

THE FUNDAMENTALIST REACTION

BY HENRY FRANK

THE recrudescence of theological controversy in this age of scientific pursuit is as startling as unexpected. At the opening of the twentieth century it had been generally admitted in all schools of modern culture that the popular mind was wholly indifferent to speculations of whatever character which related to the supernatural. It had been taken for granted that the "proverbial man in the street" had lost all interest in discussions which meandered into metaphysical by-paths of religion, and insisted on preachments applicable to the practical demands of daily life. The ethical had presumably succeeded the theological trend of thought; and man's eyes were now in his forehead and no longer at the back of his head.

In the previous generation an Ingersoll might provoke debates with a Gladstone or a Talmadge, or even assail a Cardinal Manning, entrenched within the citadel of faith; the masses were inclined to read with avidity the long printed debates and crowds were easily lured into the most commodious auditoriums to be overawed by the thunderous clash and lightning gleams of opposing rhetoric. But before the Great War it had been surmised that such possibilities had reached their climax and none was now so peer to do reverence to the most eloquent protagonist of a cause foreign to modern culture and offensive to scientific taste.

Apparently, however, we were grossly in error. Whether the shock occasioned by the great conflict or the return swing of the pendulum of thought be or be not the cause, the amazing fact confronts us that there still exist thousands eagerly interested in supposed meribund issues and avidly devour whatever may appease their appetite for those old age-worn problems: the super-

natural origin of Jesus; the mysterious source of the gospels; the historic beginnings of the Christian religion and the possibility of miracles. The rise of fundamentalism means nothing less than the recrudescence of traditional faith founded on conjecture, historic inaccuracy and legendary lore.

Considering the frail foundation of the historical evidence and the strange intimations of writers contemporary with the advent of the Christian Epoch one marvels that the instigators of Reactionism dare be so bold as to venture an engagement with their fees.

One need but read again the severely shattered arguments of those who were once considered the highest exegetical authorities and proponents of the ancient faith to realize the vanity of those who once more leap into the arena and challenge the defenders of modern research and culture.

During the last quarter century there has not been added one scintilla of evidence which controverts the conclusions of authors up to the middle of the nineteenth century, notwithstanding the immense achievements of archaeology during this period. Heretofore, however thorough were the dredgings and excavations in the Orient and Occident not one iota of historical proof had been divulged which compelled the revision of the modernist deductions. Though in the immediate present the world is standing on tip-toe of expectancy at the tomb of Tut-enk-Ahmen awaiting the final lifting of the ancient lid of the sarcophagus, it is hardly to be presumed that any more verifiable confirmation of the Messaic Epoch, during which he is supposed to have reigned, will be found than had already been unearthed in the nineteen or more disembowelled tombs of Egyptian Kings in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The silence of profane history as to the Biblical Records of ancient Judaism and the advent of the Christian religion, is the most puzzling phenomenon that startles one reared in traditional belief and inculcation. The statement of James Fergusson, the famous historian of architecture, in the latter quarter of the last century, still holds true. He said: "It is one of the peculiarities of Jewish history and certainly not one of the least singular, that all we know of them is derived from their written books. Not one monument, not one sculptural stone, not one letter or inscription, not even a potsherd, remains to witness by material fact the existence of the Jewish kingdom. No museum ever possessed a Jewish antiquity, while Egypt, Assyria, Greece and

all the surrounding countries teem with material evidence of former greatness and of the people that once inhabited them."

All the alleged discoveries of evidential monuments since Fergusson's time, such as the supposed tomb of Absalom, the sight of the temple of Solomon—and the more recent finds of the Palestinian excavators have proved on careful analysis to be ineffective as historical corroborations of the Biblical records. Writing at a far later period than Fergusson, indeed in our own generation, Edouard Dujardin says in *The Sources of Christian Tradition*; "Of ancient Hebraism no monument of the slightest interest has come down to us."

If, then, the battle is to be waged once more in the field of historical and documentary evidence, so far as the Old Testament is concerned, the fundamentalists seem to have before them a campaign of precarious value and which doubtless will end like its predecessors in humiliating defeat.

This conclusion, of course, relates only to the demands of literalness and supernatural revelation; it has no bearing on the value of the possible ethical value of the Bible or its exemplary characterization. The world today stands ready as never before to hold the ancient volume in high esteem so far as its antiquity and noble literature are concerned, however much it may discard its enunciations as standards by which scientific truth and the data of knowledge are to be determined.

But the reaction of the fundamentalists to the intransigence of modern thought and the results of scientific research can lead only to a disrespect for the Book they so eagerly worship and unconsciously disarm.

Nor are the reactionists to fare better when the battle is fought again over the claims of divine revelation for the New Testament. The fact that the Canonical Books contained in this Testament appertain to the life of perhaps the sublimest personage in all history overcasts them with a halo that even the Old Testament does not possess. The emphasis of the Modernist Movement is not against the leadership and spiritual captaincy of Jesus of Nazareth. All schools adore the manliness, kindness, wholesome fellowship and democratic spirit of Him who spake as never man before. Modernism, indeed, vies with fundamentalism in lifting higher still the hallowed personality of one whose greatness inheres in his human sympathy and spiritual supremacy.

But the claim of modernism, as of all psychological appreciation, consists in the positive severance of the personality and precepts of this sublime exemplar of ethical efficiency from the demeaning and derogating tradition with which myth and maudlin adoration have enshrouded and defaced them.

The battle is not waged around the person of Jesus (be that historical or ideal) but around the encystment of false mythology and mystical exaggeration with which it has been encumbered. Fundamentalism means the degradation of a lofty personage from its mountain height of unselfish and humanitarian nobility to a plain level with that of the now discarded heathen gods, whether on Olympus, the Capitoline Hill or beneath the shades of the Himalayas.

To emphasize the mythical birth of Jesus from the virgin womb of immaculate conception; to surround him with apocryphal hallucinations that offend the common sense of mankind; to present him as the dramatic hero who met and assailed the personal devil on the mount or temple-height of temptation; to feature him as an histrionic thaumaturge whose miraculous feats are like to those of the gods and goddesses in the mythical dramas of pagan antiquity; is but to make him a forerunner of some Cagliostro or another Bacchus or Mercury transformed from pagan crudity to the refinement of theological finesse.

One fact must ever be kept before the mind of the studious investigator of the origin of Christianity. That fact is that there is not a single characteristic or act which has been attributed to Jesus but what was already attributed to scores of pretenders or ennobled leaders in the traditions and narratives which were current in so-called heathen annals.

If this be true, then, one is at once startled to discover that He to whom the appellation of the Supreme Deity is attributed could not or did not, when on earth, display a characteristic or perform a distinctive act which had not already been recorded of others. The only originality in the career of Jesus is the sublime personality which he presents. He added nothing to the world's wisdom but he did emblazen and illuminate that wisdom by the nobility of his character and the sublime self-sacrifice of his devotion to truth. Yet even in that it may be questioned whether his sacrifice and service on behalf of humanity are more worthy of admiration and praise than that of Buddha. Around the brow of each the imagination of mankind has cast a halo

through which these superlative beings are magnified into divine proportions.

Comparisons to the conservative traditionalist are of course odious. Nevertheless, the fundamentalist contention compels comparison and when it is made the results in the item of originality are amazingly disappointing. Is it the claim of divine origin and virgin birth that must be conceded the fundamentalists? Alas, there are at least a score of other claimants to such mystical and biologically inconsistent origins which may successfully contest the uniqueness or singularity of such descent. Even in minute details of this birth such as the visitation of the Magi with gifts the event is already in a way anticipated as in the case of Plato whom Eastern hierophants visited to offer incense to a divine being.

Insistence on the virgin birth of Jesus is truly an unhappy claim for a personage so free from authoritative tradition and hypocritical pretense, because it can easily be demonstrated that the conception of the virgin birth of the gods originated in an age of ignorance, savagery and pristine indecency. Instead of having its origin in exalted idealism and spiritual refinement it emanated from a period of physiological perversion and sexual indifference. To prove this I need quote but one authority whose dictum will not be questioned, for he is the prince of writers and investigators on the subject of the origin and habitat of primitive and modern religions.

In his *Golden Bough*, Rev. Dr. J. G. Frazer, referring to the source whence sprang the belief in virgin-births says: "Such tales of virgin mothers are relics of an age of childish ignorance when men had not yet recognized the intercourse of the sexes as the true cause of offspring. That ignorance still shared by the lowest of existing savages, the aboriginal tribes of central Australia, was doubtless at one time universal among mankind. Even in later times when people are better acquainted with the laws of nature, they sometimes imagine that these laws may be subject to exceptions and that miraculous beings may be born in a miraculous manner by women who have never known a man. In Palestine, *to this day*, it is believed that a woman may conceive by a jinnee or by the spirit of her dead husband. There is at present a man at Nebk who is currently supposed to be the offspring of such a union, and the simple folk have never suspected his mother's virtue."

That this belief was current among mankind even in ages of comparative intelligence is proved by the fact that every one of the pagan deities, even in their most refined theogonies, was conceived to have been born of a virgin mother. It was true of Mithras, of Osiris, of Adonis, of Attys, of Bacchus, of Balder, of Buddha, etc., etc.

It may be justly asked why, if it be so common a thing for a deity who appears on earth to have been the offspring of a virgin mother, should this origin be claimed for Jesus as an exclusive and incontrovertible proof of his divine essence and deific supremacy.

The value and imposing characteristic of such an origin must lie in its uniqueness, its singleness, its absolute inimitability. But if before the advent of Jesus, as the God-man, already so many predecessors had reduced the phenomenon to a commonplace, wherein are we to discern the especial supremacy of Jesus because of such origin?

There is another consideration that must give us pause in accepting as authoritative the traditional claim of the supernatural origin and office of Jesus. If at the time of the inauguration of Christianity there had been no rivalry to its claim of spiritual supremacy and supernatural origination, it might have disarmed suspicion of the natural formation of the tradition.

But the strange fact that there was another religion running parallel in progress with the Christian faith, at one time almost wresting world-supremacy from its grasp, and that that rival faith in all its characteristics and tenets was identical with that of Christianity, save only in name, forces upon us the conviction that both these faiths must have had a common origin, and that it was by the mere caprice of fortune that the one survived while the other sank into innocuous desuetude.

The religion of Mithras was for nearly four hundred years the rival and "thorn in the flesh" of the organized Christian church. "Both religions," says a writer in the *Britannica*, "were of oriental origin; they were propagated about the same time; they spread with equal rapidity on account of the same causes, namely, the unity of the political world and the debasement of the moral life."

The struggle was the more obstinate because of the resemblance of the two religions, which were so numerous and close as to be the subject of remark as early as the second century.

Mithra was born of a rock, the marvel being seen by shepherds who brought gifts adoring him. In the early legends of Jesus, we may recall, he also was brought forth in a cave or rock, instead of a manger, a later tradition.

The recognition of this astonishing similarity by the fathers was curiously accounted for by Justin Martyr, of that period, in his first *Apology*. "Having heard it proclaimed," he declares, "through the prophets that Christ was to come, and that ungodly men were to be punished by fire, they put forth many to be called the sons of Jupiter, under the impression that they would be able to produce in men the idea that the things which were said with regard to Christ were mere marvellous tales, like the things which were said by the poets. . . . The wicked Devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras the Lord's supper, commanding the things to be done," etc.

Such naive explanations (ignoring the fact that the Mithras religion was already old when Christ made his advent) are almost paralleled by the fundamentalist fanatics even in our own day.

But the fundamentalist contention meets with even more serious obstacles when we learn that many years before the time of Jesus there already existed among the Jews a system of faith which seemed to set forth every tenet and event which the New Testament records of the Galilean. In the *Book of Enoch* we already find a clear and detailed description of the entire drama of the Christ legend.

It is many decades since James Martineau reminded us of this fact. He said: "Here we find, a century before the first line of the New Testament was written, all the features of its doctrines respecting the 'end of the world' and the second coming of 'the Son of Man'; the same theatre, Jerusalem; the same time, relatively to the writer—the immediate generation—the hour at hand; the same harbingers—wars and rumors of wars, and the gathering of the Gentile armies against the elect; the same deliverance of the elect; the advent of the Messiah with the holy angels; the same decisive solemnity—the Son of Man on the throne of glory, with all the nations gathered before Him; the same awards—unbelievers to the pit of fire in the valley of Hinnom, and the elect to the Halls of the Kingdom, to eat and drink at the Messiah's table; the second resurrection and the second judgment of eternity, consigning the wicked angels to their doom; and the same new Creation, transforming the heav-

enly world that it may answer to the paradise below. Here in a Book to which the New Testament appeals, we have the very drama of 'the last things' which appear in the Book of Revelation and in portions of the Gospels."

Here, then, are two curious facts to be considered and answered by the literalistic fundamentalists if they can. The two facts are, first, the existence of an almost identical pagan religion (Mithraism) contemporary with the advent of Christianity, and, second, the Hebraid description of a spiritual epoch, almost a century before the age of Jesus which in every detail foreglimoses the drama of his career and the teleology reared around the glory of his name.

Apparently the entire story of Jesus and his tragic fate existed centuries before the advent of Jesus of Nazareth, and that story was woven in legend, ritual, hymnology, and spiritual dramatization, even before the first line of the New Testament was written, whether by Paul or the Synoptists, and ever before the name of Jesus was known.

The remarkable similarity between the careers of the Mithraic and the Christian hero, in doctrines and in dramatic presentation, is altogether too close to be pushed aside as an accident or a hapless coincidence. Each was called the "divine friend," "mediator," "deliverer," "savior"; and each was an incarnation of the God-head—Mithra of the Sun-father (Dyaus-pater), Jesus of the heavenly Father; Mithra was the divine son of Ahura-Mazda; Jesus, the "Lord of Glory" and the divine son of Jehovah; each was born of a virgin in a cave or manger; each enjoined the sacrament of baptism and consecration in entering the warfare with evil; each provided oblations of bread and water mingled with wine, representing the body and blood of the savior; each taught deliverance from sin, the judgment after death and the ascent to heaven. Each is to come a second time and conquer the Devil, pronouncing the general judgment of the whole world, the wicked to be punished in Hell and the good to be raised in heavenly glory when the "Millennial Kingdom of Peace" shall be established. Each was crucified, hung on "the accursed tree." Firmicius, an ancient Christian father, reminds us that "for the destruction of souls the devil had beforehand resorted to deceptive imitations of the cross of Christ; that in Phrygia they fixed the image of a young man to a tree in the worship of the Mother of

Gods, and in other cults did imitate the crucifixion in similar ways." (See *Pagan Christs* by Robinson, p. 318.)

The fact that the Mithraic religion had already existed for a long time before the advent of Jesus and that a hundred years about passed before John on Patmos proclaimed his vision of the Revelation, whose dramatic features were so like to those of the Mithraic dramas, was cause enough to disturb the pristine fathers of the church who sought to account for the startling "coincidence" by the assumption that the Devil had imposed on the credulity and ignorance of the pagan world by forestalling the career of Jesus with vulgar imitation and sacrilegious pretense.

But it is not necessary to assume that there was any direct borrowing or vicious imitation by one religion of another that brought about the curiously similar content and characteristics. The more likely truth may be that the religions which have survived, or whose history is still held in legend and literature, are the offshoots of some primitive faith whose roots lay in the primeval experiences of mankind.

For as Max Muller reminded us many decades ago, we cannot appreciate the value of any single religion save by comparison with all other religions. In the science of Comparative Religion alone have we a method by which bigotry is denuded of its power and the insincerity of seductive perversion.

Any religion which is more concerned about its dogmatic and ecclesiastical authority than about the crystalline purity of its spiritual and ethical virtues is as undeserving the devotion of its votaries as the respect of its adversaries.

If Christianity is to continue to be, or is ever to become, a worthwhile religion it must concern itself less with its well-oiled ecclesiastical machinery, the integrity of its antique formularies, its iron-bound creed and fetishistic rituals; and more, far more solicitous of the alleged truths of its deliverances and the consistent relation between spiritual assumptions and the meticulous realities of Nature.

Till the ethics of Christianity supercede its dogmatics it will never become the faith that commands universal voluntary respect. When any religion ceases to adore the Truth it not only ceases to be free but becomes an encumbrance to itself and the race, both tumbling into pitfalls of error and delusion.