

ATTEMPTS TO ELIMINATE THE SUPER-
NATURAL FROM THE GOSPEL
HISTORY.*

I.

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It is impossible, within our limits, to enumerate the attempts which have been made to eliminate the Supernatural from the Gospel history. They vary from age to age, they depend on the tone, spirit, and tendency of the time, but whatever these may be the attempt is ever renewed, and those who make the attempt are always persuaded that they have been successful. At all events they proclaim loudly that they have succeeded. Yet every fresh attempt is a criticism on all former attempts, and a confession that so far former attempts have been a failure. Recall to mind the criticism of Strauss on the rational endeavors of the *Aufklärung* movement, and the subsequent criticism of Baur of the theory of Strauss, and the reply of Strauss to Baur. One might write a history of these failures, from the writings of those who successively have been in the van of the attack. Yet this is not the place for such a work.

The attempts have in the main proceeded from science, from philosophy, or from those mainly interested in history. Typical illustrations of the attack from the scientific side are to be found in the writings of Huxley and Spencer; from the side of philosophy one may find the attack proceeding from the various schools, materialistic or ideal, but both schools are equally determined to reduce the processes of Christianity to that level which will bring them within the grasp of the principles they regard as sufficient for the explanation of the world and

* In our January issue will appear the second part of Prof. Iverach's article, in which his suggestive argument will be completed.—Editor.

of all the changes within it. Then there is the attack from the student of history, who is resolved that all historical movements shall be explained on grounds common to them all, and that there will remain in history no movement that cannot be explained from principles which operate along all the lines of history. There is one thing in common to all these attacks. Science claims that all the changes in time and all the movements within the world are to be explained by the general laws of science. Philosophy demands that the Whole and all the interrelations within the Whole shall be explicable through the working of the categories which philosophy has ex-cogitated as the principles which regulate the ongoing of the Whole. And the historical critic is not behind these in his demand that reality shall conform to the canons of historical criticism which they have found to be applicable over a wide range of history. Now all these have their rights, and all of them have a high and noble function to perform. Science, philosophy, and criticism are among the highest achievements of the human mind, and without them the work of man in history could not go on. For my part, I owe too much to them all ever to deny their place and power in the evolution of man.

It is one thing, however, to recognize the worth of the work which these have done in the history of man, it is another thing to yield to their claims when they tend to imprison the human spirit within the cramped, and confined boundaries drawn by rules abstracted from reality, and made absolute in a negative direction.

To abstract is necessary; it is the condition under which finite intelligence is able to deal with the complexity of the real world, if we are to have any possibility of understanding that world. We must isolate certain aspects of experience if we are to have any mastery over it. But then we are apt to place the aspect we have isolated as if it were the reality, and to ignore altogether the elements we have neglected. Thus a chemist complains, as Ostwald did the other day, that the abstractions of the

physicist leave out of account those very aspects of reality which are the essential notes of matter from the chemical point of view. Sufficient for the purpose of the physicist, they misrepresent altogether the objects of the chemist's vision and research. So we might pass round the circle of the sciences and note that each one makes its own assumptions, looks at its own problems from its own point of view, and states its problems according to its own method of procedure. Each of them, too, ignores to a large extent the problems of the others, and each of them tends to describe reality in terms derived from its own abstractions.

Let me recall to you the twofold process of science, philosophy, and criticism. There is a process which we all know. Is it not described in every text-book of logic, is it not set forth in every manual of philosophy? Induction, deduction, generalisation, the process of discovering more and more general laws, till you come to the highest and widest generalisation of all. So you arrive at such laws as those of gravitation, conservation of energy, and the like. These are largely useful, and helpful in many ways. But their use is largely in the way of limitation. They describe conditions which are universal, conditions to which the world is subject, and which the changes of the world must submit to. They are of little use for purposes of explanation. Architecture must be limited by gravitation, but gravitation does not explain architecture. General laws will never account for particular effects. Mill, or Bain, or others, say Jevons, will tell you all about induction, and so on. They will not tell you anything about the other process which after all is the greater part of science and philosophy. They will not tell you how to recognize the uniqueness of the unique, nor enable you to recognize that unique assemblage of qualities which make the thinghood of the thing. What I contend for here is just this, that science, philosophy, and criticism are as much interested in, are as much bound to recognize the concrete reality in its individual concreteness, which

makes it what it is, and not something else, as it is interested in, and bound to recognize the linkage which connects one thing with every thing else. The bearing of this remark on our subject will appear very soon. Abstract science can never represent the real world. Abstract science deals only with those aspects which they have abstracted, and those features of reality which have been neglected clamor for recognition, and must have their place in any final or adequate interpretation of experience. This is true for all science, it is emphatically true of those sciences which deal with man. The synthesis of particulars, which from one point of view is the goal of all science, is accentuated in the case of the most complex of all known objects, the individual being which we call a human person. In dealing with men we have not only to deal with general rules, not only with those qualities which are common to all men, but with that uniqueness which makes this individual a being unlike all other beings, one in all respects never to be repeated, one that has a place which no one else can take, and a work to do which no one else can do. Not to speak of science generally any further let us take psychology, and what we have to say of psychology will be so far true of all science. I take psychology for various reasons. For one reason I take it because of the demands made in its name by men like Sabatier, Amiel, Percy Gardner and others. In their hands psychology has become the almost universal solvent of views regarding the Gospel History which have been the accepted beliefs of generations of Christians. Amiel demands that Psychology shall take the place of history. His statement is, "What our age needs especially is a translation of Christianity from the domain of history to the domain of psychology." Professor Percy Gardner gives his emphatic approval to the statement of Amiel and endeavors to work out the thesis in his *Exploratio Evangelica*.

These writers take the mind of the believer as the

primary object of investigation in religion. What is belief? How does it work? How has it manifested itself throughout those generations of men regarding whom we have sources of information more or less trustworthy? Thus we have any number of investigations into the beliefs of mankind, their nature, their laws of growth, their recurring notions, and the various ways by which they strive to make their beliefs correspond with their experience. It is this vague and large sphere of investigation that is indicated by Amiel, rather than the domain usually indicated by psychology. But even then it is a demand which can hardly be justified. To clear our views let us hear one or two of the masters in psychology. Dr. Ward, universally acknowledged to be one of the foremost psychologists of our time, says: "To be characterized at all, psychology must be characterized from the standpoint from which this experience is viewed. It is the way of expressing this that widely different schools of psychology define it as subjective, all other positive sciences being distinguished as objective. But this seems scarcely more than a first approximation to the truth, and is apt to be misleading. The distinction rather is that the standpoint of psychology is what is sometimes termed 'individualistic,' that of the so-called objective science being 'universalistic,' both alike being objective in the sense of being true for all, consisting in what Kant would call judgments of experience. For psychology is not a biography in any sense, still less a biography dealing with idiosyncracies, and in an idiom having an interest and a meaning for one subject only and incommunicable." (*Encyc. Brit.*, art. *Psychology*). Munsterberg says: "Psychology is not at all an expression of reality, but a complicated transformation of it, worked out for special logical purposes in the service of our life." In truth the idea of psychology apparently, in the minds of Professor Gardner, Sabatier and others, seems to be on a level with that idea of psychology which has given us the popular expressions *psychological moment*, *psychologi-*

cal atmosphere, and the like, which must be characterized simply as mostly psychological nonsense, the product of imperfect knowledge, and inexact thinking.

“Psychology is not a biography in any sense,” says Dr. Ward, and when he says it, he disposes of the notion of Sabatier that Christianity has to be translated from the domain of history to that of psychology. For professedly the claim advanced by Christianity on the part of its founder is one which can be tried not on the grounds of psychology, but on that of a biography. It is a personal, not a racial question. A biography in general terms is a failure. A biography must give us the man in his habit as he lived, must paint him with the warts, must set him forth in all the idiosyncracies which make up uniqueness of his personality, as well as in those common to him with all men. Processes described by psychology are here only limiting conceptions, descriptive of bounds beyond which you may not pass, and of conditions within which you must work.

My contention is that, while you bring to the study of the origin and character of Christianity all the knowledge you can possibly gather from the general history of mankind, from the nature and working of human belief in general from the conditions, circumstances and characteristics of the special time in which Christianity had its origin, you must not be content with that; you must have regard as well to those features of Christianity which make it what it is. What I ask in relation to Christianity is nothing more than is conceded willingly in relation to those periods of history which may be described as epoch-making. In the sciences you seek to set forth processes, laws, recurring cycles, movements which are regarded as continuous, but in history as it is, not merely as we write it, you have to deal with events which only happened once and never again, with persons who lived and worked, and appeared only once in all the uniqueness of their personality in this world's history. It is well to describe the sphere of their work, the condi-

tions of their life, but not to forget their concrete reality. From the point of view of physical chemistry, Napoleon, Wellington, Newton and Goethe, represent only series of complicated chemical processes, which physiologically complete themselves within a certain cycle, to the psychologist they are only a series of psychological processes which went on between their birth and their death, yet history has much to say of these men, and they form for history a series of problems of exceeding interest, so difficult is it for us to think out all those determinations which meet in the life and work of those men. You must recognize in Julius Cæsar more than the expression of the tendency of the Roman people towards a centralized form of Government, and Plato is not a mere type of Greek genius. It is not enough for you in practical life to know man, you must know men. It is not enough to know general tendencies about a period of history, you must come to particulars, and become acquainted with the men in whom moved the spirit of the time in a definite and concrete form.

Thus, in relation to the origin of Christianity, it is not enough to know the history of the times in which it originated, not enough to trace the history and development of the Hebrew people, and to recognize the dominating conception of the time, not enough to trace the laws of human belief as these have been ascertained by a comparative view of the action of the human mind as far as these can be known; there must be here as elsewhere a definite recognition of the actual phenomena of the Christian movement as a whole. Not one of us but recognizes with gratitude the real and helpful work done in psychology, archæology, history and in other spheres by the many workers of the last century. We all gladly welcome the light cast on the New Testament by the persevering and varied research of the present time, we hail with pleasure the descriptions of the life, thought, feeling of the world, Jewish, Greek and Roman, in the first century of our era, and we welcome any connection which may be

traced between Christian life and thought and the life and thought of the time, but we venture to say that no amount of such investigations can give a sufficient account of the origin and character of Christianity. It is simply rigidly, scientifically true that one cannot account for Christianity apart from the creative personality of Jesus Christ. Most of the attempts I have read from the Wolfenbittel Fragmentist down to the most recent are attempts to turn the story of Christianity into a story which began after Christ. After we have studied with minuteness, accuracy and impartiality the connections between Christianity and former and contemporary faiths, let us study Christianity itself with like minuteness, accuracy and impartiality. Many of our friends neglect the particular study, or reduce the peculiarities of Christianity until nothing is left save that which it has in common with the ordinary processes of human history.

Critics bring to the study of the New Testament a number of generalisations which they have taken from the study of history, of psychology, of anthropology, and of science in general. They have learned something from the history of myth, and they carry with them to the study of Christianity what they have learned from the study of mythology. Legendary literature has its characteristics, and they search for such characteristics in Christianity. Then there is the maxim that any given literature bears the marks of its time, and shares the limitations of the period of its production. Then, too, we are reminded often that ancient history is never history in the modern sense of that word. Ancient peoples never cared for what actually happened, they never recorded fact for the sake of fact. History was written for didactic purposes, for edification, for the glorification of a cause, for patriotic purposes, or simply for artistic purposes. They never sought or desired, so we are told, to know what really happened; facts were manipulated in order to point a moral or adorn a tale. In this there

is no doubt a measure of truth. But it is greatly exaggerated. But what truth is in it is equally true of modern history. Read Hegel on the history of philosophy, or on the philosophy of history and you will find that history is simply an illustration of the Hegelian process, thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Read Lange's *History of Materialism*, and you will find an illustration of what has been described above as the very spirit of ancient historians. Read Macaulay and you will find a strong subjective bias, apologetic throughout of the whig party. Read Mommsen, the greatest of modern historians, and one of the most objective of them, and you find a history of Rome written throughout with an eye on the problems of Prussian Politics in the Nineteenth Century. Read Ihne alongside of Mommsen, and you have a history colored throughout by antagonism to Mommsen. Yet we do not accuse these eminent historians in philosophy and history with that wholesale disregard of fact which we find thrown out by Professor Gardner as the note of ancient history. Let us acknowledge that even ancient history had some appreciation of what actually had happened, that Ramsay's claims that Luke was one of the great historians of the world has truth in it, and that that claim can be justly made for other ancient historians as well.

Let us be thankful for the fact that this generation knows the first century of our era as no generation ever did. What the Old Testament and the history of the Hebrew people really was, and what was the influence of the great Hebrew tradition in Palestine and the Diaspora on the life in Palestine in the First Century is known in great fullness. The political conditions and the religious atmosphere of the time are also known. The ideas, the expectations, the hopes and fears of the Hebrew and Hellenistic worlds are so far understood, and in the light of all that knowledge the uniqueness of Christianity shines forth more and more.

We know something about myth which was unknown

to Strauss. Tendencies can be traced with more exactness than could be done by Baur with the means at his command. And there is the further advantage that the documents of the New Testament are acknowledged by most critics to be documents of the First Century. Any processes which are descriptive of the growth of the New Testament history must have their scope within the First Century. Nay, further, mainly in relation to the Synoptic Gospels, the processes through which the materials of the Gospels passed must have their limit within fifty years after the events happened. That is the state of New Testament criticism at the present time. Of course, I must acknowledge the existence of the *Encyclopædia Biblica*, and of Professors Schmiedel and Manin. These writings have been described as Midsummer Madness. I do not object save in the limitation of the noun by the epithet.

Time will not allow me to enumerate in historical order the attempts which have been made to eliminate the supernatural from the Gospel history. Nor is it necessary, for many of them are obsolete, or survive only in an attenuated form. We need not go back to the Wolfenbüttele Fragmentist, or think of Paulus and the like. Strauss has placed them forever in the museum of the superannuated. Nor is Strauss himself much in evidence at the present time. Yet he is in evidence in another form and his mythical theory appears in a transfigured form in Professor Percy Gardner. Strauss has exaggerated, they say, the mythical theory, but there is something in it. So also with Baur, he has exaggerated the tendency criticism. He has extended it over too wide a field, his successors tell us, and has lengthened its action for too long a time. But they say Baur discovered a true cause. But he did not discern its true character, nor its true scope. He ought to have seen that its action began earlier, and its function was more fundamental. The modern form of the Tendency Criticism is to say that the "Synoptic Gospels are the resultant of several factors.

They represent not merely the contemporary feeling and opinion actually within Christian circles between 70 and 100, but also the processes of reflection, the dominant interests and activities of faith, the mental and devotional attitude to Jesus, which must have been current through the memory and teaching of the early Christians during the years that intervened between 30 and 70. "Thus the modern form of the principle of Baur is that the Gospels are the outcome of two main tendencies, first of the impression made on the first disciples by Jesus, and the interpretation of that impression by the first generation of Christians. If you read the *Exploratio Evangelica* of Professor Percy Gardner you will be struck with the fact that all the principles by the use of which Christianity was reduced to the level of ordinary history are present in his book in an attenuated form, but none the less effective on that account. You will remember, too, that all the processes at work are supposed to have completed their action within the First Century. That is the limit set to that process by the concession that the documents of the New Testament are of the First Century. Briefly the contention set forth is that the New Testament and all that it signifies is the work of a multitude, is the outcome not of Jesus Christ's person, work and teaching, but the work of a generation of men of the ordinary stature of humanity. The reflection of these men produced alike the character, the teaching and the work of Jesus Christ. Let me quote from Professor Percy Gardner: "Our Gospels belong to the great formative time, when the great ideas of Christianity were surging up, when inspiration flowed to mankind in a broad stream, and found itself a place amid worldly surroundings with a rapidity which is astonishing. Some geologists hold that there have been periods in the history of our planet when all the processes of biologic evolution took place with far greater rapidity than now. There have also been times of sudden growth of mankind. The first half of the Fifth Century B. C. was to the Greek spirit such a

time when art, poetry, the drama, all the great fruits of Hellenic genius suddenly ripened. Such a time to the Teutonic spirit was the age of Luther and Calvin, when great systems of doctrine arose suddenly. Such was the earliest age of Christianity, of which the New Testament is the eternal fruit. But great times of creation are of all times least critical. Personality and the bias that goes with it are at their strongest, while the absence of self consciousness prevents men from taking precautions against their own bias, or being at all aware of it. It is precisely the power of the inspiration of the early Church which makes the life of Jesus, from the critical and historic points of view, so embarrassing." It is a remarkable passage, and other passages quite as remarkable might be cited from his interesting book. Observe what is alleged. A great period of inspiration flowing to mankind in a broad stream, great ideas surging up, coming we know not whence, working we know not how. We were wont to think of this stream of inspiration as flowing from a personal source, and the great ideas of Christianity as originating in a single mind. And if that creative personality be what his disciples believed him to be, we had a real source of the inspiration, and a real thinker with whom the great ideas of Christianity originated. Apparently great ideas are more intelligible to Professor Gardner, if they do not originate in a single mind. It is a consolation to have from Professor Gardner and those with whom he agrees that there were great ideas in Christianity, and that these ideas require a special inspiration to account for them.

Let us look, however, at the contention that the synoptic Gospels are the result of many factors, and especially that they are the product of Christian reflection. This is the special modern attempt, the special machinery whereby it is sought to reduce Christianity to the level of the ordinary. We read the Synoptic Gospels, and we seem to come into contact with a unique figure, who makes that impression on us which he appears to have made on His

contemporaries. We, too, feel that he speaks as never man spoke. We feel a power of superhuman goodness manifested in his character and action, and we yield ourselves to that impression and feel that there has been no one else of whom it could be said simply and sublimely, "He went about doing good." Yielding to that impression we find that he makes claims on our thinking and acting, a claim to our loyalty and obedience and trust which is absolute. Then, too, in many passages he seems to claim all the future of the world as belonging to Him, and as His own in a very definite sense. He seems to foresee a time when His cause and kingdom will be so visible and successful that men will seek to be identified with them from other motives than those which actuated his first disciples. Are we justified in yielding to these impressions, and in taking him to be what he seems to be in the Gospels? Well, the criticism with which we at present deal comes to us and says, "No, you may not trust those impressions." It is necessary to find out what in the Gospels is fact, and what is the product of reflection on the fact. We must start with the minimum, with that which was intelligible to the first generation of the Jerusalem Church, with what they were able to assimilate. Then we have an ideal construction of the capacity of the Jerusalem Church. We had one picture already from the pen of Prof. Gardner. But the favorite picture is to describe the earliest generation of Christians as merely Jews, with one additional article of faith, that Jesus is the Messiah. Clearly, they say, "Whatever is beyond the accepted comprehension of the early church in the Gospels must be set down as the product of Christian reflection." Thus you must shut out of the original Gospel every universal statement regarding the mission and work of Christ, and every statement regarding the mission and work of Christ, and every statement regarding the world-wide mission of the Christ must be set down as not spoken by Him. This one principle makes an amazing sweep, and if you apply it rigidly, you will be

surprised to find how many of the sayings of Christ it sweeps away. All that is universal is late, then there is another principle at work. All that seems to raise Jesus Christ above the stature of ordinary men, all that claims for Him power beyond ordinary, or insight more than human, must be set down to reflection. Schmiedel acting on these principles reduces the authentic sayings of Jesus to a very few, and these have not much significance. Of any saying of Jesus, of any deed recorded of Him, of the scope of His character as a whole, on these principles you have only to ask, was this a likely thing to be accepted by the Jerusalem Church? and the answer quickly comes, it is far beyond their horizon, it is something they could not have understood, or have accepted. I do not know what the materials are from which the critic derives his view of the early church, and at present I do not inquire. For I find that the picture drawn of the primitive church, of its range of mind, of its qualification generally, only place difficulties in the way of the critical assumption by which the New Testament literature is accounted for. On the one hand the early church is narrow, bigoted, exclusive, the people in it are Jews, holding the whole circle of Jewish beliefs. On the other hand, this people by a process of reflection have transcended their own narrowness, have passed from bigoted particularism to a universalism unknown in the world before, they have created an ideal of a man and of a humanity unsurpassed before or since, they have set up a conception of the fatherhood of God and of the brotherhood of man, confessedly beyond the reach of any other literature, ancient and modern; in short, they have set up a standard of life and conduct and thought which is the standard yet. I say look on this picture and on this, and ask yourselves, are they consistent with one another? Either the early church was much greater than is set forth in the one picture, or the New Testament literature was not the product of the reflection of the early church.