THE RELIGION OF OUR ANCESTORS.

BY THE EDITOR.

COMPARATIVE RELIGION has made much headway; but while the religions of Asia (Mohammedanism, Buddhism, Brahmanism, Confucianism, and Taoism), are very diligently studied, the religion of our Saxon forefathers, of the Teutons in Continental Europe, of the Norse and of the Icelanders, is much neglected. And yet it is of great importance—in some respects, perhaps, more important than the religions of the East, which at present stand in the foreground. For, while the Eastern religions are of foreign growth, the mythology of our ancestors has very largely entered into the present make-up of our Christianity.

It will be astonishing to many people how many ideas, customs, and aspirations of the old Northern world-conception have been embodied in Christianity and are now commonly regarded as peculiarly Christian.

When the Roman See succeeded in being recognised by the new converts of Great Britain, and when the Anglo-Saxon Winfrid converted the Germans on the Continent, making them all spiritually subject to Rome, when, finally, the Franconians adopted the Roman form of Christianity, the ecclesiastical supremacy of Rome in Western Europe was firmly established; but the conquest of these large tracts populated by nations of Teutonic blood at the same time began gradually to change the Christianity of Rome. Innumerable dignitaries of the Roman Church, who came from the North, introduced many of their Northern views, festivals, and ideals, embodying them as much as possible in church institutions. The celebration of the birth of Christ at the time of the old Yule festival is by no means an isolated nor the most important incident of Northern influence. The most momentous innovation, which was due to the influence of the Teutonic races,
was the new spirit in which the doctrines of Christianity were received. While the old Christianity absolutely abandoned all worldly interests for the sake of salvation to be attained in a future life, the Teutons introduced their views of struggle and the ethics of struggle in this world.

The Jerusalemitic Christianity had communistic tendencies and their communism practically constituted the most important feature of the new religion, so much so that those who would not submit on this point were supposed to be punished immediately by the Holy Ghost with death. The Jewish Christianity naturally went out of existence, because it attempted to realise an impossible ideal. However, before it became extinct in Jerusalem, it was transferred to Greece and found two formulations which are represented, the one in St. Paul, the other in the Fourth Gospel according to St. John. In St. Paul’s Christianity the second advent of Christ still constitutes the central doctrine. The apostle expects the return of Christ during his lifetime, and admonishes everybody to be prepared for it.

From Greece, Christianity spread to Rome, where Christianity adopted the Roman forms of worship, continuing at the same time the belief in various Italian deities with a new meaning under the name of Christian saints.

In spite of many close similarities, Roman Christianity was so different from Greek Christianity that they were never united. While the West of Europe fell to Rome, Greek Christianity spread all over Russia, where it became the state religion, and the Emperor of Russia has come to be recognised as the official head of the entire Greek Church.

Although Rome incorporated in its own institutions a great number of the changes that the conversion of the Teutons wrought, the difference between Roman Christianity and Teuton Christianity became so great in the course of time that it led, in the sixteenth century, to that great schism which is known as the Reformation. The abuses and the misgovernment which prevailed in those days in the church were the cause of the Reformation, but they were by no means the sole factor that led to the final and complete split dividing the old church into two camps, the Teutonic Christianity represented by the English, the Germans, the Dutch, the Swedes, the Norwegians, and the Icelanders, and the Roman Christianity, embodying the Romance nations, and including the Celts of Ireland.

The difference between these two kinds of Christianity lies deeper than is generally supposed. The Roman Church had its
Hel, the Goddess of the Nether World.

(By Johannes Gehrts.)
counter reformation, and almost all the abuses of which Luther complained were abrogated, or at least changed, so as to show no longer those features which made them objectionable; and yet the split between the two kinds of Christianity remains and will remain so long as the main differences of national character, of habits, and of ethics distinguish the adherents of both forms of religion.

In order to appreciate the difference that obtains between Teuton and Roman Christianity, we must go back to the world-conception of the ancestors of the Teutonic races, as it took shape in their religion. There we find the character of the race in simple and strong outlines. The religion of our forefathers is illustrated in its practical application in Tacitus's account of the Germans, which is the most valuable information we have on the subject. Their mythology is not as artistically finished as the mythology of the Greeks, but it is superior to Greek mythology by being philosophically deeper and practically sounder.

The significance of Northern mythology consists in the recognition of the struggle that is going on everywhere in the world. Death is inevitable, but death is transfigured when it is the death of a hero who fights courageously and, if possible, victoriously. Human ideals are represented in the Asas, and the Asas are the main gods of the Teutons, but the Asas have originated, they have to fight for their lives, and will finally perish again.

The struggle for existence was perhaps nowhere severer than in the climate of Northern Europe, and the ethics of struggle were perhaps more important to the races of the cold north than to the people of the sunny south, and the Teutons learned the lesson. It is remarkable that all the Germanic races do not look upon struggle as being in itself an evil, nor do they look to victory as the main thing to be achieved. Their highest ambition is to fight the struggle nobly and squarely, not to shrink from either wounds or death, not to show cowardice of any kind, not to take advantage of a weak foeman. The most hated enemy's life was safe as soon as he was in a condition of helplessness, be it that he was without arms, that he was wounded or disabled from defending himself for some other reason. To be conquered in a duel or to be slain in battle was not regarded as a disgrace; but the use of foul means for the sake of gaining a victory was considered a crime which brought contempt and shame upon him who dared to do it.

1 Tacitus's Germania is a short treatise, but it is of great historical importance. It should be a text-book in our schools, and every one who has a drop of Teutonic blood in his veins, be it Saxon, or German, or Norse, ought to have read and reread that ancient account of the habits and life of his ancestors.
As an instance of this nobility of the Teutonic ethics of struggle, we refer to an incident which is told in the Nibelungenlied. When Hagen, standing at the door of Atli's hall, overcomes all the Huns who try to force an entrance, he is at last met by Rüdiger, a vassal of Atli and a personal friend of Hagen. Hagen reproaches Rüdiger, not for coming to fight him, for that was Rüdiger's duty, because he had sworn allegiance to Atli, but for combating a man whose shield has suffered serious injuries in former combats. While Hagen is worn out, Rüdiger comes with fresh vigor, and since Rüdiger would be ashamed of taking advantage of the insufficient armor of his foe, he gives him the necessary equipment. Before Rüdiger proceeds to fight, he hands his own shield to Hagen and takes the dilapidated shield of his adversary in order to equalise the conditions of the fight.

It is this ethics of struggle which made the Teutonic races so strong, and if the Saxon is taking possession of the world it is not so much due to a physical superiority of the Teutonic race, but to the superior views which they hold dear as to the methods that are to be employed in fighting their adversaries.

Although infinitely superior to common mortals, the Asas, or gods, are not above error and sin. Indeed their conduct, although upon the whole quite noble and elevating, is not free from reproach. They made mistakes, and having from carelessness got into trouble, they committed the worst sin imaginable to a Teutonic mind,—they broke their faith. This is the reason why the present condition of the world is full of evil and the Asas fight bravely against the powers of evil until at last, on doomsday, which is called Ragnarok, a final battle will take place in which the gods as well as their enemies will be slain, and the whole world will be destroyed. Yet this is not the end of all, for after the destruction of the world through the fire of Muspil a new world will originate and the old gods will reappear with new chances for a better and more sinless life.

The enemies of the Asas are the giants who represent the forces of nature. Although morally and intellectually inferior to the Asas, the giants are in many respects much more powerful,—which finds expression in the tale of Skrymer, where we read how Asa-Thor drank from a drinking-horn and could not empty it. He tried to raise a cat, and could not lift it from the ground. He wrestled with a toothless old woman and could not overcome her. The drinking-horn which he could not empty was the ocean (his attempts to do so resulted in the phenomenon of the tides);
the cat which he could not lift was the Midgard serpent, the evil
dragon which encompasses in its coils the whole world; and the
toothless old woman whom the strongest of the gods could not
throw to the ground was old age.

The literature on the religion of the Teutonic races has hereto-
fore been almost exclusively written in German, Danish, Icelandic,
Swedish, or Norwegian, and the standard works on the subject by
Grimm, Simrock, Lachmann, Felix Dahn,¹ and others, are well
known the world over. A few years ago, however, R. B. Anderson,
professor of the Scandinavian languages in the University of
Wisconsin, published a series of English-written books on Norse
mythology and Viking sagas, which are a boon to the English-
speaking world, especially to students of comparative religion and
mythology, and we recommend them heartily to our readers. As
Professor Anderson is very well versed in the traditions of his fore-
fathers, his works are a most reliable source of information, and
since they are at the same time written in a very popular style, it is
hoped that they will be read and appreciated by our public and will
fill a great gap in our libraries.

Professor Anderson says in his book Norse Mythology:²

"Greek Mythology is frivolous, the Norse is profound. The
frivolous mind lives but to enjoy the passing moment; the pro-
found mind reflects, considers the past and the future. The Greek
abandoned himself wholly to this life. The Norseman accepted
life as a good gift, but he knew that he was merely its transient
possessor. Over every moment of life hangs a threatening sword,
which may in the next moment prove fatal. Life possesses no hour
of the future. And this is the peculiar characteristic of the heroic
life in the North, that our ancestors were powerfully impressed
with the uncertainty of life. They constantly witnessed the inter-
change of life and death, and this nourished in them the thought
that life is not worth keeping, for no one knows how soon it may
end. Life itself has no value, but the object constantly to be held
in view is to die an honorable death.

"In comparing the Greek mythology with the Norse, it was
stated that the Norse has a theoktonic myth, while the Greek lacks

¹Walhall by Felix and Therese Dahn (published by Geibel & Brockhaus, Leipsic) is a very
attractive work. Not only is Felix Dahn, the famous author of Der Kampf um Rom, the best
authority on the subject of Teutonic law, customs, and mythology, but he has found in Johannes
Gehrts an illustrator of great force. We here reproduce with the permission of the publishers
two pictures by Gehrts, one representing Hel, the goddess of the lower world, and the other Rag.
narok or Doomsday, the last battle between the gods and the powers of evil.

²Other works by the same author are The Younger Edda and Viking Tales of the North,
the final act of the grand drama. The Greeks knew of no death of the gods; their gods were immortal. And yet, what were they but an ideal conception of the forms of life? And this life, with all its vanity, pomp, and glory, the Greek loved so dearly that he thought it must last forever. He imagined an everlasting series of changes. But what will then the final result be? Shall the thundering Zeus forever continue to thunder? Shall the faithless Aphrodite forever be unfaithful? Shall Typhon forever go on with his desolations? Shall the sinner continue to sin forever, and shall the world continue without end to foster and nourish evil? These are questions that find no satisfactory answer in the Greek mythology.

"Among the Norsemen, on the other hand, we find in their most ancient records a clearly expressed faith in the perishableness of all things; and we find this faith at every step that the Norseman has taken. The origin of this faith we seek in vain; it conceals itself beneath the waters of the primeval fountains of their thoughts and aspirations. They regarded death as but the middle of a long life. They considered it cowardice to spare a life that is to return; they thought it folly to care for a world that must necessarily perish; while they knew that their spirits would be clothed with increased vigor in the other world. Happy were they who lived beneath the polar star, for the greatest fear that man knows, the fear of death, disturbed them not. They rushed cheerfully upon the sword; they entered the battle boldly, for, like their gods, who every moment looked forward to the inevitable Ragnarok, they knew that life could be purchased by a heroic death.

"The very fact that the gods in the creation proceeded from the giant Ymer foreshadowed their destruction. The germ of death was in their nature from the beginning, and this germ would gradually develop as their strength gradually became wasted and consumed. That which is born must die, but that which is not born cannot grow old.

"The gradual growth of this germ of death, and corresponding waste of the strength of the gods, is profoundly sketched throughout the mythology. The gods cannot be conquered unless they make themselves weak; but such is the very nature of things that they must do this. To win the charming Gerd, Frey must give away his sword, but when the great final conflict comes he has no weapon. In order that the Fenris-wolf may be chained, Tyr must risk his right hand, and he loses it. How shall he then fight in Ragnarok? Balder could not have died had not the gods been blind and presumptuous; their thoughtlessness put weapons
into the hands of their enemy. Hoder would never have thrown the fatal mistletoe had not their own appointed game been an in-

duction to him to honor his brother. When Loke became separated from Odin the death of the gods was a foregone conclusion.

"Our old Gothic fathers, in the poetic dawn of our race, investigated the origin and beginning of nature and time. The divine
poetic and imaginative spark in them lifted them up to the Eternal, to that wonderful secret fountain which is the source of all things. They looked about them in profound meditation to find the image and reflection of that glorious harmony which their soul in its heavenly flights had found, but in all earthly things they discovered strife and warfare. When the storms bent the pine trees on the mountain tops, and when the foaming waves rolled in gigantic fury against the rocky cliffs, the Norseman saw strife. When the growl of the bear and the howl of the wolf blended with the moaning of the winds and the roaring of the waters, he heard strife. In unceasing conflict with the earth, with the beasts, and with each other, he saw men stand, conquer, and fall. If he lifted his weary eye toward the skies he saw the light struggling with the darkness and with itself. When light arose out of darkness, it was greeted with enthusiasm; when it sank again into darkness, its rays were broken and it dissolved in glimmering colors; and if he looked down into the heart of man, into his own breast, he found that all this conflict of opposing elements in the outward world did but faintly symbolise that terrible warfare pervading and shattering his whole being. Well might he long for peace, and can we wonder that this deep longing for rest and peace, which filled his heart in the midst of all his struggles,—can we wonder, we say, that his longing for peace found a grand expression in a final conflict through which imperishableness and harmony were attained?

"This final conflict, this dissolution of nature's and life's disharmony, the Edda presents to us in the death of the gods, called Ragnarok."