

RELIGION IN A MONISTIC INTERPRETATION.

BY THE EDITOR.

MANKIND has passed through a period of dualism, but the spirit of scientific investigation has more and more firmly established a unitary world-conception commonly called monism, and at present in monistic circles the tendency prevails to combat dualistic notions and the practical applications drawn therefrom. Many ardent monists go too far in this direction; they see a dualism where the nomenclature still suggests it, and so their efforts are sometimes like Don Quixote's fight with the windmills. The victory of the unitary world-conception is practically complete, and the time has come to understand the paramount significance of the subtler, higher and so-called spiritual relations of nature, to appreciate the superiority and dignity of thought, of man's intellectual, moral and religious aspirations.

It goes without saying that all phenomena of life belong to the all-comprehensive domain of nature. The spirit of man is not a foreign importation from extramundane spheres, but develops right from the roots of all existence,¹ and is as much subject to natural law as are physical phenomena, yet nobody who has given any thought to the matter will deny that the spiritual life of man is far more important than purely physical happenings. If it is but understood that the whole realm of existence constitutes a unity we need not be afraid to emphasize both the paramount significance and the unquestionable superiority of the intellectual in life. In fact a true monism would not be complete without understanding and rightly appreciating the higher phases of life and their proper place in the system of the universe. Spiritual life is by no means an accidental

¹ For a brief explanation of these and kindred problems see the author's *Philosophy of Form* which has appeared in German under the title *Die Philosophie der Wissenschaft*, in French under the title *Philosophie comme science*, and of which an Italian translation is now on the press (Formaggini, Genoa, Italy).

by-play. It reveals to us the meaning of the cosmos, and to grasp this meaning is the task of religion, philosophy and science.

It is a poor principle of fanatic radicals to condemn religion as a mere invention of priestcraft. Religion is the precursor of philosophy and finally also of science. It is true that the religious development of mankind passes from the crudest notions of animism and kindred superstitions to higher, purer and more scientific views. But so does philosophy, so does science. Religion in its inmost being is nothing but a popular philosophy applied to practical life. The nucleus of every religion is a world-conception so simply outlined that even unthinking masses can comprehend its significance and follow the rules of conduct derived therefrom. Religion has passed through many phases and the end of its development is not yet. We must not forget that religion is the result of a search for truth, and that the actual forms of religion which we meet in different countries and in different ages are the temporary precipitates of this function of the human mind. It is noticeable that in contrast to philosophies they presuppose social interaction, and their products always represent views of whole communities where the opinions of leading personalities are mere factors, not final results.

A comprehension and a study of the development of religion is an essential feature of a scientific world-conception, and therefore it will not do to reject religion offhand as a conglomeration of superstitions. The importance of this view becomes the more apparent since religious life is developing even now, and modern science is molding and reforming the traditional beliefs as they are embodied in the churches of to-day. There is no need to fight the superstitions of the dogmatic formulation of the dead creeds of present-day religion, for the dogmas and a belief in their letter are nowadays no longer of great consequence. It is much better to study the origin of the great religions, to learn to understand the laws of religious development under the guidance of the facts of comparative religion, and to appreciate the meaning of dogmas by digging out what might be called the philosophy of religion. In following this plan we find that many religions which are often mutually contradictory in their dogmas express the same fundamental ideas if we but understand the spirit that has begotten them.

For instance the similarities between Christianity and Buddhism are obvious even to a most superficial consideration, but if we comprehend the original interpretation of the leading ideas, the several religions shall in the end be found to forestall views of a tenable scientific world-conception. Thus the God-idea embodies

the theory of authority. It means this world is not a chaotic medley but a law-ordained whole. The course of evolution shows a definite aim. It is not planned by a designer after the fashion of human conceits but is due to an intrinsic necessity, and we may be sure that the same norms of morality, the same advance from lower to higher stages and the rise to a higher and higher plane will obtain in all planets on which life develops and where rational beings appear and are living communal lives.

Remember this, that all religions teach in one form or another the cultivation of the ideal. There is hero-worship which helps to incite the growing generation to strain all their efforts in the cause of the good. This aspiration has found expression in the belief in a god-man, in avatars, in the incarnation of divinities whether personal or impersonal, in realizing a superior type of manhood, and so forth. So it is noticeable that the Christ-ideal in the church has been a living factor which molded the Christian world and inspired its representative leaders. This Christ-ideal is by no means stable. We may trace the errors of the successive world-conceptions in its changes from century to century, and whether or not the traditional Christianity will be able to maintain itself depends exclusively upon the adaptability of church life to the new demands. What does the idea of a god-man mean but the truth that human reason, human aspirations, human morality are but an enthusiasm to lead a life of the whole, which means to have the world-order incorporated in our own very being? And truly, what is reason, the gist of the human in man, other than the world-order incarnated in a living sentient being? If this world-order is the divinity of the universe, what is man, every man, but a child of God, and the ideal man but the actualization of perfection? The man in whom the norm of right conduct has become realized is the god-man, or as Christians say, the Christ; as the Buddhists say, the Buddha; as the Taoists say, the superior man; as the Persians say, the Mithras; etc.

When the religious superstitions are pointed out to us we should remind the enemies of religion that many superstitions had to be overcome also in other phases of the intellectual life of mankind. The eradication of superstitions in the domain of science is by no means as yet complete. We must have patience with science and its errors, why should we not have patience with religion and its shortcomings? Here is one of the greatest tasks of mankind, and here the religious leaders will find a large field. "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few," and the work ought to be done, not in contempt of religious traditions but in sympathy

with them. The very principle of evolution teaches us that we must build upon the past to develop higher forms of life, of institutions, of ideals. Instead of being satisfied with a mere tearing down, we ought to build up, and if with our own aspirations we expect to find recognition we must not denounce our fathers—or, generally, our remoter ancestors—as villains, hypocrites and frauds. Religion originated in response to an inborn want, the desire to know the truth and to live the truth—in a word, to do our duty. No doubt our fathers have erred, but they were inspired by an anxiety to do right; let us criticise them with reverence. Let us honestly and energetically take up our duties of building higher and higher.