

The Poetry of Christian Dogma, G. Santayana



1 Tess. 5:

9 Ty Gud hafwer icke satt oss til wrede, utan at äga salighet, genom vår HERra JEsu Christum; 10 Den för oss död är; på det, ehwad wi wake eller sofwe, skole wi lefwa samt med honom. 11 Derföre förmaner eder inbördes; och upbygger hwar den andra, såsom I ock gören. 12 Men wi bedje eder, käre bröder, at I kännen dem som arbeta ibland eder, och stå eder före i HERranom, och förmana eder: 13 Håller dem dess kärare, för deras werks skull, och warer fridsamme med dem. 14 Men wi bedje eder, käre bröder, förmaner de osediga, tröster de klenmodiga, hjälper de swaga, warer långmodige wid hwar man. 15 Ser til, at ingen wedergäller någrom ondt för ondt; utan alltid farer efter det goda inbördes, och med hwar man. 16 warer alltid glade. 17 Bedjen utan återwändö. 18 warer tacksamme i all ting; ty det är Guds wilje om eder, genom JEsu Christum. 19 Utsläcker icke Andan.

THE POETRY OF CHRISTIAN DOGMA

The deathbed of Paganism was surrounded by doctors. Some, the Stoics, advised a conversion into pantheism (with an allegorical interpretation of mythology to serve the purposes of edification); others, the Neo-Platonists, prescribed instead a supernatural philosophy, where the efficacy of all traditional rites would be justified by incorporation into a system of universal magic, and the gods would find their place among the legions of spirits and demons that were to people the concentric spheres. But these doctors had no knowledge of the patient's natural constitution; their medicines, prescribed with the best intentions, were in truth poisons and only hastened the inevitable end. Nor had the unfortunate doctors the consolation of being heirs. Parasites that they were, they perished with the patron on whose substance they had fed, and Christianity, their despised rival, came into sole possession.

Yet Neo-Platonism, for all we can see, responded as well as Christianity to the needs of the time, and had besides great external advantages in its alliance with tradition, with civil power, and with philosophy. If the demands of the age were



for a revealed religion and an ascetic morality, Neo-Platonism could satisfy them to the full. Why, then, should the Hellenic world have broken with the creations of its own genius, so plastic, eloquent, and full of resource, to run after foreign gods and new doctrines that must naturally have been stumbling-blocks to its prejudices, and foolishness to its intelligence? Shall we say that the triumph of Christianity was a miracle? Is it not a doubtful encomium on a religion to say that only by miracle could it come to be believed? Perhaps the forces of human reason and emotion suffice to explain this faith. We prefer to think so; otherwise, however complete and final the triumph of Christianity might be, it would not be justified or beneficent.

Neo-Platonism arose in the midst of the same conditions as Christianity. There was weariness and disgust with the life of nature, decay of political virtue, desire for some personal and supernatural good. It was hardly necessary to preach the doctrine of original sin to that society; the visible blight that had fallen on classic civilization was proof enough of that. What it was necessary to preach was redemption. It was necessary to point to some sphere of refuge and of healthful resort, where the ignominies and the frivolities of this world might be forgotten, and where the hunger of a heart left empty by its corroding passions might be finally satisfied. But where find such a supernatural world? By what revelation learn its nature and be assured of its existence?

Neo-Platonism opened vistas into the supernatural, but the avenues of approach which it had chosen and the principle which had given form to its system foredoomed it to failure as a religion. This avenue was dialectic, and this principle the hypostasis of abstractions. Plato had pointed out this path in his genial allegories. He had, by a poetical figure, turned the ideas of reason into the component forces of creation. This was, with him, a method of expression, but being the only method he was inclined to employ, it naturally entangled and occasionally, perhaps, deceived his intelligence; for a poet easily mistakes his inspired tropes for the physiology of Nature. Yet Platonic dogma, even when meant as such, retained the transparency and significance of a myth; philosophy was still a language for the expression of experience, and dialectic a method and not a creed. But the master's counters, current during six centuries of intellectual decadence, had become his disciples' money. Each of his abstractions seemed to them a discovery, each of his metaphors a revelation. The myths of the great dialogues, and, above all, the fanciful machinery of the *Timæus*, interpreted with an incredible literalness and naive earnestness, such as only Biblical exegesis can rival, formed the starting point of the new revelation. The method and insight thus obtained were then employed in filling the *lacunæ* of the system and spreading its wings wider and wider, until a prodigious hierarchy of supernatural existences had been invented, from which the natural world was made to depend as a last link and lowest emanation.

The baselessness and elaboration of this theology were, of course, far from being obstacles to its success in such an age. On the contrary, the less evidence could be found in common experience for what a man appeared to know, the more



deeply, people inferred, must he be versed in supernatural lore, and the greater, accordingly, was his authority. Nor was the spell of personal genius and even holiness wanting in the leaders of the new philosophy to lend it colour and persuasiveness with the many, to whom metaphysical conceptions are less impressive than is an eloquent personality, or a reputation for miraculous powers. Plotinus, to speak only of the greatest of the sect, had, in fact, a notable success in his day. His lectures at Rome, we are told, were attended by all the fashion and intellect of the capital; and his large and systematic thought, his subtlety and precision, his comparatively sober eloquence, and his assurance, if we may say so, in treading the clouds, have made him at all times a great authority with those persons who look in philosophy rather for impressive results than for solid foundations. His contemporaries were eminently persons of that type. A hungry man, when you bring him bread, does not stop to make scrupulous inquiries about the mill or the oven from which you bring it.

But the trouble was that the bread of Plotinus was a stone. The heart cannot feed on thin and elaborate abstractions, irrelevant to its needs and divorced from the natural objects of its interest. Men will often accept the baldest fictions as truths; but it is impossible for them to give a human meaning to vacuous conceptions, or to grow to love the categories of logic, interweaving their image with the actions and emotions of daily life. Religion must spring from the people; it must draw its form from tradition and its substance from the national imagination and conscience. Neo-Platonism drew both form and substance from a system of abstract thought. Its gods were still-born, being generated by logical dichotomy. Only in the lower purlieu of the system, filled in by accepting current superstitions, was there any contact with something like vital religious forces. But those minor elements—hopes and fears about another world, fasts and penances, ecstasies and marvels—had no necessary relation to that metaphysical system. Such practices could be found in every religion, in every philosophical sect of the time. The Alexandrian dialectic of the supernatural accordingly remained a mere schema or skeleton, to be filled in with the materials of some real religion, if such a religion should arise. As such a schema the Neo-Platonic system actually passed over to Christian theology, furnishing the latter with its categories, its language, and its speculative method. But that dialectic served in Christianity to give form to a religious substance furnished by Hebrew and apostolic tradition, a religious substance such as, after the Pagan religion was discredited, Neo-Platonism necessarily lacked and was powerless to generate.

We have mentioned apostolic tradition. It is fortunately not requisite for our purpose to discuss the origin of this tradition, much less to decide how much of what the Christian Church eventually taught might be traced to its Founder. That is a point which even the most thorough scholars seem still to decide mainly by their prejudices, perhaps because other material is lacking on which to base a decision. For our present object we may admit the most extreme hypotheses as equally possible. The whole body of Catholic doctrine may have been contained in the oral teaching of Christ; or, on the other hand, a historical Jesus may not have existed at all, or may have been one among many obscure Jewish



revolutionists, the one who, by accident, came afterward to be regarded as the initiator of a movement to which all sorts of forces contributed, and with which he had really had nothing to do. In either case the fact remains which alone interests us here; that after three or four centuries of confused struggles, an institution emerged which called itself the Catholic Church. This church, possessed of a recognized hierarchy and a recognized dogma, triumphed, both over the ancient religion, which it called Paganism, and over its many collateral rivals, which it called heresies. Why did it triumph? What was there in its novel dogma and practice that enchained the minds that Paganism could retain no longer, and that would not be content with Neo-Platonism, native, philosophical, and pliable as that system was?

The answer, to be adequate, would have to be long; but perhaps we may indicate the spirit in which it ought to be conceived. Paganism was a religion, but was discarded because it was not supernatural: Neo-Platonism could not be maintained because it was not a religion. Christianity was both. It had its roots in a national faith, moulded by the trials and passions of a singularly religious people; that connection with Judaism gave Christianity a foothold in history, a definite dogmatic nucleus, which it was a true instinct in the Church never to abandon, much as certain speculative heresies might cry out against the unnatural union of a theory of redemption with one of creation, and of a world-denying ascetic idealism, which Christianity was essentially, with the national laws, the crude deism, and the strenuous worldliness of the ancient Jews. However, had the Gnostic or Manichæan heresies been victorious, Christianity would have been reduced to a floating speculation: its hard kernel of positive dogma, of Scripture, and of hieratic tradition would have been dissolved. It would have ceased to represent antiquity or to hand down an ancestral piety: in fine, by its eagerness to express itself as a perfect philosophy, it would have ceased to be a religion. How essential an element its Hebraism was, we can see now by the study of Protestantism, a group of heresies in which the practical instincts and sentimental needs of the Teutonic race found expression, by throwing over more or less completely the Catholic dogma and ritual. Yet in this revolution the Protestants maintained, or rather increased, the intensity of their religious consciousness, chiefly by absorbing the elements of Hebrew law and prophecy which they could find in the Bible and casting into that traditional form their personal conscience or their national ideals.

How inadequate, on the other hand, this Hebraic element would have been to constitute the supernatural religion that was now needed, appears very clearly from the case of Philo Judæus. Here was a man, heir to all the piety and fervour of his race, who at the same time was a Neo-Platonist three hundred years before Plotinus and, as it were, the first Father of the Church. But his religion, being national, was not communicable and, being positivistic, was at fundamental odds with the spirit of his philosophy. It remained, therefore, as a merely personal treasure and heirloom, the possession of his private life: his disciples, had he had any, must either have been Jews themselves or else must have been the followers merely of his philosophy. His religion could not have passed to them; they



would have regarded it, as we might regard the Christianity of Kant or the wife-worship of Comte, as a private circumstance, a detached trait, less damaging, perhaps, to his philosophy than favourable to his loyal heart.

Philo, in his commentaries on the Bible, sought to envelop and transform every detail in the light of Platonic metaphysics. His interpretations are often violent, but the ingenuous artifice of them would have delighted his contemporaries as much as himself, and was adopted afterward by all the Fathers and theologians of the Church. Philo's theology was thus a success, even a model; yet he failed, because of the inadequacy of his religion. What interest, what relevance, could it have for any Gentile to hear about the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt or out of Babylon, or about circumcision and prescribed meats, or about the sacrifices in the Temple? What charm or credibility could he find in further promises of glorious kingdoms, flowing with milk and honey? Such images might later appeal to the imagination of New England Puritans and make a religion for them: but what meaning could they have to the weary Pagan? No doubt the Jews carried with them an ideal of righteousness, and prosperity; but the Gentile was sick of heroes and high priests and founders of cities. Stoic virtues were as vain in his eyes as Sybaritic joys. He did not wish his passions to be flattered, not even his pride or the passion for a social Utopia. He wished his passions to be mortified and his soul to be redeemed. He would not look for a Messiah, unless he could find him on a cross.

That is the essence of the matter. What overcame the world, because it was what the world desired, was not a moral reform—for that was preached by every sect; not an ascetic regimen—for that was practised by heathen gymnosophists and Pagan philosophers; not brotherly love within the Church—for the Jews had and have that at least in equal measure; but what overcame the world was what Saint Paul said he would always preach: Christ and him crucified. Therein was a new poetry, a new ideal, a new God. Therein was the transcript of the real experience of humanity, as men found it in their inmost souls and as they were dimly aware of it in universal history. The moving power was a fable—for who stopped to question whether its elements were historical, if only its meaning were profound and its inspiration contagious? This fable had points of attachment to real life in a visible brotherhood and in an extant worship, as well as in the religious past of a whole people. At the same time it carried the imagination into a new sphere; it sanctified the poverty and sorrow at which Paganism had shuddered; it awakened tenderer emotions, revealed more human objects of adoration, and furnished subtler instruments of grace. It was a whole world of poetry descended among men, like the angels at the Nativity, doubling, as it were, their habitation, so that they might move through supernatural realms in the spirit while they walked the earth in the flesh. The consciousness of new loves, new duties, fresh consolations, and luminous unutterable hopes accompanied them wherever they went. They stopped willingly in the midst of their business for recollection, like men in love; they sought to stimulate their imaginations, to focus, as it were, the long vistas of an invisible landscape.



If the importunity of affairs or of ill-subdued passions disturbed that dream, they could still return to it at leisure in the solitude of some shrine or under the spell of some canticle or of some sacramental image; and meantime they could keep their faith in reserve as their secret and their resource. The longer the vision lasted and the steadier it became, the more closely, of course, was it intertwined with daily acts and common affections; and as real life gradually enriched that vision with its suggestions, so religion in turn gradually coloured common life with its unearthly light. In the saint, in the soul that had become already the perpetual citizen of that higher sphere, nothing in this world remained without reference to the other, nor was anything done save for a supernatural end. Thus the redemption was actually accomplished and the soul was lifted above the conditions of this life, so that death itself could bring but a slight and unessential change of environment.

Morbid as this species of faith may seem, visionary as it certainly was, it is not to be confused with an arbitrary madness or with personal illusions. Two circumstances raised this imaginative piety to a high dignity and made it compatible with great accomplishments, both in thought and in action. In the first place the religious world constituted a system complete and consistent within itself. There was occasion within it for the exercise of reason, for the awakening and discipline of emotion, for the exertion of effort. As music, for all that it contains nothing of a material or practical nature, offers a field for the development of human faculty and presents laws and conditions which, within its sphere, must be obeyed and which reward obedience with the keenest and purest pleasures; so a supernatural religion, when it is traditional and systematic like Christianity, offers another world, almost as vast and solid as the real one, in which the soul may develop. In entering it we do not enter a sphere of arbitrary dreams, but a sphere of law where learning, experience, and happiness may be gained. There is more method, more reason, in such madness than in the sanity of most people. The world of the Christian imagination was eminently a field for moral experience; moral ideas were there objectified into supernatural forces, and instead of being obscured as in the real world by irrational accidents formed an intelligible cosmos, vast, massive, and steadfast. For this reason the believer in any adequate and mature supernatural religion clings to it with such strange tenacity and regards it as his highest heritage, while the outsider, whose imagination speaks another language or is dumb altogether, wonders how so wild a fiction can take root in a reasonable mind.

The other circumstance that ennobled the Christian system was that all its parts had some significance and poetic truth, although they contained, or needed to contain, nothing empirically real. The system was a great poem which, besides being well constructed in itself, was allegorical of actual experience, and contained, as in a hieroglyph, a very deep knowledge of the world and of the human mind. For what was the object that unfolded itself before the Christian imagination, the vision that converted and regenerated the world? It was a picture of human destiny. It was an epic, containing, as it were, the moral autobiography of man. The object of Pagan religion and philosophy had been a



picture of the material cosmos, conceived as a vast animal and inhabited by a multitude of individual spirits. Even the Neo-Platonists thought of nothing else, much as they might multiply abstract names for its principles and fancifully confuse them with the spheres. It was always a vast, living, physical engine, a cosmos of life in which man had a determinate province. His spirit, losing its personality, might be absorbed into the ethereal element from which it came; but this emanation and absorption was itself an unchanging process, the systole and diastole of the universal heart. Practical religion consisted in honouring the nearest gods and accepting from them man's apportioned goods, not without looking, perhaps, with a reverence that needed no ritual, to the enveloping whole that prescribed to gods and men their respective functions. Thus even Neo-Platonism represented man as a minor incident in the universe, supernatural though that universe might be. The spiritual spheres were only the invisible repetitions of the visible, as the Platonic ideas from the beginning had been only a dialectic reduplication of the objects in this world. It was against this allotment that the soul was rebelling. It was looking for a deliverance that should be not so much the consciousness of something higher as the hope of something better.

Now, the great characteristic of Christianity, inherited from Judaism, was that its scheme was historical. Not existences but events were the subject of its primary interest. It presented a story, not a cosmology. It was an epic in which there was, of course, superhuman machinery, but of which the subject was man, and, notable circumstance, the Hero was a man as well. Like Buddhism, it gave the highest honour to a man who could lead his fellow-men to perfection. What had previously been the divine reality—the engine of Nature—now became a temporary stage, built for the exigencies of a human drama. What had been before a detail of the edifice—the life of man—now became the argument and purpose of the whole creation. Notable transformation, on which the philosopher cannot meditate too much.

Was Christianity right in saying that the world was made for man? Was the account it adopted of the method and causes of Creation conceivably correct? Was the garden of Eden a historical reality, and were the Hebrew prophecies announcements of the advent of Jesus Christ? Did the deluge come because of man's wickedness, and will the last day coincide with the dramatic denouement of the Church's history? In other words, is the spiritual experience of man the explanation of the universe? Certainly not, if we are thinking of a scientific, not of a poetical explanation. As a matter of fact, man is a product of laws which must also destroy him, and which, as Spinoza would say, infinitely exceed him in their scope and power. His welfare is indifferent to the stars, but dependent on them. And yet that counter-Copernican revolution accomplished by Christianity—a revolution which Kant should hardly have attributed to himself—which put man in the centre of the universe and made the stars circle about him, must have some kind of justification. And indeed its justification (if we may be so brief on so great a subject) is that what is false in the science of facts may be true in the science of values. While the existence of things must be understood by referring them to their causes, which are mechanical, their



functions can only be explained by what is interesting in their results, in other words, by their relation to human nature and to human happiness.

The Christian drama was a magnificent poetic rendering of this side of the matter, a side which Socrates had envisaged by his admirable method, but which now flooded the consciousness of mankind with torrential emotions. Christianity was born under an eclipse, when the light of Nature was obscured; but the star that intercepted that light was itself luminous, and shed on succeeding ages a moonlike radiance, paler and sadder than the other, but no less divine, and meriting no less to be eternal. Man now studied his own destiny, as he had before studied the sky, and the woods, and the sunny depths of water; and as the earlier study produced in his soul—*anima naturaliter poeta*—the images of Zeus, Pan, and Nereus, so the later study produced the images of Jesus and of Mary, of Heaven and Hell, of miracles and sacraments. The observation was no less exact, the translation into poetic images no less wonderful here than there. To trace the endless transfiguration, with all its unconscious ingenuity and harmony, might be the theme of a fascinating science. Let not the reader fancy that in Christianity everything was settled by records and traditions. The idea of Christ himself had to be constructed by the imagination in response to moral demands, tradition giving only the barest external points of attachment. The facts were nothing until they became symbols; and nothing could turn them into symbols except an eager imagination on the watch for all that might embody its dreams.

The crucifixion, for example, would remain a tragic incident without further significance, if we regard it merely as a historical fact; to make it a religious mystery, an idea capable of converting the world, the moral imagination must transform it into something that happens for the sake of the soul, so that each believer may say to himself that Christ so suffered for the love of him. And such a thought is surely the objectification of an inner impulse; the idea of Christ becomes something spiritual, something poetical. What literal meaning could there be in saying that one man or one God died for the sake of each and every other individual? By what effective causal principle could their salvation be thought to necessitate his death, or his death to make possible their salvation? By an ὑστερον πρότερον natural to the imagination; for in truth the matter is reversed. Christ's death is a symbol of human life. Men could "believe in" his death, because it was a figure and premonition of the burden of their experience. That is why, when some Apostle told them the story, they could say to him: "Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet: thou hast told me all things whatsoever I have felt." Thus the central fact of all Christ's history, narrated by every Evangelist, could still be nothing but a painful incident, as unessential to the Christian religion as the death of Socrates to the Socratic philosophy, were it not transformed by the imagination of the believer into the counterpart of his own moral need. Then, by ceasing to be viewed as a historical fact, the death of Christ becomes a religious inspiration. The whole of Christian doctrine is thus religious and efficacious only when it becomes poetry, because only then is it the felt counterpart of personal experience and a genuine expansion of human life.



Take, as another example, the doctrine of eternal rewards and punishments. Many perplexed Christians of our day try to reconcile this spirited fable with their modern horror of physical suffering and their detestation of cruelty; and it must be admitted that the image of men suffering unending tortures in retribution for a few ignorant and sufficiently wretched sins is, even as poetry, somewhat repellent. The idea of torments and vengeance is happily becoming alien to our society and is therefore not a natural vehicle for our religion. Some accordingly reject altogether the Christian doctrine on this point, which is too strong for their nerves. Their objection, of course, is not simply that there is no evidence of its truth. If they asked for evidence, would they believe anything? Proofs are the last thing looked for by a truly religious mind which feels the imaginative fitness of its faith and knows instinctively that, in such a matter, imaginative fitness is all that can be required. The reason men reject the doctrine of eternal punishment is that they find it distasteful or unmeaning. They show, by the nature of their objections, that they acknowledge poetic propriety or moral truth to be the sole criterion of religious credibility.

But, passing over the change of sentiment which gives rise to this change of doctrine, let us inquire of what reality Christian eschatology was the imaginative rendering. What was it in the actual life of men that made them think of themselves as hanging between eternal bliss and eternal perdition? Was it not the diversity, the momentousness, and the finality of their experience here? No doubt the desire to make the reversal of the injustices of this world as melodramatic and picturesque as possible contributed to the adoption of this idea; the ideal values of life were thus contrasted with its apparent values in the most absolute and graphic manner. But we may say that beneath this motive, based on the exigences of exposition and edification, there was a deeper intuition. There was the genuine moralist's sympathy with a philosophic and logical view of immortality rather than with a superstitious and sentimental one. Another life exists and is infinitely more important than this life; but it is reached by the intuition of ideals, not by the multiplication of phenomena; it is an eternal state not an indefinite succession of changes. Transitory life ends for the Christian when the balance-sheet of his individual merits and demerits is made up, and the eternity that ensues is the eternal reality of those values.

For the Oriental, who believed in transmigration, the individual dissolved into an infinity of phases; he went on actually and perpetually, as Nature does; his immortality was a long Purgatory behind which a shadowy Hell and Heaven scarcely appeared in the form of annihilation or absorption. This happened because the Oriental mind has no middle; it oscillates between extremes and passes directly from sense to mysticism, and back again; it lacks virile understanding and intelligence creative of form. But Christianity, following in this the Socratic philosophy, rose to the conception of eternal essences, forms suspended above the flux of natural things and expressing the ideal suggestions and rational goals of experience. Each man, for Christianity, has an immortal soul; each life has the potentiality of an eternal meaning, and as this potentiality is or is not actualized, as this meaning is or is not expressed in the phenomena of



this life, the soul is eternally saved or lost. As the tree falleth, so it lieth. The finality of this brief and personal experiment, the consequent awful solemnity of the hour of death when all trial is over and when the eternal sentence is passed, has always been duly felt by the Christian. The Church, indeed, in answer to the demand for a more refined and discriminating presentation of its dogma, introduced the temporary discipline of Purgatory, in which the virtues already stamped on the soul might be brought to greater clearness and rid of the alloy of imperfection; but this purification allowed no essential development, no change of character or fate; the soul in Purgatory was already saved, already holy.

The harshness of the doctrine of eternal judgment is therefore a consequence of its symbolic truth. The Church might have been less absolute in the matter had she yielded more, as she did in the doctrine of Purgatory, to the desire for merely imaginary extensions of human experience. But her better instincts kept her, after all, to the moral interpretation of reality; and the facts to be rendered were uncompromising enough. Art is long, life brief. To have told men they would have infinite opportunities to reform and to advance would have been to feed them on gratuitous fictions without raising them, as it was the function of Christianity to do, to a consciousness of the spiritual meaning and upshot of existence. To have speculated about the infinite extent of experience and its endless transformations, after the manner of the barbarous religions, and never to have conceived its moral essence, would have been to encourage a dream which may by chance be prophetic, but which is as devoid of ideal meaning as of empirical probability. Christian fictions were at least significant; they beguiled the intellect, no doubt, and were mistaken for accounts of external fact; but they enlightened the imagination; they made man understand, as never before or since, the pathos and nobility of his life, the necessity of discipline, the possibility of sanctity, the transcendence and the humanity of the divine. For the divine was reached by the idealization of the human. The supernatural was an allegory of the natural, and rendered the values of transitory things under the image of eternal existences. Thus the finality of our activity in this world, together with the eternity of its ideal meanings, was admirably rendered by the Christian dogma of a final judgment.

But there was another moral truth which was impressed upon the believer by that doctrine and which could not be enforced in any other way without presupposing in him an unusual philosophic acumen and elevation of mind. That is the truth that moral distinctions are absolute. A cool philosophy suffices to show us that moral distinctions exist, since men prefer some experiences to others and can by their action bring these good and evil experiences upon themselves and upon their fellows. But a survey of Nature may at the same time impress us with the fact that these goods and evils are singularly mixed, that there is hardly an advantage gained which is not bought by some loss, or any loss which is not an opportunity for the attainment of some advantage. While it would be chimerical to pretend that such compensation was always adequate, and that, in consequence, no one condition was ever really preferable to any other, yet the perplexities into which moral aspiration is thrown by these



contradictory vistas is often productive of the desire to reach some other point of view, to escape into what is irrationally thought to be a higher category than the moral. The serious consideration of those things which are right according to human reason and interest may then yield to a fanatical reliance on some facile general notion.

It may be thought, for instance, that what is regular or necessary or universal is therefore right and good; thus a dazed contemplation of the actual may take the place of the determination of the ideal. Mysticism in regard to the better and the worse, by which good and bad are woven into a seamless garment of sorry magnificence in which the whole universe is wrapped up, is like mysticism on other subjects; it consists in the theoretic renunciation of a natural attitude, in this case of the natural attitude of welcome and repulsion in the presence of various things. But this category is the most fundamental of all those that the human mind employs, and it cannot be surrendered so long as life endures. It is indeed the conscious echo of those vital instincts by whose operation we exist. Levity and mysticism may do all they can—and they can do much—to make men think moral distinctions unauthoritative, because moral distinctions may be either ignored or transcended. Yet the essential assertion that one thing is really better than another remains involved in every act of every living being. It is involved even in the operation of abstract thinking, where a cogent conclusion, being still coveted, is assumed to be a good, or in that æsthetic and theoretic enthusiasm before cosmic laws, which is the human foundation of this mysticism itself.

It is accordingly a moral truth which no subterfuge can elude, that some things are really better than others. In the daily course of affairs we are constantly in the presence of events which by turning out one way or the other produce a real, an irrevocable, increase of good or evil in the world. The complexities of life, struggling as it does amidst irrational forces, may make the attainment of one good the cause of the unattainableness of another; they cannot destroy the essential desirability of both. The niggardliness of Nature cannot sterilize the ideal; the odious circumstances which make the attainment of many goods conditional on the perpetration of some evil, and which punish every virtue by some incapacity or some abuse,—these odious circumstances cannot rob any good of its natural sweetness, nor all goods together of their conceptual harmony. To the heart that has felt it and that is the true judge, every loss is irretrievable and every joy indestructible. Eventual compensations may obliterate the memory of these values but cannot destroy their reality. The future can only furnish further applications of the principle by which they arose and were justified.

Now, how utter this moral truth imaginatively, how clothe it in an image that might render its absoluteness and its force? Could any method be better than to say: Your eternal destiny is hanging in the balance: the grace of God, the influences of others, and your own will reacting upon both are shaping at every moment issues of absolute importance. What happens here and now decides not



merely incidental pains and pleasures — which perhaps a brave and careless spirit might alike despise — but helps to determine your eternal destiny of joy or anguish, and the eternal destiny of your neighbour. In place of the confused vistas of the empirical world, in which the threads of benefit and injury might seem to be mingled and lost, the imagination substituted the clear vision of Hell and Heaven; while the determination of our destiny was made to depend upon obedience to recognized duties.

Now these duties may often have been far from corresponding to those which reason would impose; but the intention and the principle at least were sound. It was felt that the actions and passions of this world breed momentous values, values which being ideal are as infinite as values can be in the estimation of reason — the values of truth, of love, of rationality, of perfection — although both the length of the experience in which they arise and the number of persons who share that experience may be extremely limited. But the mechanical measure of experience in length, intensity, or multiplication has nothing to do with its moral significance in realizing truth or virtue. Therefore the difference in dignity between the satisfactions of reason and the satisfactions of sense is fittingly rendered by the infinite disproportion between heavenly and earthly joys. In our imaginative translation we are justified in saying that the alternative between infinite happiness and infinite misery is yawning before us, because the alternative between rational failure or success is actually present. The decisions we make from moment to moment, on which the ideal value of our life and character depends, actually constitute in a few years a decision which is irrevocable.

The Christian doctrine of rewards and punishments is thus in harmony with moral truths which a different doctrine might have obscured. The good souls that wish to fancy that everybody will be ultimately saved, subject a fable to standards appropriate to matters of fact, and thereby deprive the fable of that moral significance which is its excuse for being. If every one is ultimately saved, there is nothing truly momentous about alternative events: all paths lead more or less circuitously to the same end. The only ground which then remains for discriminating the better from the worse is the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the path to salvation. All moral meanings inhere, then, in this life, and the other life is without significance. Heaven comes to replace life empirically without fulfilling it ideally. We are reduced for our moral standards to phenomenal values, to the worth of life in transitory feeling. These values are quite real, but they are not those which poetry and religion have for their object. They are values present to sense, not to reason and imagination.

The ideal of a supervening general bliss presents indeed an abstract desideratum, but not the ideal involved in the actual forces of life; that end would have no rational relation to its primary factors; it would not be built on our instinctive preferences but would abolish them by a miraculous dream, following alike upon every species of activity. Moral differences would have existed merely to be forgotten; for if we say they were remembered, but transcended and put to



rest, we plunge into an even worse contradiction to the conscience and the will. For if we say that the universal bliss consists in the assurance, mystically received, that while individual experiences may differ in value they all equally conduce to the perfection of the universe, we deny not merely the momentousness but even the elementary validity of moral distinctions. We assert that the best idea of God is that least like the ideal of man, and that the nearer we come to the vision of truth the farther we are from the feeling of preference. In our attempt to extend the good we thus abolish its essence. Our religion consists in denying the authority of the ideal, which is its only rational foundation; and thus that religion, while gaining nothing in empirical reality, comes to express a moral falsehood instead of a moral truth.

If we looked in religion for an account of facts, as most people do, we should have to pass a very different judgment on these several views. The mechanical world is a connected system and Nature seems to be dynamically one; the intuitions on which mysticism feeds are therefore true intuitions. The expectation of a millennium is on the other hand quite visionary, because the evidence of history, while it shows undeniable progress in many directions, shows that this progress is essentially relative, partial, and transitory. As for the Christian doctrine of the judgment, it is something wholly out of relation to empirical facts, it assumes the existence of a supernatural sphere, and is beyond the reach of scientific evidence of any kind. But if we look on religion as on a kind of poetry, as we have decided here to do,—as on a kind of poetry that expresses moral values and reacts beneficently upon life,—we shall see that the Christian doctrine is alone justified. For mysticism is not an imaginative construction at all but a renunciation or confusion of our faculties; here a surrender of the human ideal in the presence of a mechanical force that is felt, and correctly felt, to tend to vaguer results or rather to tend to nothing in particular. Mysticism is not a religion but a religious disease. The idea of universal salvation, on the other hand, is the expression of a feeble sentimentality, a pleasant reverie without structure or significance. But the doctrine of eternal rewards and punishments is, as we have tried to show, an expression of moral truth, a poetic rendering of the fact that rational values are ideal, momentous, and irreversible.

It would be easy to multiply examples and to exhibit the various parts of Christianity as so many interpretations of human life in its ideal aspects. But we are not attempting to narrate facts so much as to advance an idea, and the illustrations given will perhaps suffice to make our conception intelligible. There is, however, a possible misunderstanding which we should be careful to avoid in this dangerous field of philosophic interpretation. In saying that a given religion was the poetic transformation of an experience, we must not imagine that it was thought to be such—for it is evident that every sincere Christian believed in the literal and empirical reality of all that the Christian epic contained. Nor should we imagine that philosophic ideas, or general reflections on life, were the origin of religion, and that afterward certain useful myths, known to be such by their authors, were mistaken for history and for literal prophecy. That sometimes



happens, when historians, poets, or philosophers are turned by the unintelligent veneration of posterity into religious prophets. Such was the fate of Plato, for instance, or of the writer of the "Song of Solomon"; but 110 great and living religion was ever founded in that way.

Had Christianity or any other religion had its basis in literary or philosophical allegories, it would never have become a religion, because the poetry of it would never have been interwoven with the figures and events of real life. No tomb, no relic, no material miracle, no personal derivation of authority, would have existed to serve as the nucleus of devotion and the point of junction between this world and the other. The origin of Christian dogma lay in historic facts and in doctrines literally meant by their authors. It is one of the greatest possible illusions in these matters to fancy that the meaning which we see in parables and mysteries was the meaning they had in the beginning, but which later misinterpretation had obscured. On the contrary—as a glance at any incipient religious movement now going on will show us—the authors of doctrines, however obvious it may be to every one else that these doctrines have only a figurative validity, are the first dupes to their own intuitions. This is no less true of metaphysical theories than of spontaneous superstitions: did their promulgator understand the character of their justification he would give himself out for a simple poet, appeal only to cultivated minds, and never turn his energies to stimulating private delusions, not to speak of public fanaticisms. The best philosophers seldom perceive the poetic merit of their systems.

So among the ancients it was not an abstract observation of Nature, with conscious allegory supervening, that was the origin of mythology, but the interpretation was spontaneous, the illusion was radical, a consciousness of the god's presence was the first impression produced by the phenomenon. Else, in this case too, poetry would never have become superstition; what made it superstition was the initial incapacity in people to discriminate the objects of imagination from those of the understanding. The fancy thus attached its images, without distinguishing their ideal locus, to the visible world, and men became superstitious not because they had too much imagination, but because they were not aware that they had any.

In what sense, then, are we justified in saying that religion expresses moral ideals? In the sense that moral significance, while not the source of religions, is the criterion of their value and the reason why they may deserve to endure. Far as the conception of an allegory may be from the minds of prophets, yet the prophecy can only take root in the popular imagination if it recommends itself to some human interest. There must be some correspondence between the doctrine announced or the hopes set forth, and the natural demands of the human spirit. Otherwise, although the new faith might be preached, it would not be accepted. The significance of religious doctrines has therefore been the condition of their spread, their maintenance, and their development, although not the condition of their origin. In Darwinian language, moral significance has been a spontaneous variation of superstition, and this variation has insured its survival as a religion.



For religion differs from superstition not psychologically but morally, not in its origin but in its worth. This worth, when actually felt and appreciated, becomes of course a dynamic factor and contributes like other psychological elements to the evolution of events; but being a logical harmony, a rational beauty, this worth is only appreciable by a few minds, and those the least primitive and the least capable of guiding popular movements. Reason is powerless to found religions, although it is alone competent to judge them. Good religions are therefore the product of unconscious rationality, of imaginative impulses fortunately moral.

Particularly does this appear in the early history of Christianity. Every shade of heresy, every kind of mixture of Christian and other elements was tried and found advocates; but after a greater or less success they all disappeared, leaving only the Church standing. For the Church had known how to combine those dogmas and practices in which the imagination of the time, and to a great extent of all times, might find fitting expression. Imaginative significance was the touchstone of orthodoxy; tradition itself was tested by this standard. By this standard the canon of Scripture was fixed, so as neither to exclude the Old Testament, which the pure metaphysicians would have rejected, nor to accept every gospel that circulated under the name of an apostle, and which might please a wonder-loving and detail-loving piety. By the same criterion the ritual was composed, the dogma developed, the nature of Christ defined, the sacraments and discipline of the Church regulated. The result was a comprehensive system where, under the shadow of a great epic, which expanded and interpreted the history of mankind from the Creation to the Day of Doom, a place was found for as many religious instincts and as many religious traditions as possible; while at the same time the dialectic proficiency of an age that inherited the discipline of Greek philosophy, introduced into the system a great consistency and a great metaphysical subtlety. Time mellowed and expanded these dogmas, bringing them into relation with the needs of a multiform piety; a justification was found both for asceticism and for a virtuous naturalism, both for contemplation and for action; and thus it became possible for the Church to insinuate her sanctions and her spirit into the motives of men, and to embody the religion of many nations during many ages.

The Church's successes, however, were not all legitimate; they were not everywhere due to a real correspondence between her forms and the ideal life of men. It was only the inhabitants of the Græco-Roman world that were quite prepared to understand her. When the sword, or the authority of a higher worldly civilization, carried her influence beyond the borders of the Roman Empire we may observe that her authority seldom proved stable. She was felt, by those peoples whose imaginative traditions and whose moral experience she did not express, to be something alien and artificial. The Teutonic races finally threw off what they felt to be her yoke. If they reconstructed their religion out of elements which she had furnished, that was only because religion is bound to be traditional, and they had been Christians for many hundred years. A wholly new philosophy or poetry could not have taken immediate root in their minds; even the philosophy which Germany has since produced, when the national spirit was



reaching, so to speak, its majority, hardly seems able to constitute an independent religion, but takes shelter under some form of Christianity, however much the spirit of that religion may be transformed.

At first, indeed, the new movement took the Bible for its starting-point. So heterogeneous a book, which was already habitually interpreted in so many fanciful ways, was indeed an admirable basis for the imagination to build upon. The self-reliant and dreamy Teuton could spin out of the Biblical chronicles and rhapsodies convictions after his own heart; while his fixed persuasion that the Bible was the word of God, was strengthened (not illegitimately) by his ability to make it express his own moral ideals. The intensity of his religion was proportionate to the degree in which he had made it the imaginative rendering of his own character.

Protestantism in its vital elements was thus a perfectly new, a perfectly spontaneous religion. The illusion that it was a return to primitive Christianity was useful for controversial purposes and helped to justify the iconoclastic passions of the time; but this illusion did not touch the true essence of Protestantism, nor the secret of its legitimacy and power as a religion. This was its new embodiment of human ideals in imaginative forms, whereby those ideals became explicit and found a remarkable expression in action. These ideals were quite Teutonic and looked to inner spontaneity and outward prosperity; they were more allied to those of the Hebrews than to those of the early Christians, whose religion was all miracles, asceticism, and withdrawal from the world. Indeed we may say that the typical Protestant was himself his own church and made the selection and interpretation of tradition according to the demands of his personal spirit. What the Fathers did for the Church in the fourth century, the Reformers did for themselves in the sixteenth, and have continued to do on the occasion of their various appearances.

If we judge this interpretation by poetic standards, we cannot resist the conclusion that the old version was infinitely superior. The Protestant, with his personal resources, was reduced to making grotesquely and partially that translation of moral life which the Fathers had made comprehensively and beautifully, inspired as they were by all the experience of antiquity and all the hopes of youthful Christendom. Nevertheless, Protestantism has the unmistakable character of a genuine religion, a character which tradition passively accepted and dogma, regarded as so much external truth, may easily lose; it is in correspondence with the actual ideals and instincts of the believer; it is the self-assertion of a living soul. Its meagreness and eccentricity are simply evidences of its personal basis. It is in full harmony with the practical impulses it comes to sanction, and accordingly it gains in efficiency all that it loses in dignity and truth.

The principle by which the Christian system had developed, although reapplied by the Protestants to their own inner life, was not understood by them in its historical applications. They had little sympathy with the spiritual needs and



habits of that Pagan society in which Christianity had grown up. That society had found in Christianity a sort of last love, a rejuvenating supersensible hope, and had bequeathed to the Gospel of Redemption, for its better embodiment and ornament, all its own wealth of art, philosophy, and devotion. This embodiment of Christianity represented a civilization through which the Teutonic races had not passed and which they never could have produced; it appealed to a kind of imagination and sentiment which was foreign to them. This embodiment, accordingly, was the object of their first and fiercest attack, really because it was unsympathetic to their own temperament but ostensibly because they could not find its basis in those Hebraic elements of Christianity which make up the greater bulk of the Bible. They did not value the sublime aspiration of Christianity to be not something Hebraic or Teutonic but something Catholic and human; and they blamed everything which went beyond the accidental limits of their own sympathies and the narrow scope of their own experience.

Yet it was only by virtue of this complement inherited from Paganism, or at least supplied by the instincts and traditions on which Paganism had reposed, that Christianity could claim to approach a humane universality or to achieve an imaginative adequacy. The problem was to compose, in the form of a cosmic epic, with metaphysical justifications and effectual starting-points for moral action, the spiritual autobiography of man. The central idea of this composition was to be the idea of a Redemption. Around this were to be gathered and moulded together elements drawn from Hebrew tradition and scripture, others furnished by Paganism, together with all that the living imagination of the time could create. Nor was it right or fitting to make a merely theoretical or ethical synthesis. Doctrine must find its sensible echo in worship, in art, in the feasts and fasts of the year. Only when thus permeating life and expressing itself to every sense and faculty can a religion be said to have reached completion; only then has the imagination exhausted its means of utterance.

The great success which Christianity achieved in this immense undertaking makes it, after classic antiquity, the most important phase in the history of mankind. It is clear, however, that this success was not complete. That fallacy from which the Pagan religion alone has been free, that *πρῶτον ψεῦδος* of, the natural but hopeless misunderstanding of imagining that poetry in order to be religion, in order to be the inspiration of life, must first deny that it is poetry and deceive us about the facts with which we have to deal—this misunderstanding has marred the work of the Christian imagination and condemned it, if we may trust appearances, to be transitory. For by this misunderstanding Christian doctrine was brought into conflict with reality, of which it pretends to prejudge the character, and also into conflict with what might have been its own elements, with all excluded religious instincts and imaginative ideals. Human life is always essentially the same, and therefore a religion which, like Christianity, seizes the essence of that life, ought to be an eternal religion. But it may forfeit that privilege by entangling itself with a particular account of matters of fact, matters irrelevant to its ideal significance, and further by intrenching itself, by virtue of that entanglement, in an inadequate regimen or a too narrow imaginative



development, thus putting its ideal authority in jeopardy by opposing it to other intuitions and practices no less religious than its own.

Can Christianity escape these perils? Can it reform its claims, or can it overwhelm all opposition and take the human heart once more by storm? The future alone can decide. The greatest calamity, however, would be that which seems, alas! not unlikely to befall our immediate posterity, namely, that while Christianity should be discredited no other religion, more disillusioned and not less inspired, should come to take its place. Until the imagination should have time to recover and to reassert its legitimate and kindly power, the European races would then be reduced to confessing that while they had mastered the mechanical forces of Nature, both by science and by the arts, they had become incapable of mastering or understanding themselves, and that, bewildered like the beasts by the revolutions of the heavens and by their own irrational passions, they could find no way of uttering the ideal meaning of their life.

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Vänliga hälsningar,

Företag



Staffan Humlebo