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The Origin of Christianity.

BY THE REV. W. ST. CLAIR TISDALL, D.D.

THE age in which we live is an age of theories. Regarding nearly every one of these we may truly say that it *Schwebt im Luft* (to borrow a very expressive and apposite German idiom) better than most of our aeroplanes. We are often inclined to boast of the progress made in many branches of science, but in this matter we often follow the practice of the unscientific ages, and are too hasty in forming hypotheses. In religious matters, at all events, we frequently desert the truly scientific method of induction, which in natural science has won such victories, and by rash speculations and hasty assertions destitute of proof attempt to bolster up some pet theory which we fancy has at least the merit of being new, if not actually true. A more careful examination not unfrequently shows that the idea is as far from being one as the other, and has already, ages ago, been started, refuted, and forgotten so completely as to seem quite fresh when polished up for use in our too credulous and shallow, though (in a bad sense) sceptical, age.

Quite a number of theories have been promulgated in modern times to account for Christianity. For convenience' sake it may be permitted us to sum these up under two heads: (1) Those which maintain its eclectic, and (2) those which contend for its evolutionary, origin. These we propose to test very briefly.

It is hardly necessary, perhaps, to state that the Christianity of which we speak is that of the New Testament. Not a few opponents of the Faith have purposely confounded the most corrupt form of Romanism with Christianity. They have succeeded in showing that its image-worship, its holy water, and such doctrines as those of Transubstantiation and Sacerdotalism, are of heathen derivation. But this has nothing whatever to do with our present inquiry, for every candid reader of the New Testament and of history knows this, and is in no danger of mistaking Romanism as a whole for Christianity.

I. The upholders of various forms of the eclectic theory would fain prove Christianity to be a more or less harmonious *μάλαγμα* of ideas, doctrines, precepts, myths, culled from every form of heathenism known in Western Asia in the first century of our era. One portion is supposed to have been borrowed from Phrygian nature-myths, another from Egyptian philosophy or mythology, a third from the asceticism of the Essenes, a fourth from late Buddhist fables, a fifth from Kṛishṇaism, and a sixth from Mithraic rites and dogmas.

When we investigate these various "sources" we find that the asserted resemblances, upon which so much stress is laid, are either very slight and casual or are non-existent, and are due to a perfervid imagination or to misunderstanding on the part of their discoverers. The fancied discovery is often what, *pace* classical scholars, may be respectfully styled a *nidus equinus*. It has often been made before. Such writers as Origen and Tertullian ages ago, when those ethnic faiths which are now dead were living, powerful, and

well known in the West, in not a few cases ably refuted the very arguments which are now revived and produced as the latest deductions of the most enlightened modern scholarship !

In the early days of Christianity true Christians were as ready as they now are to welcome truth wherever they found it, always and everywhere recognizing it to be from their Lord, as Augustine says.¹ We see this in the fact that St. Paul quotes from Cleanthes and Aratos (Acts xvii. 28). But this is in itself a confutation of the eclectic theory ; for it was precisely because they already had a "a form of sound words," a *καλὴ παραθήκη*,² a clear and definite body of doctrine, a "faith once for all delivered to the saints," a personal knowledge of Him whom they had believed, that they were able to compare with the doctrines of their religion anything at all good that they might find amid the seething mass of error and corruption with which, at the risk of their lives, they had to contend. There was surprisingly little good to be found in the ethnic faiths as they then existed. Even the most enlightened of the heathen themselves were turning away from them in utter disgust. Yet a scholar of our own time is not ashamed to draw certain conclusions from the fact that, as he says, Christianity "first struck root" in such "hotbeds" of immorality as Zela, Comana, and Corinth, or in their neighbourhood. Even he, however, does not venture to do more than hint that the Christian inculcation of personal purity was derived from the licentious rites of Anaitis and Cybele.

Others have declared that the doctrine of our Lord's Resurrection was taken from the Egyptian legend of Osiris, though that legend distinctly taught that Osiris' body had *not* returned to life, but still lay in its tomb at Heliopolis.³ That, of course, is a mere detail. We know so very little of the Essenes that it is far safer to make rash assertions about their influence on nascent Christianity than it now is about that of Egypt, for erroneous statements regarding Egyptian mythology have an awkward way of being refuted by the hieroglyphic and hieratic texts.

It is well to remember, however, that anti-Christian assertions need no proof nowadays. In one sense, perhaps, this is just as well ; for when the asserters condescend to adduce proofs, they not unfrequently exhibit a childish credulity. A candid examination of the documents they quote, instead of convincing the serious student, often serves rather to arouse in his mind the suspicion that he has to do with men who are not so much deceived as deceivers.

Some of these writers tell us that the doctrine of the Virgin-birth is of Zoroastrian origin. But on inquiry we learn that Zoroaster was the *third son* of Pôurushâspa and Dughdhôva.⁴ Others deduce the doctrine from the fables regarding Kṛishṇa ; but Indian authorities state that his mother, Devakî, had already before his birth borne *seven*⁵ children to her husband

¹ "De Doct. Christiana," lib. ii., 18.

² 2 Tim. i. 13, 14.

³ "Book of the Dead" (Budge), text, cap. clxii. ; cf. Plutarch, "De Iside et Osiride," cap. xx. *fin.*

⁴ "Zâd Sparam," xv. 5.

⁵ "Prem Sâgar," cap. iii.

Vasudeva, Kṛishṇa's father. Others, again, confidently appeal to the Buddhists, only to be told that the doctrine is not found in the books of either the Northern or the Southern Canon, that even in the fifth Christian century it was not known in¹ Ceylon, and that the only authority—a somewhat doubtful one—for it is a passage in a late book in bad Sanskrit and of uncertain date belonging to a heretical sect of Northern Buddhists. In this connexion it is hardly necessary to take seriously and once again answer Celsus' argument, based on Greek mythology and confuted by Origen some seventeen centuries before our time.

A short time ago a vigorous attempt was made by more than one writer to trace a great deal of Christianity to Mithraism, the great Oriental religion which exercised so much influence over the western part of the Roman Empire during the first two centuries. The most wild statements were made as to the "almost complete coincidence" between Mithraic and Christian doctrines and even ceremonies, and the foregone conclusion was drawn. It had to be admitted, however, that little or nothing was really known of Mithraic doctrines, so that a vivid imagination had to supply the place of knowledge. This seemed singularly like drawing conclusions on scientific points from what we *do not* know of the other side of the moon. We were told of the meekness and gentleness and purity inculcated by the religion, though it was known as a historical fact that it was first introduced into Rome by the tender-hearted Cilician pirates brought there as captives by Pompey; that it was afterwards professed principally by barbarian soldiers whose female associates practised the licentious rites of Cybele; that Mithraic priests officiated equally at the altars of the Capitoline triad and of the Keltic gods; that the chief devotees of Mithraism among Roman Emperors were such models of propriety as Nero and Commodus; that Diocletian, Galerius, and others of the cruellest persecutors of the early Church, were its imperial patrons; that it, sometimes at least, offered human sacrifices, besides practising many cruel rites. Not a single Mithraic scripture has come down to us to reveal the beliefs of those who were among the fiercest opponents of Christianity during the first three centuries of its existence. It almost passes belief, yet it is true, that we have been invited to believe that the Christians, who died by fire and every kind of torture rather than deny their Lord or burn a handful of incense before the Emperor's statue, knew so little of the faith by which they had lived and for which they died, that they adopted by mistake for it the chief tenets of its cruel and licentious opponent, Mithraism.

It is not wonderful, therefore, that the eclectic theory of the origin of the Christian faith has not found acceptance among reasonable men to any great extent. To try to construct such a religion as Christianity in this way would be as hopeless a task as the endeavour to make an up-to-date locomotive out of scraps of old iron taken from broken-down engines of all kinds and of every degree of age, by borrowing a boiler-plate here, a

¹ The "Mahāvamsa" says: "Mâyā and Pajāpati both equally became consorts of Suddhodano. Our Vanquisher" (*i.e.*, Buddha) "was the son of the Mahārājā Suddhodano and of Mâyā." (Ed. Turnour, vol. i., cap. ii., canto 10, śl. 11.)

screw there, the spoke of a wheel elsewhere, and so on. We fancy that the result of the latter attempt would, however, work almost as well as the eclectic theory at least. The upholders of the theory have always forgotten the hardest part of their task—to account for the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and to explain the inspiring motive-power of love to Him and faith in Him, by which alone Christian courage, morality, and perseverance were brought to birth in the men of the first century, and have all through the ages since continued to exercise a daily increasing power for good.

Theories should sometimes be tested by historical experience. The wisest philosophers of Greece and Rome and of the Eastern world had failed to invent a system in which all could unite. It is hard to take men seriously when they assure us that the infinitely more hopeless task of successfully organizing and propagating an eclectic religion was accomplished by certain unlearned and ignorant men in Palestine in the first century, nearly 1,900 years before the birth of the science of comparative religion. In later times two eclectic religions have been started—Islâm and Bâbîsm. Neither has invented a Christ, nor is a pure moral influence the distinguishing mark of either.

II. Turning now to the evolutionary theory, we find a writer in the *Nineteenth Century* a few years ago gravely assuring us that in the dying Græco-Roman world there was gradually growing up a philosophy and a system of ethics not very different from the Christian, and that, had Christianity not come suddenly to the fore and anticipated it, this evolution would have been successfully accomplished—about the Greek Calends, no doubt. Those who know the decadent state of that period and its inward rottenness are hardly likely to accept this idea. Doubtless we thankfully recognize certain scattered noble sentiments in Epictetus, in Seneca, in Marcus Aurelius. But “one swallow does not make a summer,” nor do even the faint twitterings of two or three. It was precisely because Greece and Rome had failed to evolve any system, even of ethics, at all comparable with the Christian that their philosophies and their religions had to give place to the Gospel, though Christianity did not, of course, oppose but illumine the faintly perceived elements of truth which they contained. It is known from history that Christianity, instead of springing from Greek and Latin philosophy, was, when it arose, bitterly opposed even by such philosophers as Marcus Aurelius, and that these philosophers ended by striving to maintain in opposition to it the follies and abominations of the idolatries which they despised. Even the argument that something like Christian philosophy *might* in time have been evolved is an admission that it did not so arise.

But had Christianity been produced by a process of evolution, that very fact would go far to demonstrate its essential truth. For were it proved that all the religious thought of the world had culminated in any system of religion, it would be hard to deny a Divine purpose in that development, or to refuse to see in it the goal towards which God had for ages been guiding His creatures.

However, the evolutionary theory of the origin of Christianity breaks down completely when examined. Above all, like every other theory, it

fails to account for Christ Himself. Christianity is not a system of morals, a collection of dogmas, a series of rites and ceremonies; Christianity is Christ living and reigning in the hearts and lives of those who love Him.

The study of comparative religion is often appealed to in connexion with this subject. But the more thoroughly that study is pursued, the more completely does it prove the *uniqueness* of Christianity and of Christ. The doctrines of God's Holiness and spiritual Fatherhood are found nowhere else, except in some measure in its preliminary stage, Judaism. The idea of human brotherhood is purely Christian. Our Lord's inculcation of gentleness, humility, patience, and His command to return good for evil, were absolutely contrary to the ethnic systems of his time, as they still are to those of non-Christian nations. His attitude to children, to women, to the poor, the outcast, the common people, the sinful, the degraded, the lost, the penitent, was, again, so startlingly new that the more we think of it the more it astounds us by the contrast it presents to everything even theoretically taught, much less practised, elsewhere. Christ showed that to serve one's fellow-men is the noblest and loftiest of human tasks, instead of being a degradation. His revelation of God is unparalleled before or since, as all must admit. Leaving entirely out of account the uniqueness of His miracles, His parables, His prophecies, His self-abnegation, His death and resurrection, we come to the most practical and not least remarkable matter of all—the influence He exerted and still exerts over countless millions of men of every class and race, of every clime and every time. It has well been said: "There has scarcely been a town in any Christian country since the time of Christ where a century has passed without exhibiting a character of such elevation that his mere presence has shamed the bad and made the good better, and has been felt at times like the presence of God Himself."¹

This being so, it is clear that no possible modification of either of the theories which we have been considering will satisfy the conditions of the case. The only solution of the problem of the origin and influence of Christianity is that stated by Christ Himself: "My doctrine is not Mine, but His that sent Me." "I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world." "Lo, I am with you all the days."



God's Hand in Earth's Past History.

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THE aim of the author of the work which we are now noticing² is to show that the past history of the earth, extending through the periods of geology, and passing over vast eras of time, could have only brought about the present condition of our globe by being guided at every step in its long development by the guiding Providence of Almighty God.

¹ "Ecce Homo," cap. xiv. *fin.*

² *La Providence Créatrice*, par A. de Lapparent. Troisième Edition, Paris, 1907.