

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

**Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea**

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

VOL. XXXIV (No. 6)

JUNE, 1920

NO. 769

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The Problem of Democracy

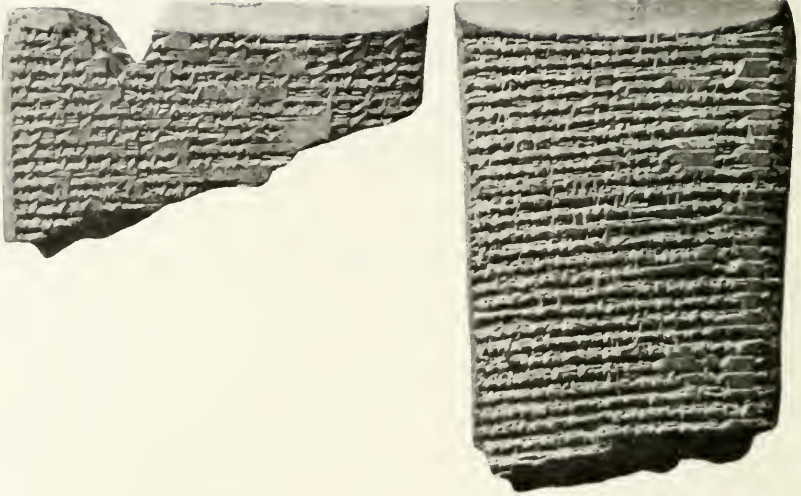
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THE CHALDEAN ACCOUNT OF THE CREATION.

Clay tablet, 650 B. C., British Museum. (By permission of the Trustees.)

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

With this thing so potent, so enduring, to which the Old Theology yet yields a half-hearted allegiance, the New Theology has broken forever. The leaders of this school assert, in Channing's noble words, that we are responsible, not for the rightness but for the uprightness of our opinions. They deny that there exists any external authority before which the consciences of men may be tried. Certain intellectual beliefs are, doubtless, a part of Christianity, but a man may reason honestly and yet mistakenly, therefore they refuse to condemn or pass judgment upon those who differ from them upon intellectual grounds alone.

It is this winsome tolerance, this fellow-feeling with those who differ, which appeals so powerfully to a great number of enlightened men to-day. No less strong an attraction is the sincerity of the new school. This, of course, is not without blemish in the case of individuals, but on the whole its followers exhibit an unwillingness to defend traditional doctrines merely because they are traditional, and a readiness to abandon preconceived opinions in the interest of truth which are indicative of mental honesty.

To represent the New Theology as faultless would be foolish and dishonest. The chief deficiency, that with which its orthodox opponents are so fond of reproaching it, is a lack of spirituality. This, however, is probably not the result of any doctrinal errors, but rather the natural consequence of the scientific method. With the exaltation of reason as the great solver of difficulties, the tendency almost inevitably arises to regard it as the Alpha and the Omega, and to approach every question as though it were a problem in logic or mathematics.

Our psychological enthusiasts are sure that they can trace the course of man's religious instinct back through the ages and explain its origin. Our philosophical friends must have a deity whom they can express in terms of the Absolute, and cannot be satisfied without some explanation of the problem of evil. The result of such an attitude is that much of the finer element in religion inevitably escapes it, even as Darwin relates that, as he became absorbed in his biological studies, the love for music passed from his life.

The intellect must always be the chief element in theology, since this is the natural expression as well as explanation of the religious instinct. But the intellect alone is not enough. As the skill of the great general consists in the use of no single arm, but in the harmonious manipulation of infantry, cavalry and artillery, so the truly catholic theologian must utilize reason, experience and intuition in his assault upon the strongholds of truth.

This over-intellectualism of the liberal movement is shown in its disregard of mysticism and of the study of comparative religion. In regard to the former, the reason for this attitude is obvious. A man who has yielded himself wholly to the scientific spirit, who has found his reason an invincible weapon for the pulling down of creedal strongholds and an inevitable guide through the labyrinths of historical research; who with this experience has plunged into the new science of psychology and whose soul is fascinated at the sight of fresh fields of knowledge—such a man is frequently most reluctant to admit that experiences may be passed through and that events may take place which his reason cannot explain nor his science elucidate, and is apt to insist with some vehemence that all such experiences must be purely subjective and illusory, and consequently possess only a reflexive value.

Whether this explanation be correct or not, the fact remains that mysticism has played a part, and that a most vital part, in all great world religions; it has expressed itself in phenomena possessing permanent worth for all peoples and times; it has moulded the lives of most, if not all, of the great religious leaders of history; it has exercised a powerful influence upon the Christian Church from generation to generation; and it demands to be studied with sympathy and respect by all those who would place themselves in line with the tradition of the past and enter upon the entire inheritance of the Church of the ages. Happily there are signs of an awakening interest in this field among the younger generation of liberal theologians, an interest which the experiences of the late war will probably do much to stimulate.

In regard to the study of comparative religion, much the same may be said. A growing interest is noticeable, but it needs to be fostered and encouraged. Too many men go out of our seminaries with scarcely any knowledge of religions other than their own. Moreover, too great a part of our work heretofore has been the comparing and cataloging of specific doctrines held by different races of mankind. This is excellent in its way, and more work needs to be done in this field. But there has not been sufficient appreciation and understanding of the inherent religious nature of man, that mysterious and unconquerable spirit which expresses itself through all doctrines and dogmas, which lurks behind all fetishes and superstitions, which has not left itself without witnesses among any race or in any age, in devotion to which men have sacrificed all things and inspired by which they have accomplished all things, which everywhere is unceasingly active upon their inmost lives.

which can never be vanquished nor destroyed, but, though seemingly overwhelmed by the floods of materialism and skepticism, returns ever to the contest with irresistible might. This spirit, I say, in its native strength and grandeur, we have not been taught to wonder at and reverence as we should. Repelled by the lower forms of expression of which it is compelled to avail itself, we have concentrated our attention upon one or two of its noblest manifestations, and have failed to appreciate the vastness of its power.

This tendency must be checked and is being checked. If we are to make our religion the highest and final expression of the religious spirit of mankind, we must cultivate in ourselves a sympathy for all manifestations of that spirit.

Such, then, is the condition of affairs at the present day. What of the future? We may safely say, first of all, that Christendom is facing changes more sweeping than any that have taken place since the Reformation. In the second place, we may note with pleasure that the chances for a reunion of the scattered members of the Church of Christ are greater than they have been at any time since Arius and Athanasius joined in their immortal combat.

To appreciate this fully we have first to contemplate the destructive side of the liberal movement, and terribly destructive, indeed, it has been. The mighty enginery of truth have made irreparable breaches in the middle walls of partition. The ramparts of dogma have been broken down and their blood-stained battlements are no longer tenable. Consider, for instance, what are the vital issues at stake between a twentieth-century Presbyterian and a twentieth-century Methodist? Or between a Methodist and a Congregationalist? The question itself is a *reductio ad absurdum*. Our sects and denominations to-day are the interesting relics of historic contests over issues that are dead and gone. How can we quarrel now concerning our doctrines when the search-light of historical criticism has revealed to us their steady growth through the centuries and the tiny seeds from which they sprang?

Take, for example, the conflicting views as to the nature of the Eucharist. Historical investigation shows us clearly the gradual evolution of the primitive love-feast of the early Church into a mystical substitute for blood-sacrifices both Jewish and pagan. The conflicting speculations of a later day are thus brushed aside by the hard hand of fact. Again, with what face can we insist upon the acceptance of any particular Christology when the slightest acquaintance with the history of the first three centuries makes us familiar with any number of Christologies varying all the way from

Adoptionism and Samosatianism to Sabellianism and Patripassianism? Or how can we demand assent to the doctrine of the Trinity when the very term was unknown to the early Church, many of whose members, as Tertullian, its inventor, himself testifies, objected strongly to its introduction on the ground that it set up three gods? Furthermore, to any one familiar with the history of the first century, who appreciates the spontaneous democracy of primitive Christianity, and the formless and extemporaneous character of church government, how absurd seem the claims of certain ecclesiastical hierarchies and high-church parties to be the sole representatives of Christ and his apostles!

The foundations of intolerance and bitterness and particularism have been undermined by the historical investigators, and their parapets are crumbling away. We have gotten back beyond Augustine and Origen, we are getting back behind Paul, back even to Jesus himself. And as we do so there comes into the minds of most of us the remembrance of a certain day at Jerusalem when the question was asked, "What commandment is the first of all?" And we recall the noble words of the reply, "The first is, Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. The second is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these." And when we ask ourselves in perplexity just what it is to be a Christian we hear the answer, "Behold my mother and my brethren. Whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother and sister and mother."

How refreshing are such words to our tired souls, how sweetly they sound across the centuries, like echoes out of paradise! As when in the restoration of some ancient cathedral a coat of white-wash has been removed and underneath is found untouched the beautiful painting of some long-dead master, so when the accretions of superstition and dogma and tradition have been taken away from the edifice of historical Christianity, the gospel of Jesus is left unchanged and unchanging in its eternal beauty, so that we are moved to exclaim with the apostle, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and forever!"

This has been the great achievement of modern scholarship, that it has relegated our theologies to obscurity and recovered for us the message and the personality of the historic Jesus. To-day liberal men of different parties are fraternizing upon the ancient battlefield and together pledging their loyalty to the two command-

ments on which hang all the Law and the Prophets. The foundations are being laid for a new catholicism. The work of destruction is nearly at an end. By the removal of the false we have established the true. The great realities of God's fatherhood and man's sonship, of the possibility of communion with the Divine, of the universal love of God that unites all men in a common brotherhood—these are being emphasized now as never before in Christian history.

The future is ours if we dare to seize it. But we must seize it without fear and hesitation, we must press onward without doubt or vacillation, if we are to turn possibility into fact and make actual reality of so glorious a hope.

Herein lies the great opportunity for the New Theology. For it, at least, there is very little to unlearn. But to lead the march to victory it needs to transform itself from a school of tranquil, somewhat easy-going, theologians into a movement full of life and enthusiasm, to place upon its negative conclusions a purely incidental emphasis and to thrust into the foreground the recovered gospel for which the world cries aloud to-day. It must cultivate, above all else, the practice of the spiritual life, it must preach to men the friendship of God. It must stretch its sympathies to include all the faiths and peoples of the world. It must assimilate all that is of value in the experiences of the past. It must sift from superstition and fantastic illusion and false interpretation that element of permanent reality and value in the mystical life, which the mystics of all faiths and ages share in common, that we may have a mysticism which will not be in contradiction to the reason, but corroborative of and complementary to it, a perpetual fountain of life and hope and inspiration. And when it has done this the New Theology will be theology no longer, it will be religion.

Nor will it be religion only, it will be a new catholicism. It will welcome to its fellowship men from all the world, and each will find himself at home in it. Here is the opportunity if we are men enough to take it. But if the theologians of the liberal school choose supinely to let it pass by it may not return for centuries. The spirit of freedom is hampered to-day by the division of its followers. These are either confined to two small denominations or are scattered here and there, singly or in little groups, throughout the orthodox churches, their presence in which seems to lend support to the sluggish mass of tradition.

The favorite argument of the latter class is that the Church cannot be got to move by action from without; that what is needed is pressure from within. In many instances, in some of the more

unprogressive and dogmatic quarters, the liberals are compelled to resort to a certain amount of insincerity and duplicity neither just to the conservatives nor fair to their own brethren in order to retain their membership. In other quarters this is not the case, and the liberals are allowed to remain undisturbed, but they are none the less sundered one from another and obscured by the crowd of their companions. The effect of their united influence is lost. What we need is a rallying-point. "Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying 'Hitherto hath the Lord helped us!'" Some landmark we need about which to gather, some program to stand by, a united movement which shall split the present denominational lines, whether by the formation of an actively liberal party in all churches, or by uniting elements of these into a new body, so that if men must be divided from one another, they may at least be separated by living issues and not by those that are dead.

If this be not done, if we go on stifling the living breath of freedom within the walls of ancient creed, then there is scant hope of swift betterment in the future. Those who look toward Rome for the catholicism of to-morrow are building their hopes upon a foundation of sand. No organization can hope to inherit the future which has declared war upon science and history, upon the human reason and the instinctive longing of the soul for free and personal fellowship with God. No, the catholicism of the future will be liberal if it exists at all.

It is the function of the New Theology to provide a basis upon which all intelligent and broad-minded men can unite in a spirit of truest religion and profoundest devotion. If this can be done successfully the greatest task will have been accomplished. The spread of general education will gradually eliminate the unprogressive elements which refuse to be absorbed by the new movement. Needless to say, there are many rocks on which the ship may split. There is the question, for instance, of government and organization. This must be approached in a spirit of brotherly forbearance and compromise, with a main eye to the practical situation. In a liberal church it goes without saying that any form of government which is to be successful must be founded upon the recognition of the spiritual autonomy of the individual. But if the foundations be laid in wisdom and faith, we may trust that the builders who come after shall not fail.

What might not be accomplished by a reunited church, by an undivided Christendom! We have only to look back to the Middle

Ages to see what the Church universal meant to the world. Though in a later day when corruption, intolerance and bigotry had nearly slain its soul the world rejected it, yet the ideal remained and still remains, God's proud and confident challenge to the courage of his sons. What such a church might be, what influence it might wield, we can but vaguely imagine.

The medieval Church failed because it attempted to control every sphere of life, to command instead of to suggest and encourage, to repress instead of to inspire. Therefore men feared and hated it. Human spontaneity demands freedom in every sphere. But if religion is anything, it is, as Mazzini said, "the center of life," and its influence must permeate the whole. Is it possible that art in all its forms—music, sculpture, painting, the drama, the dance, etc.—that education, science, government should remain permanently and confessedly without God as at the present day? Or will the Church of to-morrow bless the geologist, the linguist, the excavator, the biologist and the historian as they labor to lay bare the secrets of the world, fearless of how their discoveries may react upon herself, fearless because protected by the impenetrable armor of sincerity and truth? Will the statesman of to-morrow, who guides the progress of his State, or perhaps of the World-State, will the educator and the reformer who struggle to uplift and enlighten the ignorant, will the artist and the author whose task it is to make life beautiful once more, as well as the capitalist and the laborer who make it possible, feel that together they are members of one mighty organism of which their various activities are but the manifold expressions and which is the synthesis of them all? Whether this shall be or shall not be depends upon the breadth of vision, the unselfishness, the loyalty, the courage and the strength of the love of the men of to-day.