

## A BASIS FOR RECONSTRUCTION IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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The Christian religion faces at the present time a crisis similar to that which confronted the traditional religion of the Greeks in the age of Socrates. Its influence has been weakened and its authority destroyed by scientific criticism. By the end of the Middle Ages Christianity had been formulated in terms of a definite world-view which was then accepted as its logical pre-supposition and has ever since been intimately associated with it. This world-view included a philosophy of nature and a philosophy of mind. The philosophy of nature, based on the Ptolemaic astronomy, the physics of Aristotle, and the Hebrew cosmogony, was geocentric and anthropocentric; the philosophy of mind embraced a formal psychology with its doctrine of simple soul-substance and a juristic ethics with belief in retributive justice, substitutionary punishment, and imputed righteousness. This world-view has been thoroughly discredited by modern thought and, because associated with it, Christianity has been discredited too.

The attitudes taken by the different parties in the present crisis reveal other marked similarities to the situation as it was in Athens at the period referred to. We today have our sophists and skeptics who reject the authority of every religion along with all other authority, moral and social, and who would reconstitute human life upon the biological principles of natural instinct and individual interest. These modern exponents of naturalism and individualism are destined to have as little permanent influence in modern times as did the Greek sophists in antiquity; since the human will demands for its satisfaction a super-individual good.

Then we have in our own time an influential school of thinkers who, like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, seek to find in *reason* a

new basis of social and moral obligation. Only the science of the present is not limited, as Greek idealism was, to an analysis of the capacities of the human mind and a study of the conditions of social life among human beings.<sup>1</sup> Through a use of the methods of inductive and experimental research it has gained such exact knowledge of the processes of nature as to make possible in many instances their control by human agency. Now it is proposed by our current rationalism to utilize this new body of scientific truth, discovered by modern methods of investigation, in the reconstructing of human society, so controlling the forces of nature and directing the organization of society as to secure the highest human welfare.

But modern intellectualism is bound to fail just as Greek intellectualism failed; for reason cannot supply an adequate basis for the moral order. This is because reason in its accepted conclusions records and interprets those ideas which have been verified by human conduct in the past; while morality is concerned with the conduct that is yet to be, with the possibilities of achievement held forth by an unexplored and, to a large extent, unknown future. For while exact knowledge of physical processes enables us to predict with certainty their future changes, it is inconceivable that any exercise of thought or discovery of reason would enable us to predict with like certainty the behavior of living beings or the choices of free agents. Life and intelligence undergo development, and true development necessarily involves the occurrence of the novel, the unexpected, the different. The moral order is thus grounded not on intellect but on will—on will, the self-organizing, self-expanding activity which is the root and source of personality itself. Moral development requires, besides knowledge, *faith*—the willingness to venture, to surrender objects already achieved and proven satisfactory, for the sake of ends which, although more extensive and far-reaching, are as yet uncertain and untried. Such faith is requisite in each successive step of moral development—in the surrender of an assured present

<sup>1</sup>Of course Greek idealism did not altogether lack a philosophy of nature, particularly in the case of Aristotle. But its ethical and social recommendations, most fully expressed in Plato's *Republic*, were based entirely upon a study of human nature.

enjoyment in the interest of an uncertain future, in the sacrifice of an experienced individual interest for the sake of an untried social good, in the subordination of approved human welfare to a problematic cosmical purpose.

The mission of religion has been to arouse and strengthen this faith which is essential to moral development. But in order thus indirectly to uphold the moral and social order, a religion must fulfil two requirements: (1) Its beliefs must agree with the verified conclusions of reason, so far as these extend. (2) Its world-view must be such as to promise satisfaction to the demand of human volition for a completely organized and all-comprehensive life.

The Christian religion, whose essence consists in a *revelation of God as a being of infinite benevolence whose devotion to his creatures leads him continuously to strive and even to suffer for their well-being*, produced in mankind a moral faith which served as the foundation for a new moral and social order. It was inevitable that in the centuries following the essential principles of Christianity should be interpreted in terms of the philosophical conceptions then current. The result was a Christian cosmology, anthropology, and eschatology, which in the course of scientific progress were bound to become outworn, and which in fact have become so.

Now the question arises whether, if we cast aside the philosophy which has become associated through tradition with the Christian religion, we still possess in that revelation of the nature of God which is the heart and core of historic Christianity an available source of the needed moral faith. Let us consider how the Christian revelation of God, stripped of all interpretations and taken in its essential simplicity, meets the two requirements laid down above.

I. In the first place, does it agree with modern knowledge of the world and of human nature?

Modern science and philosophy receive their most adequate and characteristic expression, perhaps, in the evolutionary interpretation of the world. In this modern world-view we may distinguish three features:

1. The universe is *really progressive*. Its processes have been

means to an end and this end, the existence of a self-developing society of intelligent persons, possesses moral value. This fact that *reality develops* rules out both the materialism which seeks to include all the cosmic processes within the limits of a mechanically determined system, and the idealism which construes reality as an eternally realized purpose and thus makes all change and incompleteness merely apparent.

2. Despite the prevailing adaptation in the universe, maladjustment and consequent suffering of sentient beings are inherent in the nature of reality as a result of its incompleteness and imperfection. This aspect of reality is shown in the bitter struggle for existence waged by the lower forms of life and the incessant conflict with forces of nature which has attended human life and civilization. But through the conflict and the pain progress is secured. The struggle for existence is the cost of natural selection, and man's conflict with natural forces the price he pays for the quality of self-reliance and the ability to provide for the future.

3. Since the further progress of reality is dependent upon resident forces and these are partly or wholly self-determined, the outcome of universal evolution is still undecided. Evolution in its higher stages depends upon the efforts of living beings which must be conceived as in a degree spontaneous, and upon the actions of intelligent individuals which of course are "free." Thus an element of uncertainty is introduced into the situation, but with it goes the possibility of each living individual's making a real contribution to universal progress.

Reflection shows that the Christian revelation is not merely compatible with the evolutionary world-view but positively agrees with it in a most remarkable way on each of these three points.

1. The Christian conception of God guarantees the reality of universal progress by holding that God is actually engaged in the labor of carrying it forward. "My Father worketh even until now, and I work." The Christian view does not attribute to God a perfection or imperturbability which separates him from the sphere of change and imperfection, or reduces the whole world of time and development to unreality.

2. Christianity also admits the reality of natural evil; for according to the Christian revelation God himself suffers. But it represents the vast amount of evil actually suffered in the course of evolution as a necessary means of progress; it teaches that God's striving and suffering follow from his devotion to the purpose he has undertaken to realize in the world, and to the creatures he is aiming to perfect in the course of time.

3. According to the Christian view God has intrusted a part of his work to the free agency of man and, as man may through choice fail to do this work, God has limited himself and made the outcome of his undertaking uncertain and problematic. But through God's self-limitation comes man's opportunity; for thus only could man be given a chance to render real assistance in the work of universal progress.

II. Secondly, does that conception of God which has been described as the essential feature of the Christian religion promise to satisfy human volition in its demand for complete self-organization and an ever-expanding life? The answer is that it appears to be the only conception of God in his relation to the world that *does* make possible the complete realization of man's will under the conditions of existence, such as modern science has discovered them to be.

1. Since the divine purpose is being progressively realized in universal evolution man may reasonably expect through devotion to social and universal causes to realize, from his own individual standpoint, the universal spiritual life for which his soul yearns.

2. As the outcome of evolution has been left in part to the free agency of man and hence rendered doubtful, each human individual has the opportunity to do a work in the furtherance of universal progress which no one else can do. Every man may therefore be a fellow-worker with God in the realization of God's purpose, conscious that God needs him as well as he needs God, and knowing that if he does not do his part it must remain forever undone.

3. Since God the Supreme Reality endures suffering in the achievement of his benevolent purposes, the human individual need not fear that his own personal reality is destroyed or even

diminished by suffering or natural death undergone in the promotion of human welfare or the furtherance of universal progress. Rather is the sufferer raised to a higher plane of reality, initiated into a divine fellowship, united with God himself.<sup>2</sup>

Is not such an interpretation of fundamental Christianity suggestive of a reinterpretation of certain fundamental Christian doctrines?

1. *Providence*.—Because the divine benevolence is working in universal evolution, the human individual who devotes himself to the cause of world-betterment may hope to have provision made for him, and power given to him, by the universal spirit.

2. *Atonement*.—In the realization of any comprehensive purpose the persistence of an element of discord and opposition has its effect upon the progress of the whole, which must suffer as long as the discordant factor is allowed to remain within it. Of course, if the discordant or conflicting element is expelled or not allowed to enter, then it will itself suffer the penalty of its own recalcitrancy. Now in intrusting a part of the work of evolution to man's free agency and thus permitting rebellious and conflicting human wills to exist in his universe, God voluntarily exposed himself to the pains of defeated purpose and disappointed hopes. But God's suffering was the price he had to pay for keeping man in the universe and preserving for even a refractory human will the opportunity of changing its bent, of devoting itself to the larger super-individual ends, and thus of realizing the universal principle which is implicit within him.

3. *Sanctification*.—The persistent discharge of duty in the service of others and the world, even when accompanied by sufferings inflicted by nature or by the hands of fellow-men, is attended by increasing perfection; for only thus are the limits of a narrow individuality broken down and the human soul enabled to enter into union with the universal spirit whose nature is essentially that of self-sacrificing benevolence.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. my article on the "Christian Conception of God and the Problem of Natural Evil," in the *American Journal of Theology*, January, 1909.