

He has spent his substance in riotous living. But he has come home again. And when he came home, the father said, 'This my son'; 'bring forth the best robe.'

He is imperfect still. Here is the paradox of perfection. We shall be perfect whilst we are still imperfect. That is what our Lord means. He means that we shall be perfect as sons, perfect in having entered into the real relationship of sons, in having the heart of sons, in loving as only sons

can love. 'I am bold to say'—this is the Pharisee:

I am bold to say,
I can do with my pencil what I know,
What I see, what at bottom of my heart
I wish for, if I ever wish so deep—
Do easily, too—when I say, perfectly,
I do not boast, perhaps.

'Father, thou knowest that I love thee.' This is the perfection of the son.

The Present Theological Situation.

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I.

THE outstanding feature of the theological activity of the last twenty years has been the thorough-going application in the sphere of religion of a method or principle of study which was first applied with good result in other branches of human inquiry. The guiding idea of the nineteenth century—the idea of evolution or development—bade us see everywhere not sudden inbreaks of creative power, but continuous progressive change from the simple to the complex, from the lower to the higher, by means of an immanent power working according to certain observable laws. Fruitful in the world of nature, this scientific conception became increasingly applied to the study of history, converting an atomistic into an organic view of things; until in the latter half of the nineteenth century the method—generally spoken of, in its particular relation to the study of history, as 'the historical method'—employed in the sphere of religion gave rise to a new reading of religious history.

The first application of the new evolutionary conception was within Christianity itself. Its general result was to emphasize the fact that the revelation of God to Israel culminating in Jesus Christ was a gradual progressive revelation, suited or accommodated to the developing religious capacities of the race and individuals. When this was realized, many formerly felt difficulties found a

natural explanation. The imperfect morality of the Old Testament, for example, and the correspondingly imperfect forms of worship which it brings before us, ceased to appear unworthy of a place in the record of a Divine revelation. Doctrines and practices which were morally impossible as the last word of revelation became intelligible when seen in their place as steps or stages in the process.

But this idea, once adopted, could not fail sooner or later to demand a wider and more thorough-going application. An evolution or development there is within Christianity. That is granted. May not Christianity itself also come within evolution? Two things combined to delay until recent years the coming forward of this further question. *First*, there was the belief in the special revelational character of the Christian religion, according to which it was viewed as a religious phenomenon of an exceptional miraculous character extra- or supra-natural in its rise and progress, infallible in its sacred books, over against all manner of false religions—'a holy island in the sea of history.' In the very nature of the case, such a belief discouraged any attempt to relate, for purposes of elucidation or explanation, the religion of the Old and New Testaments to extra-Christian religious history. *Second*, even where such a belief was no longer actively operative, our knowledge of non-Christian religions was so meagre that the indispensable fact-basis for the application of such a method of study was not yet provided. The

recent widening, however, of the horizon of our knowledge of civilizations and religions outside the Christian, through the investigations of scientific workers in many fields, especially in archæology, ethnology, and comparative mythology, as well as the close practical contact with other peoples and their history through geographical exploration, international commerce, and missionary enterprise,—all this has emphasized the resemblances and affinities between religions everywhere, and in particular has encouraged the endeavour to interpret or explain the religion of the Old and New Testaments as far as possible by connexion with or dependence on other religions.

Historically, it is said,—such is the contention of the present—Christianity is but one religion among others, one of the many forms which the religious consciousness has assumed in the long course of its development. It entered the world in certain historical circumstances, it appeared in a certain historical context. Let it be studied then ‘scientifically,’ that is to say, by the principles of historical criticism applied with success in other branches of inquiry. Let it be considered—the religion of Jesus Christ, including its Old Testament preparation—in its place in the stream of religious history, and in essential connexion with religions chronologically and geographically adjacent to it. Only so, it is held, will the nature of Christianity as an historical religion reveal itself: only so will the superiority of Christianity to other religions, if superiority there be, be rationally or scientifically established.

In the field of Old Testament research, this has meant a new interest of recent years in the study of the general religious environment of Israel. Of this new interest the most characteristic outcome has been the rise and progress of a school or movement called the ‘Pan-Babylonian,’ which seeks to show that the influence of Babylonia on the religion and culture of Israel was much greater than Old Testament pioneers, such as Ewald, Robertson Smith, and Wellhausen, had even suspected. This movement was first brought into prominence by the famous *Babel-Bibel* lectures of the Assyriologist, Friedrich Delitzsch, delivered in the winters of 1902 and 1903 before the Emperor in Berlin. The chief names associated with the movement are those of Winckler, Zimmern, Jeremias, Gunkel, and Jensen. The tendency throughout is to convert a great part of the Old Testament

history, and not a little of the New Testament as well, into forms of Babylonian myth. The ethical monotheism of Israel, for example, is traced by Jeremias largely to extra-Israelitish influences. And the New Testament representation of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus is represented by Zimmern as little more than a repetition of Marduk and Tammuz myths.

In relation to the New Testament, the new point of view has meant a deepening of interest in the question of Christian origins, and a thorough-going attempt to understand much even in the central writings of Christianity through the influence of the non-Christian environment, not only Judaistic but extra-Judaistic—Babylonian, Egyptian, Persian, Greek, and Roman. The general point of view in this connexion may fairly well be represented by the thesis of Gunkel, one of the pioneers of the movement, that ‘in its origin and shaping (*Ausbildung*), in important, even in some essential, points the religion of the New Testament stood under the influence of alien religions’ (*Zum religionsgesch. Verständnis des N.T.*, p. 1).

Of the new interest, more particularly in the Judaistic background of the New Testament, the most significant token is the recent heightened appreciation of the apocalyptic element in our Lord’s teaching. So largely, indeed, is attention devoted to this question that it may, without injustice, be described as constituting the storm-centre of New Testament criticism at the present time. The generally accepted view of criticism for many years had been that Jesus’ teaching concerning the Kingdom of God had to do with the present rather than with the future, and was ethical rather than eschatological. But as the result of more recent study of the Jewish apocryphal literature, as embodied in such a work, for instance, as Bousset’s *Jewish Religion in New Testament Times*, the tendency has been of late to emphasize the apocalyptic element in the Gospels, and to hold that for Jesus the Kingdom was, if not wholly, yet in the main or on the whole, future and catastrophic. It was Johannes Weiss who, in 1892, in his work on *The Preaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God*, started this new mode of interpretation. He maintained that Jesus’ conception of the Kingdom was not partly present and partly future, but wholly future, eschatological, and transcendent. In the second edition of his book, in 1900, Weiss considerably modified his view. But his original

position has been adopted and developed by others who claim to find in eschatology the master-key to Jesus' teaching. Prominent among these is the name of the brilliant young Strassburg scholar, Albert Schweitzer, who in 1906 published his work *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, translated into English under the title of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*—a book which largely through Professor Sanday's characteristically generous estimate has met with much more appreciation in this country than in Germany. In Schweitzer's representation Jesus becomes practically the victim of eschatology, a *Zukunftsfanatiker*, and His whole ethical ideal and teaching is depreciated as merely an *Interimsethik*, conditioned by His belief in the near approach of the end. Just as in time of war, special laws are proclaimed for the special circumstances of the time, to be abrogated as soon as these circumstances pass away, so the moral precepts of Jesus, especially those of a negative and world-despising kind, are to be understood as applying only to a state of affairs which is *interim* and about to pass away.

Now this deepened interest in the question of Israelitish and Christian origins involves, it is evident, a great widening of the province of Biblical exegesis and theology. The old standpoint of Biblical exegesis, according to which for the Bible student there existed only the Old Testament and the New, is gone; and the sphere of investigation has been enlarged to include, not only extra-canonical Jewish religion and literature, but the whole religious literature of the time—Jewish and non-Jewish alike. No longer can it be held to be enough for the explanation of a Biblical idea to take all the scriptural passages where it occurs and, by combining them, arrive at its general meaning. Its antecedents must be inquired into. It must be investigated in the context of general religious history. Heitmüller, for example, seeks to explain the meaning and usage of the New Testament phrase 'in the name of Jesus' by bringing forward analogies in Babylonian, Persian, Mandaean and other forms of religion and worship where the name of the Deity is thought of as itself a part of the Divine essence, the mere utterance of which acts as a kind of charm. And Gunkel, in like fashion, places the whole Christ-picture of the New Testament—not only the Christological presentation of Paul and John, but the Gospel narratives of the Infancy,

Baptism, Temptation, Transfiguration, Resurrection, and Ascension—in the wide-flowing stream of religious history, and endeavours to explain, or at least interpret, the New Testament representation of Christ by the help of mythological conceptions diffused throughout the Orient, and derived chiefly from Babylonia.

No doubt this new genetic, or embryological, study of Biblical conceptions has been by many, in the enthusiasm of a new love, carried to unwarranted extremes. What is at best analogy has been too often hastily interpreted as evidence of dependence or borrowing, little justice being done to the properly Israelitish and Christian development itself. Under the influence of such methods, some have even undertaken to explain the New Testament representation of Christ without the assumption of the historical personality of Jesus. But such extravagances are not of the essence of the movement, and already the further progress of research is leading to a conservative reaction against such extreme positions. In Old Testament study, for example, the result of placing the religion and literature of Israel alongside the religion and literature of the ancient Oriental world has been to set in a clearer light than ever the distinctive features of the religion of Israel. If somewhat of its previously conceived originality has disappeared in the process—many features which were once thought to be exclusively Israelitish now being known to be common to surrounding peoples—never before has its uniqueness been so convincingly demonstrated. In particular, the outcome of the 'Pan-Babylonian' movement has been to emphasize the fact that Babylonia had almost nothing to teach Israel ethically, and it was from ethical sources within herself, and not from outside influence, that the monotheism of Israel immediately arose.

So also, in New Testament research, with reference to the radical apocalyptic movement, it is being increasingly recognized that a purely eschatological interpretation of Jesus' teaching is unwarrantable. Jesus may have adopted the apocalyptic ideas of His time, but in the very act of adopting them He remoulded and transformed them. He gave them a new moral and religious significance, filling them with a new content which made His teaching independent of the passing thought of the age. Though the eschatological interpretation of the Gospels, no doubt, has a

relative justification in that it has tended to rectify the balance which formerly had dipped too far on the side of a purely ethical interpretation, yet to adopt a merely apocalyptic point of view is to unduly narrow the significance of Jesus' teaching.

Such extravagances in detail, then, as we have referred to, are being corrected by the progress of research itself, and are not to be looked upon as affecting the permanent gains of the new method. Of these gains we may mention three.

First, Biblical exegesis has become for the first time scientific and historical. Hitherto Biblical interpretation had been too much dominated by dogmatic and practical considerations. Men did not ask what the prophets said, nor what the apostles meant, but what God had to tell them by the mouth of His prophets and apostles. The result was that, as Von Dobschütz has pointed out, each generation treated them as men of their own time. In Neander and Godet, Paul is a pectoral theologian, in Baur he is a Hegelian, in Luthardt an orthodox, and in Ritschl a genuine Ritschlian. But now the Biblical writings are seen in their true perspective, against the background of their time, and the first question is—What was the meaning of the men who wrote them, and how were they understood by those to whom they were written? This characteristic of modern exegesis is sometimes called Romanticism, but it is better spoken of as a new feeling for historical sincerity, what the Germans call *Wirklichkeitssinn*.

Second, as the result of this historical orientation of the Biblical writings there has come about a revivifying or revitalizing of Bible study. The Bible, whatever else it is, has become for us in a new sense a genuinely human book, and as such subject in great measure to the same general conditions as mould other forms of human literature.

Third, the new study of religion has enlarged and deepened our conception of the ways of God with men. Just as the Darwinian theory of organic development when truly interpreted, instead of banishing God from the world as was at first thought, has led to a wider and a grander teleology: so the general historical study of religion, by showing us continuous progressive action of the Divine on the human rather than sudden special revelation, will, when realized, lead to a wider and worthier theodicy.

II.

Closely connected with this new interest in the history of religion, with its determinative influence on the conception of the place of Christianity in religious history, is a second, and in some respects more significant, feature of the present, namely, the application of psychology to the interpretation of religious experience. The comparative study of religions, with the auxiliary disciplines of genetic psychology, anthropology, and ethnology, by investigating the growth and development of the religious consciousness racially as well as individually, and emphasizing the essential unity of the religious nature of man everywhere—a unity manifesting itself in similar beliefs, ceremonials, and institutions where similar conditions are fulfilled, has provided the data for a psychological study of religion correlating and interpreting the facts with a view to the discovery of general laws of religious development.

The sphere in which the new science claims to be most serviceable is in the interpretation of the facts of conversion. The literature of the subject, apart from preliminary magazine articles, began with the publication in 1899 of Professor Starbuck's *Psychology of Religion*—a biological, psychological study of the fact of conversion in relation to the phenomena of adolescence. This was followed in 1900 by Professor Coe's *The Spiritual Life*, which, while written from the same point of view, contained a larger element of experimental data more particularly regarding the different types of religious experience. Best known, however, in this connexion is the name of the late Professor James, who, in his Edinburgh Gifford Lectures (1899–1901), *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, made the religious experiences of mankind the subject of most careful scientific investigation.

But more recently the new science has been applied to the interpretation of another department of religious experience—the facts of inspiration and prophecy. Last year there was published a book by the Warden of St. Deiniol's Library, Hawarden (Dr. Joyce), entitled *The Inspiration of Prophecy*, in which psychology is applied to the explanation of prophetic inspiration, both Hebrew and Christian. Just as in the sphere of religious history, so long as Christianity was set over against all other religions as the one supernatural religion, there was no possibility of the rise of an historical science of

religion, so, as long as inspiration was looked upon as the monopoly of one faith—a break in religious experience as the Christian religion was conceived to be in religious history—there was no possibility of raising the question how far prophetic inspiration could be brought under a law applicable to it and analogous experiences outside the pale of revealed religion. But with the waning of the old mechanical theory of inspiration, and the increasing investigation, under the influence of evolutionary thought, of the religious consciousness in its various manifestations, Christian and extra-Christian, points of resemblance and affinity revealed themselves, and the question was raised whether the prophetic inspirational experience is something altogether apart and distinct, *sui generis*, or not rather the exhibition, though on a higher and more impressive scale, of the same activities as come into play in religious consciousness everywhere. In this book the author, by an investigation into the first beginnings of prophecy and an attempt to trace its connexion with earlier and cruder spiritual manifestations, seeks to show that the fact of prophetic inspiration in Israel was not an abrupt interposition in religious history and experience but rather an evolution out of lower spiritual operations such as those of the diviner and the soothsayer.

This is not to explain away prophecy as a mere natural psychological occurrence apart from Divine influence. The evolution of prophecy is not, any more than the evolution of nature, inconsistent with Divine action. There is nothing derogatory to the Divine in supposing that the means employed by the Spirit of God in the case of the prophet was to heighten and direct psychic powers that belonged in some measure naturally to men of a certain temperament. What it does mean is—and the outcome of it may, with sufficient precision for the present, be defined by saying—that a new mode of conceiving the method of Divine action has been introduced which makes the working of the mind of the prophet more intelligible, bringing it within the domain of law and orderly control. God is no longer conceived as standing apart from human nature, asserting His presence by occasional arbitrary interference with the laws of its working, but as revealing Himself through the psychical laws of man's constitution—over all, yet in all and through all working out His will. The supernatural of revealed religion is

seen to be not the extra-natural but the higher natural, the natural raised to a higher power; and along this line, as we have seen along the line of historical revelation, a new conception of the ways of the Spirit of God with men is introduced.

The science is still in its infancy, and many of its general results may require revision and modification in the light of future inquiry. The significant thing about the new movement is that those at the head of it are not theologians, but scientists who have come to the study of religion from outlying provinces, for the most part from the medico-physiological side. Their interest, accordingly, is not primarily in religion, but in science. Little wonder, then, that up to the present the naturalistic atmosphere of medical and physiological studies has too much surrounded their work, and that ground has been given for the suspicion that the new interpretation of the facts of religious experience is an ally of that all-consuming movement of the day which is directed against the supernatural. The tendency always is, as in the case of the historical science of religion, to investigate the facts of primitive religious consciousness, with the avowed intention of finding therein the key to the understanding of the higher religious consciousness, and as a result to do injustice to the uniqueness of Christian experience. But whatever judgment may be passed upon some of the theories put forward in connexion with the new science, one must recognize how aptly many of the facts collected and systematized for its own purposes serve at least to illustrate the experiences of saint and prophet. Already it can be seen that just as the historical study of religion has revolutionized our thought of Biblical history, so the new study of the psychology of religion is likely to bring about no less a revolution in our conception of Biblical religious experience. So much so that not only for the theologian, but for the preacher—concerned as he is with the interpretation of religious experience to his own generation—the study of the psychology of religion is one of the most imperative duties of the present. Of this Dr. Sanday's recent hypothetical attempt in *Christologies, Ancient and Modern*, to interpret the relation between the Divine and the human in the consciousness of our Lord by means of the theory of the subliminal self is but the latest significant token.

III.

The effect of this scientific historico-psychological spirit of recent thought is that Systematic Theology for the present is somewhat in the background, elbowed out of front rank by the two dominant interests of comparative religion and religious psychology. This relative obscuring of Systematic, however, can be but temporary. Already voices are being raised calling for advance to a restatement of Christian doctrine on the broadened basis supplied by recent scientific research and in terms more suited to modern thought. 'Enough of history' (wir haben zu Viel von Geschichte), Weinel was heard exclaiming recently, as he lamented the dominance of the scientific historical interest at the expense of the more properly religious and ethical.

Though the time for such a restatement, however, may not yet have arrived, the whole trend of recent historical and psychological research has been in the direction of making ever clearer what the line of cleavage must be between the dogmatic theologies of the future. The alternative—as reflected in the 'Jesus-Paul' controversy in Germany, and the 'Jesus or Christ' controversy in this country—is to be between what Sanday has called a 'full' and a 'reduced' or 'attenuated' Christology and theology. No longer is it enough to talk of a Christocentric Christianity, and to call 'Back to Christ.' We have to define our Christ. Even with Christ in the centre, the issue is between an anthropocentric Christianity and a theocentric Christianity.

The tendency of the new scientific evolutionary movement in religion is towards the former. Its standpoint is well represented by Bousset in his recent work, *What is Religion?* where the whole history of the religious life of mankind is looked on as the great handiwork of God, 'a constant intercourse of God with man, of man with His maker, in accordance with the stage to which he has attained.' The supernatural is not denied. Rather the whole religious history of mankind becomes a natural supernatural process, the religion of the Old and New Testaments representing but the purest and highest form to which religion has yet attained. The tendency accordingly is to subsume Jesus under a general notion, to make Him one of a class, the greatest religious 'genius' or 'hero' of history, far above all other men, and

in virtue of His life and message truly our Lord and Master, but yet one of a series.

The absoluteness of Jesus for the life of religion is thus challenged to-day from the side of historical evolutionism. The old dogmas must go—the Divinity of Christ, the Trinity, the conceptions of Atonement and Redemption. This 'dogmatic' Christianity is due to Paul. He innovated, it is said, when he made Christianity the religion of redemption or atonement. We must get back from Paul, back from the subtleties and dogmas of the Judaic and pagan theologoumena of the apostles, back to the simple and direct teaching of the Master. And just here, it is claimed, is the great achievement of the scientific scholarship of the past twenty years—the separation, namely, which it has made between the Divine 'Christ of faith' and the human 'Jesus of history.' For practically two thousand years—such is the representation—Paulinism has overlaid Christianity, and the Church has been building on a wrong foundation. For the first time recent scientific research has enabled us to return to the 'religion of Jesus' as distinct from 'the gospel of Christ.'

Now it may readily be agreed that in this new emphasis on the 'Jesus of history' there is much of the nature of real gain. Whatever else it has done, recent study of the historical Jesus has recalled theology to the genuine historical humanity of Jesus as the basis of any worthy dogmatic construction of His Person. In traditional orthodoxy scant justice often was done to this side of the nature of Christ. The human and the Divine in Him were too apt to be thought of as in contrast and opposition to each other, with the result that in general the human was hidden and lost in the Divine. Against this Docetic tendency of the old Christology, historical criticism has been moving in the direction of doing fuller justice to the genuine humanity of our Lord by insisting that the Divine in Him—if Divine there was—must be approached and understood through the human, as it was through the human alone that it could manifest itself.

Not from the Christological point of view only, however, but also in a twofold practical reference, is the new emphasis on the 'historic Jesus' of importance at the present day.

First, from the point of view of Christian missions. Not in Israel alone, but wherever man is feeling after God if haply he may find Him, there is

to be recognized the immanent working of God preparing the way for the fuller light of Christianity. The Western formulation of the Christian faith, however, may appear strange and alien to the modes of thought of other lands. What they want is not our doctrinal construction of Christ or our theories of Atonement; they want to see Jesus for themselves, the Jesus of history who has come 'not to destroy, but to fulfil' the religious longings of their nature, and to bring them to God.

Second, from the point of view of the present demand for social reform. If 'liberty,' the first of the three great watchwords of the French Revolution, was the battle-cry of the nineteenth century, 'brotherhood,' the last of its watchwords, is the rallying cry of the beginning of the twentieth. In the midst of the present social and industrial unrest, men say, 'Let us get behind the Christ of the Churches to the Jesus of history.' 'We would see Jesus'—the human Jesus, the man of Nazareth and Galilee, the friend and brother of the poor and the oppressed.

The genuine humanity of Jesus, however, being recognized as our starting-point, can we rest with that and say that 'Jesus never outstepped the limits of the purely human.' Such is the position of the historical evolutionary school. Bousset, for example, holds that historical research has shown that Jesus throughout His life placed Himself on the side of man, and not on the side of God. He never made Himself the object of faith. He was at most but its first and greatest subject. So the absolute value of Christ for faith is denied, and Christianity reduced to one religion by the side of other religions which have appeared in history—the highest, indeed, that has yet appeared, but not necessarily final and absolute.

Can the absoluteness of Christianity, and of Jesus Christ, then, not be conserved. This is the issue at present between a 'full' and a 'reduced' Christology; and towards deciding this issue the most recent movements of historical criticism itself contribute not a little. The tendency in 'liberal' thought has been to narrow the basis of Christology to the Synoptic Gospels; and even within the Synoptics to limit it to the oldest evangelic tradition that is critically ascertainable. But even in this oldest tradition, as Harnack and others admit, Jesus is given a unique and absolute significance. He is not simply a man, not even the greatest of men, but God manifest in the flesh. He represents

not the ascent of man, but the descent of God. Historical criticism itself has destroyed the fiction that there was ever a time in the history of the Church when it held the 'religion of Jesus' as distinct from the 'gospel of Christ.' As far back as one can go we find only faith in and worship of a risen and glorified Christ, and Wellhausen's attempt in his Synoptic researches to get behind apostolic tradition and the 'Christ of faith' to a merely human prophetic Jesus has broken down.

Recent thought, accordingly, has been compelled to recognize that between the teaching of Jesus and that of Paul there is an essential continuity. The latter is but an unfolding of what is already implicit in the former. The apostle's teaching has, indeed, elements in it which are plainly derived from rabbinical Judaism and from the exigencies of his own dialectic, but these affect its form rather than its content; and the attempt of Wrede and others to find a deep gulf between the Synoptic 'religion of Jesus' and the Pauline 'gospel of Christ' must be dismissed as unsuccessful.

Further, it is being increasingly recognized that for a 'full' Christology and an adequate representation of the Person and Work of Christ there is demanded a wider basis than negative criticism has in the past admitted. The impression which Jesus made upon His followers is itself an element in the estimate which must be formed of Him. And much of 'liberal' Christianity is in this plight: that, if its interpretation of Jesus is true, nothing is left to explain how such an impression could have arisen.

Towards reinforcing these more positive conclusions of recent historical research and helping forward the desiderated restatement of Christian doctrine, the new Philosophy—variously described as Pragmatism (James), Activism, or Vitalism (Eucken, Bergson)—with its emphasis on conscience, feeling, and will as opposed to mere intellect, will have its own contribution to make. When, with the help of the fresh knowledge and the fresh principles and methods referred to, the new synthesis has been attained it will be one in which the central Christian truth of the absoluteness of Jesus for faith will be more clearly recognized than ever—the truth which is the implicit basis and rationale of the Christian missionary enterprise—that 'in none other is there salvation: for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved.'