is the world’s judgment"). These
seem to be commonplaces, but they nevertheless must be repeated
again and again. Such final periods do not seem to be as vivid real-
ities as under the external aspect in which the ancient mind conceived
them, but they are as real and ought to be to the human mind as
vivid. That they do not appear vivid enough to the general human
mind is only a sign that the truly ethical and religious spirit is yet
far from being fully developed and therefore needs a continual deep-
ening and an inculcation of the idea that the spiritual life of mankind
is as much an actual reality with an inner purpose in the life of the
cosmos as is the life of the latter appearing to the outer senses.