

THE EVOLUTIONARY FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH.

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I.

WILL the Church survive? Will Christianity itself survive? It all depends. The answer to the first question depends on the Church itself. If the Church survives, that will be because it so adjusts itself to the evolutionary needs of humanity, as these are more and more clearly apprehended, as to merit and to win continuous voluntary support. The answer to the second question depends upon what is meant by Christianity. If the name is understood merely as a meaningless synonym for "western civilization," as people commonly use words, and if western civilization adjusts itself to the demands of evolution, then the name Christianity may be expected to persist, but actually as a misnomer: the distinguishing features, that once made our civilization true to the name, will have disappeared. But if tradition-serving ecclesiasticism and sectarianism persist in asserting the meaning historically and etymologically denoted by the name Christianity, we may expect men to revolt against the name and discard it, even though western civilization continues. The survival of the mere name, on the one hand, will connote no gain; its disappearance, on the other hand, will be no sign of loss. For by that time we may expect a respectable minority of men to understand the psychology by which the Jew Jesus was made out to have become a supernatural Christ; to know that transcendental, other-world belief is not a motive but only a sanction of conduct, and an erroneous one at that; and that however far men may stray from the evolutionary highway, misled by the glaring bill-boards of an erroneous cultural tradition, their prime and essential affiliations are of this world and with their fellow men. The problem of supreme importance for man is continuously to provide that the human species itself may persist upon earth:

and only as it ministers helpfully and directly in the species struggle for a continued life upon earth has the Church, or Christianity, or what we call western civilization, or any institution in the life of man any claim upon a right to perpetuity. The human evolutionary process demands some such institution as the Church. Our established institutions of secular education cannot suffice; their work is not extended to all, nor far beyond the limits of youth. The press cannot meet the need; the personal and the social touch are necessary. The Church of the present cannot fill the breach, its vision distorted by a mythological idealism that is a mere travesty of man's real impulses. If the Church does not awake and adjust itself to the need, we may expect some other institution to develop, out of the very needs of men, to supplant it.

11.

The Church, like the Sabbath, was made for man; and, like the Sabbath, it was made by man to satisfy unidentified impulses and needs that the current social order brought to consciousness and set men to trying to interpret. But considerable critical thinking has been done since the Man of Nazareth lived and propounded his social program for the satisfaction of these needs—a program that lacked the scientific data and presuppositions to keep its logical implications within the scope of the real world, a program which his followers misconceived and misinterpreted to suit their own preconceived purposes in the founding of the Church. And our present-day philosophies of life, in so far as their authors go to the life process itself for their data and not to theological misinterpretations of previous misinterpretations of the impulses of life, represent a greatly changed conception of those needs, even from that of Jesus.

Jesus lived and taught among a down-trodden people, in an age of cruel economic exploitation, when his race and economic stratum saw no hopeful outlook for themselves in this world. In his attitude Jesus himself was not of this hopeless mass. He felt and taught the essential oneness of humanity, as had the great author of the Book of Jonah before him. His message embodied an equal measure of rights and of possible hopefulness for all the units of his regard, namely, for all *individuals* of all degrees, and of all races. Living before the discovery of man's evolutionary backgrounds, as he did, his philosophy had none of that direct reference of distant social and racial futurity that would have

satisfied the desires of all normal men regarding a future life; and he was too much interested in men's lives in this world to give much attention to that imaginary, mythical afterworld in which his disciples located their chief interest. Like them, he apparently felt convinced of man's increasing wickedness, and therefore of an approaching "end of the world." His altruism, expressed in the Golden Rule, took account only of men's lateral, social relationships, as individual creatures of one flesh and blood. It was a "saving" philosophy, calculated to stay the supposedly inevitable disintegration; it was not a positive, constructive program intended to build a social order that would persist because of its own vitality. While it presupposed for all races of men a derivation from a common source, yet the course of their descent it represented as not of a progressive but of a degenerative character. It embodied no account or even intimation of an evolutionary past, of the responsibility of each generation for as many as possible to succeed it, and therefore of an earthly species future evermore to be achieved, complementary to the evolutionary past that we know about.

Jesus apparently shared with his followers a belief in an afterworld. Otherwise they would hardly have followed him; their most cherished interests and convictions would hardly have found satisfactory confirmation in his teachings. But whereas his prime interest was in man's lateral, social rights and obligations in this world, his socially less hopeful followers, both in his own and in succeeding generations, centered their interests and hopes in a mythical, transcendental world beyond the grave. Because of the social injustice and oppression to which they were subjected, and for which they could discern no relief in this world, they were glad to believe that for exemplifying the kind of social righteousness urged by their Master in this world, there would be a compensation in that suppositious afterworld, which would be an effectual turning of the tables upon the oppressors of the weak everywhere—a belief too selfish and vindictive to find favor with him, but one that through all the succeeding centuries has been used to reconcile the exploited of earth to their own exploitation. The teachings of Jesus appealed to certain men of his day, as to like men ever since, not because they were true, but because they were easily interpretable in terms of what those particular men wanted to be true. Satisfaction of desire is never an evidence of truth; it can never be other than an evidence of a more or less near approach, direct or indirect, to adequate and truthful interpretation of *the impulse to that desire*. The desire for continuity of life, which Christian theology has satisfied with

the promise of a mythical, "spiritual" afterlife for the individual, finds its natural and proper satisfaction in the promise of an endless line of succeeding generations in which the desirer's own values shall continue to function on the side of species continuity. For belief in such a future world, an extension of the racial life far beyond any given generation, there is abundant foundation of fact. Satisfaction with this foundation and its promise for the future, however, can be no more than a confirmatory sanction of the reinterpretation of life therein embodied. Even here satisfaction can not be accepted as proof. Proof belongs to the intellect, sanction or confirmation to feeling. But just as a blotting of the race off the earth is the greatest calamity of which man can dream, so is the certainty of a continued life, by whatever social order this may best be achieved, his most cheering prospect.

But the conception of an evolution of the species, covering millions of years in the past, with the complementary conception of as many millions of years for the species yet to live upon earth, was not then possible either for Jesus or for his disciples. Whereas we to-day can discern life to be a matter not only of individual, nor yet of merely institutional, or national, or racial, but of really earth-wide species import for all time to come, it was by the early Christians conceived in terms of the individual. And therefore the impulse to continuity of life was by them interpreted in terms of the individual as an independent, self-existent entity with a finality of worth in himself. Instead of relating their interests in the future to such a new social order as would assure a still further future, a future to be achieved by social cooperation on an earth-wide scale, they deferred the consummation of these hopes and interests to a mystical, "spiritual," mythical existence beyond the event of death.

But between the world of the flesh and that other world was a great gulf that needs must be bridged. Removal of sensuous and logical contradictions between the notions held of these two worlds led to the conception of a non-substantial, immaterial existence, which scientifically and logically amounts to mere nothingness. Yet the feelings associated with the inherent impulse to continuity of life led men to accept and cling to this as a reality, in an unreasoning hope that it was nevertheless, in some sort of incomprehensible way, a real existence. The blind hope of a continued existence led to the blind, uncritical faith that the hope might and must have a substantial basis, and that existence itself some sort of substantial content. Then the desire for such a faith led to an assertion of

that faith, the more vociferous as the grounds of the hope appeared the less substantial. The hope, in that individualistic form of its assertion, was declared to be of itself evidence for that particular mode of fulfilment. The asserted faith was itself insisted upon as in fact the very substance of the thing hoped for. There was naturally no conception that future knowledge might so elucidate the nature of human earthly existence that this same impulse to continuity of life might be satisfied with a different interpretation: but for mutual confirmation and encouragement in this forlorn hope that they so ardently wished to entertain, men banded together and organized themselves into an institution which should some time so compel all men to join in the affirmation that none might be left to raise or suggest a doubt to disturb their unsubstantiated assurance. In whatsoever way they rationalized their action, men's chief motive in founding the Church was the desire to maintain in undisturbed comfort the precarious interpretation that they had made of their impulse to achieve a continued life.

And so we find the Church to-day supposing that its existence depends upon its assertion of this more and more precarious hope, in which men are constantly losing interest because of their greater socialization and humanization. But the motive to this supposition so strenuously held is as ever the desire not to give up this particular form of belief, because no other so satisfying interpretation of men's impulse to live has yet been presented to take its place. The Church—or, rather, the ecclesiastical element within it—fears a “phobia of disbelief” *in its own tenets*, on the myopic assumption that there can be no better, and therefore no more satisfying, form of belief. If it continues to assert this hope, in which men are rationally losing faith and interest, and if it thus continues trying to perform an impossible service, a merely suppositious service where no need is felt, it requires no seer to predict its end. The Church has not adjusted itself to the evolutionary process. Because of its leaders' fears for its integrity as an institution, partly because it is the source of their social and economic support, they have made it so to dominate men's minds as to keep them from discerning the nature and function of the process itself. Because of their insistence in season and out of season upon the ideas of soul and afterworld, they have kept themselves and all men in a blind alley where they could not discern their true nature. But those of each succeeding generation were born in this alley and brought up in fear of transgressing its confines. How then can they be blamed? If the Church survives, that will be because it outgrows its ecclesiasticism, discards

its mythological transcendentalism, and accepts itself as an institution whose fundamental concern is with such services within the evolutionary process as will give most rational grounds for hope of species continuity.

III.

Will Christianity itself survive? But what is Christianity? One is not accepted as being necessarily or essentially a Christian, who habitually and rationally accepts the historicity of Jesus as a great social and ethical teacher of Galilee nineteen hundred years ago. To be accredited a Christian one must accept the web of rationalizing myth by which the physical Jesus was made out to have become a metaphysical Messiah, or Christ, or Anointed. The use of the words Christ and Christian always implies an acceptance of this myth. It was for the purpose of making this myth more plausible and acceptable to the unscientific minds of the long ago that the slender thread of relationship between the real Jesus and the mythical Christ was invented and embodied in the story of Mary Magdalene anointing the feet of Jesus. Whether or not the incident was an actual occurrence, the primary interest in the story of it came from a misinterpretation and misapplication of such Old Testament passages as Ps. xlv. 7, Is. lxi. 1, and Dan. ix. 24. Essential Christianity, as interpreted by its ecclesiasticized interpreters, is a civilization which not only accepts the historicity of Jesus as a great prophet of social righteousness and admits in theory the essential righteousness of his ethical code, but one which accepts also and chiefly the story of his resurrection, and therefore the story of his anointing, and all the other stories that in the course of a century grew up by suggestion from misunderstood Old Testament passages, out of the effort to make him appear a plausible fulfilment of a gradually misinterpreted hope of the denationalized Jewish people. If this belief be insisted upon as the test of Christianity, while the name itself may continue to persist as the name of Occidental civilization, that name will in no long time be wholly a misnomer, because men will have outgrown the belief. The much better civilization that will some day be built up about the concept of evolution and its meaning, while it will incidentally embody the essential social teachings of Jesus—and that not because he taught them, but because they approach a scientific application of the evolutionary meaning of life itself—will not at all be truthfully subsumed under the name of Christianity. But, then, what do we care for the name? It is the thing itself that counts, by whatever

name it is called. Only, one does like to hear things called by names that are apposite and true.

IV.

And what will be the nature of that better, that evolutionary, or racial, civilization? It is not enough to discern and to insist that our present civilization admits of change, and to interpret that change as progress. The question to ask is whether the change in each case better supports the fundamental life process.

It is common to draw invidious contrasts between the natural, or real, and the ideal. The natural is often regarded as base, uninspired. The ideal, in which man pays peculiar compliments to himself as the only rational creature of earth and as being therefore in some way supernaturally endowed, is supposed to be lofty, anti-natural, supernatural. This fetching compliment man uses to set himself off from the rest of earth's creatures, so that he feels justified in treating them quite as suits his own selfish purposes and convenience; and with it also he sets himself above his fellows who prove unable to follow him through all the mazes of his selfish rationalizing. As if intellect were the be-all and the end-all of human reality and existence, and not a means to an end, developed out of the evolutionary experience of the race! As if reason did not often follow a straight course and yet reach wholly wrong conclusions, because its presuppositions had been wrong! To urge that man should live true to natural law, that he should fulfil his true nature, that he not only admit his past evolution but that he make his future history true to the immanent laws of existence, which make for an endless species life—this is supposed not to be in good taste; it would be "a retrograde movement in morals," "a reversion to type"! Most particularly is it resented by those individuals and self-appointed leaders, the borderland scouts of conservative traditionalism who profit economically and socially by their position in our various "civilized" institutions.

Men have been very slow to discern the meaning and implications of evolution. Because of ecclesiasticism's preemption of interest in the future, which it long ago misinterpreted in terms of individual destiny beyond the grave, the evolutionary interest has been almost wholly concentrated upon the past—upon the "ascent" and the "descent" of man, upon his lateral relationships to the rest of the organic world, and upon the formal nature of the evolutionary process itself. Because the thing there seized upon as most significant was the fact of evolution, development, progress, the evolu-

tionary interest in the future has been quite wholly concerned with "progress." And because of the traditional interest in the individual, progress has been conceived in terms of individual efficiency, and its culmination in a race of imaginary supermen, "a coherent universe-process of interacting spirits advancing to ever higher attainments." Furthermore, because that evolutionary progress has been chiefly expressed in terms of the physical, in terms of man's increasing control over his physical environment, his rational capacity being still regarded by the great majority as supernatural, the scientific and philosophic interest in evolution is even to-day confined to the almost wholly academic problem of the acquisition and transmission of acquired characteristics. Men fail to discern that human self-control has been a necessary prerequisite to control of nature, and that every new control of nature must also be a matter of self-control, both in the interest of its acquisition and in that of its right use. There has seldom been a more conspicuous case of gaping for a camel and swallowing a gnat than is exemplified in the total results of the study of heredity as applied to man; and seldom a more conspicuous case of straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel than the biologist's acceptance of the mythological doctrine of souls. The extenuating explanation of his plight is the fact that ecclesiasticism had already got him thoroughly indoctrinated with this belief before he had yet dreamed of becoming a scientist. It is hard indeed to slough off deeply ingrained folkways of acting and thinking.

But the most significant thing in the past history of man, as of other species, is not the fact of progress, however marvelous all this may appear. Progress is secondary and incidental to that most significant thing, which is the fact that the phyla that have become man and all the humbler species have actually achieved continuity of life through perhaps a hundred million years. As the really significant thing to discern in the evolutionary past is perpetuity of life through many millions of years, chiefly through responsiveness to sensory stimuli and to blind, organic impulse, so should our interest in the present and future of humanity be an interest in the perpetuity of the species itself. If the human phylum was so long successful without intelligence, and if since the development of intelligence and reason it has been so successful in spite of ignorance and selfishness, who is to say that with its dawning world-wide social intelligence it may not achieve as long a span of life in the future as it already has in the past?

Here, then, we discern what must be the concern and spirit of

that better civilization which is certainly destined to supplant ours of to-day. Its standard of evaluations will not be traditional ideas or beliefs, or compliance with social or institutional forms, but an ideal of perpetuity for the human race. This will be our new humanism. It will discern that man does not live to progress, but progresses as the basic condition of a continued species life; and its concern for this fundamental evolutionary ideal will direct it in its decisions regarding the nature of progress, of good and evil, of social organization and activities. Here will be found a new and really scientific basis for practical ethics. Moreover, here will be allowed the greatest possible freedom for the individual, who will readily admit that he has no right or privilege to violate the demands of the species life, save as he sublimates one impulsion in terms of a higher, more helpful one for the species, and who will always have before him as a free field of liberty a choice of all the modes of service to the race that his capacity permits. How much greater freedom can one demand for himself? Where shall he find a greater stimulus to healthful living? Where shall he find more abundant happiness, the reward of well-living? Who will grieve to see the old order give place to the new?

v.

And, finally, what shall be the place of the Church in that new order? At first thought most persons will perhaps discern no place for it at all; it is so common an error to suppose that an institution depends for its continuity upon a maintenance of the forms, practices, and "principles" with which its founders and developers envisaged its meaning. The erroneous assumption has perhaps never been more succinctly stated than in Thomas Davidson's *Aristotle*: "An institution perishes when it abandons the principles on which it was founded and built up." And yet even here is left open a way for the Church to save its face and live. If it insists that its tenets regarding soul, forgiveness of sin, heaven, and all the rest of its individualistic and mythological philosophy are the grounds of its existence and therefore must be retained, its days are all but numbered. But if it insists that the basic principle of its founding, as of its historical continuity, was service to man, and that with the advance of knowledge a new conception and a reinterpretation of what constitutes real service has become necessary; if it will discard its old "revelations" as inadequate and will proceed to adapt itself to the new revelation extracted from the scientific examination of

man's history and nature, in that case it opens before itself a vista of service as broad as the surface of the earth and as long as the possible future of the race itself. Furthermore, in so doing it will be able to throw off the enormous incubus of myth and casuistry with which ecclesiasticism loaded it in its effort to save the shadow without admitting the substance of truth.

What adjustment, then, must the Church make in order to become true to the spirit of evolution, and what is to be the service that it must render in its regenerated existence? The new thing to which it must adjust itself is the idea of, and the demand for, a practical earthly immortality of the human race. Out of this adjustment will arise as many problems as it ever attempted to solve, problems of which there will be no end for number, problems whose solution will be continuous with the life of the race, because each new generation must be oriented and prepared for its life work, and each generation of the elders must ever and anon have its knowledge extended and refreshed and its *faith* renewed. Such an adjustment will result in a practical, working identification of religion with life, a relationship which the Church has always asserted, but never convincingly, because it really knew neither term of the equation. Such an adjustment will put the Church in the way of rendering a positive, dynamic, intelligible service in the life of the race, instead of the incidental and ineffectual service that it has indirectly rendered, because it put a mythical interpretation upon it, in the past. It will array the Church positively upon the side of life and common humanity, as against privilege and the oppressors of the weak. Better, by revealing to all men their really innate humanity, it will remove the temptation to profiteering and oppression. It will make the Church the fighting champion of science and of every new application of knowledge that will redound to the betterment, and therefore happiness, of the human race. It will restore to humanity the office of prophet, which it all but lost when institutionalism gained the ascendancy in the life of the Hebrew race. It will change the current conception of life from that of a "struggle for existence" to one of a "cooperation for living," a continuously cooperative living of the life of the whole human race, to the end that it may never die.

The Church has not been mistaken in claiming for itself pre-eminence among human institutions, but only in its misinterpretation of man's need of it, and of the kind of preeminent function that it was called upon to perform. The error was wholly natural in the days of man's ignorance, but to-day man calls upon it to repent

of its old error and to set forth upon the right path. As it was man's institution in the beginning, so is it to-day, in spite of the ecclesiasticism that has always held it as preeminently a stronghold for propaganda recommending an existenceless world; and he will either mold it to his needs, now better discerned, or will supplant it with a better. It rests with the Church to decide which he shall do.