

SABATIER'S THEORY OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE.

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Various attempts have been made within recent years owing to the unsettlement produced by scientific discoveries and the adoption of the historical method of inquiry, to find a new basis for Christian faith. Of these attempts the most noticeable and influential is that which was propounded by Albrecht Ritschl, and has been elaborated by his disciples, some of whom, however, have departed very widely from their professed master. In France the chief exponent of this system is Augustus Sabatier, and it is with his special exposition of it that I propose to deal in this paper. Sabatier writes not only with the utmost sincerity, but with the enthusiasm of one who has reached for himself religious certainty and is anxious to help others in attaining it. "I think", he says, "I have caught glimpses of a steep and narrow path that leads to wide and shining table-lands above. Indeed I have ascended in the footsteps of some others, and I signal in turn to younger, braver pioneers who, in course of time, will make a broader, safer road along which all the caravans may pass, (p. xv). Later on he sums up a personal confession in the following words: "I am religious because I am a man and do not desire to be less than human, and because humanity, in me and in my race, commences and completes itself in religion and by religion. I am Christian because I cannot be religious in any other way, and because Christianity is the perfect and supreme form of religion in this world. Lastly, I am Protestant, not from any confessional zeal. . . . but because in Protestantism alone I can enjoy the heritage of Christ—that is to say, because in it I can be a Christian without placing my conscience under any external yoke, and because I can fortify myself in communion with and adoration of an immanent Deity by consecrating to Him the activity of my intellect, the natural affections of my heart, and

find in this moral consecration the free expansion and development of my whole being". (pp. 222 and ff).

The title of the book in which Sabatier unfolds his views is, "Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion based on Psychology and History"; and it covers a wide sweep of discussion. But the crux of his position, as is that of Ritschl, lies in his theory of religious knowledge; a theory which we believe to be fundamentally unsound, and ultimately subversive of Christian faith.

Sabatier is a Neo-Kantian in philosophy, agreeing with Kant in linking "knowledge to phenomena and in his exaltation of the practical over the theoretic reason".¹ To begin with it is necessary, from this standpoint, to ascertain the origin of the religious sentiment. If it is not the outcome of a spiritual intuition responding to a self-revealing God; if it does not originate in conscience which in its sense of sin acknowledges the infinite holiness, how does it spring up within the soul? Sabatier's explanation is somewhat curious. He ascribes it to the conflict between the ego and non-ego, which involves, according to his theory, a double movement; a passive movement in which external things act upon the ego by sensation and an active movement in which the ego re-acts by the will upon external things. This active movement, again, is subdivided into the intellectual and the moral; the intellectual ending in a discouraging antinomy which is incapable of explanation and the moral in a distressful sense of enslavement. Whence is deliverance to come? From religion, Sabatier replies, but is careful to add that while it liberates the spirit it brings no "theoretical solution to the problem". It consists of faith in the mysterious power on which it feels itself dependent and issues in prayer, which is the essence of religion. "Prayer," to quote Sabatier's own words, "is religion in act—that is to say, real religion." It will be observed that there is an advance here, in one respect, upon Schleiermacher's theory which makes religion to consist of a feeling of dependence. Sabatier adds to the sense of dependence "the movement of liberty". Upon this he writes, "Prayer, springing up out of our state of misery and

(1) The Ritschlian Theology, by Prof. Orr; p. 185.

oppression, delivers us from it". How prayer does this without any theoretic knowledge of God, and of His grace, he leaves not only unexplained but as if it needed no explanation; and goes on to say: "There is in it both submission and faith. Submission makes us recognize and accept our dependence; faith transforms that dependence into liberty. These two elements correspond to the two poles of the religious life; for in all true piety man prostrates himself before the omnipotence that encompasses him, and he rises with a feeling of deliverance and of concord with his God". (p. 29). No doubt this introduces an element omitted from Schleiermacher's theory which it is designed to displace, but in a very vital respect it falls below it. It fails to acknowledge the original and immediate relation of the soul to God prior to all consciousness of it which was maintained by Schleiermacher. With Sabatier "it is not the relation to God which is the first thing in a theory of religion. . On the contrary it begins in the conflict of the ego with the non-ego, motive of which, so far from being religious, is simply the desire to solve the problem of man's relation to the world. And the idea of God which, in some mysterious way springs up through this conflict is neither the result of intuition, nor of rational inference" but "a postulate which the soul makes to itself for the attainment of spiritual freedom or lordship over the world".²

This seems to us a singular example of reasoning. It is putting into the result something which is neither in the cause nor in the factors concerned. But it is not only poor reasoning; it leaves out what we regard as essential truth; the truth hinted at by Paul when he told the Athenians that "God is not far from each one of us; for in him we live and move, and have our being"; and the truth which John enunciated when he taught that the eternal word is "the light which lighteth every man coming into the world". In deducing his theory exclusively from the suggestions of psychology Sabatier has averted his gaze from the unseen realm which lies about us, and from that love of God which seeks the human soul, and having found it, will not let it go. How different is his attitude from that

(2) Orr. p. 73.

of the Scripture writer. "The Scriptures nowhere contemplate man as ignorant of the existence of God; it nowhere depicts the rise or dawn of the idea of His existence in men's minds." "The idea of God's existence" to the Hebrew "is one of the primary thoughts of man; he comes possessed of this thought to face and observe the world and his conception of God already possessed explains the world to him". He "came down from his thought of God upon the world, he did not rise from the world up to his thought of God. . . . And his contemplation of nature and providence and the life of man was never of the nature of a search after God whom he did not know, but always of the nature of a recognition of God whom he knew".³

And with these ancient, devout souls our modern poet, who was very sure of God, clasps hands across the centuries when he writes.

"A Touch divine
And the sealed eyeball owns the mystic rod
Visibly this his garden walketh God."

Passing from this bare outline of religion in its essence, Sabatier introduces the religion of Christ, which he regards as the crown and evolution of the principle of religion. The great distinction of Jesus Christ and that which constitutes Him the author of the perfect religion was this, that "He felt Himself to be in a filial relation toward God and He felt that God was in a paternal relation toward Him". (p. 148). The Christian is one who has a "perfect realization of his relation to God, and of God's relation to him" (p. 137)—that is essential Christianity; and we call it Christianity because this perfect realization does not date from ourselves but was the experience first of all of Jesus Christ. To use Sabatier's own words: "I affirm, then, not only that Christ was the author of Christianity, but that the first germ of it was formed in His inner life and that in that life, first of all, that divine revelation was made which, re-

(3) A. B. Davidson in *Hastings' Dict. of the Bible*, Vol. II, p. 196.

peating and multiplying itself, has enlightened and quickened all mankind". (p. 139). Further on in his work he puts it still more explicitly. "In the consciousness of Christ, what did we find was the essence of the perfect and eternal piety? Nothing more than moral repentance, confidence in the love of the Father and the filial sense of His immediate, active presence in the heart; the indestructible foundation of our liberty, of our moral dignity, of our security, in face of the enigmas of the universe and the mysteries of death". (p. 221). To reproduce this filial piety of Jesus is the one Christian aim, and its attainment is the measure of Christian discipleship.

Sabatier's theory of religious knowledge involves, then, first of all, a movement of piety which is specially marked by the qualities of freedom and spontaneity. This looks like the spiritual doctrine of faith which the New Testament teaches but which, as it is hidden in the priestly system of the Roman church, has also been grievously obscured by the definitions of orthodoxy. But it is defective, not only as we shall consider more fully before we close in its view of Christ, but by the distinction underlying it which is maintained between religious and theoretic knowledge. Through the conflict of the ego with the non-ego the spirit is compelled to pray to the myterious Omnipotence which is immanent in nature and in man, but it does not acquire such a knowledge of God as Christian theology has built up. Faith and knowledge, in fact, by this theory, have no real relation to each other; and faith is under the necessity of keeping itself free from the intrusion of a knowledge which belongs to another sphere and rests upon independent foundations. Now it is true that the religion of Christ has often suffered from the influences of philosophy which has forced it into narrow scholastic moulds; and nothing can be more commendable than the endeavors to get back to the primitive Gospel facts and the testimony of Christian experience. But Christian faith at every point necessarily comes into contact with realities which are the object of theoretic knowledge. Christianity deals throughout with matters not only of piety but of *truth*. It brings us by its "theistic affirma-

tions, its doctrines of providence", of grace and of redemption, into the reign of philosophical discussion; and it is impossible, as well as undesirable, to divorce them from each other. Religion, indeed, is not primarily of theoretic origin and, if Sabatier had contended only for this he would have indicated an important fact; but while religion is begotten of piety it "calls forth," as Prof. Orr has well pointed out, "theoretic activities, and necessarily employs them in the apprehension of its objects; in collating, systematizing and vindicating its own affirmations; in tracing their relation to truth in other spheres; and in seeking a scientific grounding of them in a general philosophy of religion, and in view of the world as a whole".⁴

Christian faith is not based on theoretic reason; so far we agree with Sabatier, "but neither will it place reason under the ban or refuse what friendly aid reason can give it. It will welcome light from all quarters. It will not think a doctrine condemned because, besides being Christian, it can likewise be shown to be rational".

Again, Sabatier's theory of religious knowledge is purely subjective. His statements upon this subject are unwavering and expressed in the lucid diction of which he is a master. He says, "In one sense the knowledge of nature is subjective, for it depends on our mental constitution and on the laws of our knowing faculty. But religious and moral knowledge is subjective in a different manner and for a deeper reason. The object of scientific knowledge is always outside the ego, and it is in knowing it as an object outside the ego that the objectivity of that knowledge consists. But the object of religious or moral knowledge—God, the good, the beautiful—these are not phenomena that may be grasped outside the ego and independently of it. God only reveals Himself in and by piety. . . . Absolutely eliminate the religious subject and you suppress, for him, the object of religion". (p. 304). But surely God exists whether man apprehends Him or not. He is not a phenomenon, it is true, but He is a reality, made known to us in other ways

(4) *The Ritschlian Theology*, p. 242.

than by piety. The heavens declare His glory and the firmament showeth His handiwork. And the conception of God is not confined to pious hearts. The guilty conscience becomes aware of His presence and trembles at His judgment. Besides, to maintain that religious knowledge is purely subjective robs it of the certainty which Sabatier professes to have found; for though we may be assured of our subjective judgments, they may prove after all to be mistaken representations of the individual ego, stimulating, it may be, to a particular mode of life, but beginning and ending with themselves. If the religious consciousness cannot go beyond itself it is confined to a region of dreams and fancies which cannot long maintain their ascendancy or sustain the soul either in its conflict with sin, or its pursuit of the spiritual ideals which, in supreme moments, it fashions for itself. And it appears to me that the weak and indefinite sentiment which is too largely the modern substitute for the robust faith of our fathers is traceable to the influence of the undue subjectivity which is today so widely prevalent and which Sabatier presses upon his readers. Not only does it draw away a man's attention from "the contents of faith to the mood of faith", but it prevents that vital fellowship with the living God which creates and fosters strength of conviction, and is the true dynamic of the religious life.

In the next place Sabatier affirms that religious knowledge is not theoretic but teleological. "In every religious notion", he says, "there will never, at bottom, be anything but a teleological judgment. It is not the essence of things—it is their reciprocal value and their hierarchy which interest religious faith. In the religious notion of God it is not the metaphysical nature—it is the will of God in regard to men which is of most concern". (p. 321). This corresponds with Ritschl's teaching about value-judgments, although Sabatier, for some reason, is careful to avoid the German's phrase. That there is an important truth brought to light here there is none will dispute. Faith is eminently practical and in its thought of God dwells chiefly upon His relation to man, while it recognizes in His will that which is good and acceptable and perfect. But is this the whole truth?

Surely the value-judgment, unless it is based upon reality, does not possess the authority for the soul, does not provide the sustenance and motive for the life which are indispensable to genuine religion. Prof. Orr's criticism is, it seems to us, just when he writes: "Value-judging, we admit, enters deeply into religion. . . . But if the knowledge assumed to be possessed by religion is really such—and this it can be if there is some reliable source from which it is derived—then the judgments it involves are not merely judgments of value; they are judgments of truth—of reality of being, as well".⁵

Once more, according to Sabatier's theory, religious knowledge is symbolical merely; and the title which he gives to his entire religious system is that of "Critical Symbolism". Here the root-principle of Sabatier's theory of religious knowledge is uncovered and displayed. Our knowledge of God, whatever affirmations may be made about it, and whatever stress may be laid upon its teleological worth, is, after all, merely symbolical. It does not apprehend God as He is. Such knowledge is altogether out of our reach. All attempts to attain it involve contradictions from which no escape can be found. "The object of religion", such is Sabatier's summary of the whole question, "is transcendent; it is not a phenomenon. In order to express that object, our imagination has nothing at its disposal but phenomenal images, and our understanding, logical categories, which do not go beyond space and time. . . . The true content of the symbol is entirely subjective; it is the conscious relation of the subject to God, or rather, it is the way he feels himself affected by God". (pp. 322, 327).

The divergence between this theory and the teaching of the New Testament is open and complete. The whole atmosphere is different. In the New Testament we move among divine realities. God is everywhere present as the personal, living, righteous and merciful God. The Apostle fixes and embodies it all in the pregnant sentences: "We know Him that is true and we are in Him that is true, even in His son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life".

(5) The Ritschlian Theology, p. 245.

The three ultimates of knowledge are self, the world and God; and our knowledge of each is in its sphere real, and certain, and verifiable. To ascribe reality to the knowledge of self and the world, and symbolism only to our knowledge of God, is to undermine the verity of all knowledge and to necessitate, if pushed to its conclusions, a blank agnosticism. This is the verdict of Prof. Flint who in his great work on Agnosticism says: "The view"—that is Sabatier's which we have been considering—"seems to be at once thoroughly agnostic and thoroughly erroneous. It implies that all knowledge of God is unreal and all thought of Him meaningless. Were it true there would be no rational and moral communion between God and man". (pp. 542 and ff).

While we claim, in contradistinction to Sabatier's theory, that our knowledge of God is real, just as real as of the self, or of any object in nature, we recognize the limitations of human thought. But the limitations apply to self and the world, as well as to God, although our consciousness of mystery in the sphere of religion is keener and more constantly present to the mind. All our knowledge is correlated so that the increase of the boundaries in one department of it, operates on the rest; as Tennyson has so strikingly suggested in one of his shortest and most familiar poems:

"Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower—but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is."

Such knowledge, we confess with the Psalmist, is too wonderful for us; it is high, we cannot attain unto it. But the flower is a reality to us, and our knowledge of it is by no means inconsiderable; and such too, is our knowledge of God and of the great truths of the Christian faith.

The defects and incompleteness of Sabatier's theory of relig-

ious knowledge appear most prominently in his application of it to great religious questions. As his view is avowedly subjective, he consistently sets aside the idea of a supernatural divine revelation. Revelation whether in the pages of modern religious mystics, or of sacred Scripture, is nothing but the efflorescence of piety. It is in no sense a message of God to man, but, as Dr. Forsyth has expressed it in one of his epigrammatic sentences, "it is a message of the elite to the mass, a summons from a superman".⁶

Upon this, however, there is no time to dwell, as we desire before we bring this paper to a conclusion, to say a few words upon Sabatier's view of Christ. Religion being a relation to God, the perfect religion is man's perfect realization of his relation to God, and of God's relation to him. Such is Christianity, and it is Christianity, not Buddhism or Zoroastrianism because this experience was first realized by Jesus. Jesus, to sum it up in a word, was the first and only perfectly pious man in whom the religious principle acted without check or taint. "The outlook of Jesus, it is true", he writes, "is not our own. He shared the outlook of His race and time. But His filial piety did not depend upon His knowledge of the universe". (p. 155). To ascribe more to Him, the possession of the divine nature, is to remove Him from history and transport Him into the sphere of metaphysics, with which Sabatier and his school will have nothing to do.

We have only two comments to offer. The first is that this view fails utterly to do justice to the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ. It does not even assume His sinlessness for, according to Sabatier, His consciousness of His relation to God, and of God's relation to Him, though it was filial in spirit and perfect in its confidence, involved moral repentance. But leaving out this element and accepting Christ's piety as perfect from its inception to its culmination at His death, was it piety alone which isolated Jesus from all other teachers and men, and which explains His unique influence upon the world? Was it because of His piety that men exclaimed, what manner of man is this?

(6) *Positive Preaching*, p. 218.

or that Paul described himself as a servant of Jesus Christ? Was it because Jesus was the first to realize His sonship toward God that Peter proclaimed Him to be a Prince and a Savior to give repentance unto Israel and remission of sins? A theory which requires the obliteration of three-fourths of the Gospel records and leaves the problem of Christianity and its triumphs unexplained, is not a theory which will long hold sway over the modern mind.

But there is a further comment which we offer upon this view of Christ. It not only denies the doctrine of the Incarnation but it omits all the essential verities which are included in the evangelical conception of Christianity. There is nothing here about sin, nothing about reconciliation between God and man, nothing about redemption. It is a religion without the cross and without a Savior. All the great problems which press upon us for solution are left in their naked vastness, as if they existed not. While "the acknowledgement of God in Christ, accepted by the reason, solves" for us, as Browning affirms, "all questions in the earth and out of it"—this theory has no light to shed upon them, no word to illumine their awful mystery. Such a system, although it may have attraction for minds emerging from the superstitions of Romanism, or perplexed by philosophic doubts and difficulties, is destined soon to pass away. The name of Jesus stands for more than piety. His influence is not merely that of example but is quick and redeeming. "He is the strongest spiritual power among men to-day"; and "there is a cloud of witnesses to the truth that His spiritual force makes bad men good".⁷

"The world sits at the feet of Christ,
 Unknowing, blind and unconsoled;
 It yet shall touch His garment's fold
 And feel the Heavenly Alchemist,
 Transform its very dust to gold."

(7) In Relief of Doubt, p. 67.