SOCRATES A FORERUNNER OF CHRISTIANITY.

BY THE EDITOR.

It is characteristic of the religious development of mankind that the ideal of a universal "lovingkindness" has been claimed as the essential characteristic of Christianity, but the truth is that the higher conception of ethics develops everywhere according to the law of evolution of religion and human civilization. The same maxim of requiting hatred with love was pronounced five hundred years before the Christian era by Lao Tze in China, four hundred years before Christ by Buddha, and simultaneously by Greek sages, among whom Socrates is the best known and most prominent in history. Thales of Miletus used to say, "Love thy neighbor and bear with little offences." Diogenes Laertius proposed as a principle of conduct this rule: "It is necessary to do good, to make the friend more friendly, and to change the hater into a friend." Pittacus said: "Forgiveness is better than vengeance," and Socrates forgave his enemies who had condemned him. He said in prison before he drank the hemlock: "I do not bear the least ill-will toward those who voted my death."

This spirit of lovingkindness penetrated even into the hedonistic school of Hellas to such an extent that Aristippus expressed his sentiment in the words, "Not to hate but to teach something better," meaning that haters should not be paid back in their own coin but by examples of kindness should be shown the nobler way.

The ideal of universal lovingkindness permeated the moral atmosphere of the age when Christianity originated. To be sure the masses of mankind did not follow the principle but the few select had recognized the ideal and practiced it.

Christianity now commonly conceived as the religion of love by no means originated as such. Its underlying idea is eschatological, which means that the primitive Christians expected the end of all things and proposed to be ready for the catastrophe. This appears
plainly in the speeches of Jesus himself and in the warning of St. Paul. According to the very words of Jesus the second advent of Christ was near at hand. He said:

"For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

"Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which
shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.” (Matt. xvi. 27, 28.)¹

Paul also presented this doctrine not as his private opinion but as the word of the Lord, believing that he himself with the converts he had made would live to see the day. Paul says:

“For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.” (1 Thess. iv. 15-17.)²

The trend of this primitive conception of Christianity is condensed in the concluding chapter of Revelations at the very end where we read: “He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly, Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”

The love of enemies is certainly mentioned in the New Testament, but it is incidental and Christianity in its competition with other opinions had to adopt and emphasize it more and more. How much the maxim of the love of enemies has been reinforced in Christian writings for the purpose of keeping abreast with competing philosophies and religious movements appears from the fact that the prayer of Jesus on the cross for his enemies is a later interpolation.

The older and Eastern manuscripts of the New Testament do not contain this passage, and it has crept in at a later stage of the development of the Christian Church. Prof. W. B. Smith of New

¹ For our present purpose it is quite indifferent whether or not these were the words of Jesus. The passage proves that this idea was imputed to Jesus by his followers and the passage must have been written in the first century at a very early date while some contemporaries of Jesus were still alive, for it is not probable that the second generation should have put this obvious error into the mouth of Jesus. The two passages, Mark ix. 1, Luke ix. 27, have no definite reference to the second advent and bear an interpretation that the coming of Christ in his power may simply mean the establishment of the Church.

² The context of the passage indicates that Paul in his epistle to the Thessalonians meets some criticisms of the congregation. He explains why some of the members had died, which presupposes that the doctrine of their remaining to the end of all things must have been made very prominent in his teachings. He comforts them on account of those who had died and so would not share in the meeting of the Lord on his second advent, promising that they should be first in the resurrection. The same doctrine is expressed in 1 Cor. xv. 51, 52, and here too it is plainly stated that some shall remain alive. In Cor. he mentions as a reason for the premature death of some Christians, the unworthy use of the Lord’s Supper.
THE OPEN COURT.

THE BUST OF SOCRATES.
Orleans, says in an article on "New Testament Criticism" published in the American Encyclopedia (p. 170):

"The zenith of moral sublimity, before which Rousseau justly exclaimed 'Socrates died like a philosopher, but Jesus like a God,' is attained in the prayer on the cross: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' Nevertheless, it is now bracketed by Lachmann and Westcott and Hort as a Western interpolation."

Socrates was a philosopher and to us is mainly known as such, but in the development of Greek civilization he was more, he was a moral teacher; and the impression which he left on the public mind, the stimulation which he gave to ethical ideals and the imposing personality of a man who lived according to the maxims which he preached, is incomparably more important than his logical, dialectic and specifically philosophical doctrines. He sealed his conviction by his death which he suffered in obedience to the decree of his state in dignified submission to the ordained social order although he did not recognize it as just.

The time came when Greek polytheism had run its race and a monotheistic conception began to spread. Several new religions competed for supremacy and among them Christianity grew quickly from insignificant beginnings into a world-wide movement that swept away, together with the old gods, the rival cults of Mithraism, reformed paganism, and gnosticism in its various forms. Much has been lost in this great cataclysm but the sublime ideal of a universal goodwill has been preserved. It was transferred upon the new ideal of the God-man, and so it was inserted into the Gospel.

Thus it came to pass that Socrates was a forerunner of Christ, and indeed he was part of the Christ spirit that was destined to come. Some features of his soul were incorporated into the history of the life of Jesus where they helped to build up that great ideal of a new era, the figure of Christ which is still exerting its power upon the present age.