

ARTICLE III.

THE "CHRIST-MYTH."

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THE controversy about the person of Jesus Christ which has played so great a part in Christian church history since the days of primitive Christianity, and indeed since the days of Jesus himself (Matt. xvi. 13), has entered to-day upon a new stage. The latest solution which has been given out in the heterogeneous circles of science at odds with the church and Christianity is to the effect that Jesus Christ never so much as existed. This solution was already prepared by David Fr. Strauss, who explained the Gospels as mythical inventions: it was openly asserted by Bruno Bauer in the middle of the last century, but found no echo even in the revolutionary strata of German thought. Now, however, it is suddenly proclaimed almost simultaneously from numerous centers, in England, France, America, and finally in Germany also, and, like a train of fire kindled at various points in a dry prairie, seems with ever increasing rapidity to be growing into an universal danger. It is not my present purpose to inquire into the scientific tenableness of this latest hypothesis. This I have lately done in another place.² What I wish to do here is to raise and answer

¹Translated from *Der Geisteskampf der Gegenwart*, March, 1910, pp. 85-94, by Benjamin B. Warfield, D.D., LL.D., Professor in Princeton Theological Seminary.

²*Der historische Jesus, der mythologische Christus, und Jesus der Christ. Ein kritischer Gang durch die moderne Jesus-Forschung.* By Lic. K. Dunkmann. Leipzig: A. Delchert, Nachf. 1910.

the no less important question of how it comes about that this wild hypothesis, which reminds us vividly of the affinity of genius and lunacy, after not having dared through nearly two thousand years to raise itself even in thought as a bare possibility, to say nothing of openly announcing itself as fact,— how it comes about that this hypothesis, which on its first hesitant suggestion was at once rejected on all sides, by friends and foes alike,— has now in our day been simultaneously “discovered” in various places, and not merely taken seriously, but propagated with evident delight. I shall not enter, therefore, upon an investigation of the subject itself, but of a closely related subject. What I wish to treat of is the whole phenomenon which meets our view, and that as a phenomenon in the history of culture. For it seems to me that there is presented to our consideration here a plain pathological symptom, and what I ask is, Where lie the causes?

The causes lie in the scientific situation of our day. To understand this, we should, first of all, bear in mind that science has to do with irrefragable facts which it is our duty to explain. Now Christianity as a world-historical entity is in any event an irrefragable fact, the explanation or derivation of which must be carried back to its ultimate causes. We face here, then, ultimately primitive Christianity or the primitive Christian community; and the question is, Whence came it? What forces have coöperated in its origination? In this primitive Christianity, however small and contemptible it was in the beginning, there lie concealed already, as in a seed, mighty world-transforming forces. In proportion as the beginnings were small, like a mustard seed, in that proportion are the elementary life-forces which lay in them incalculable. Whence came these life-forces? Who or what infused this energy into primitive Christianity? The answers which have been given heretofore are

of two sorts. The one was given by primitive Christianity, and in sequence to it has been given by Christianity itself. It runs: Jesus called us into being. Our miraculous power goes back to the miraculous man, to the Christ, the Son of God. We know and feel ourselves to be just a miracle of God, and we trace ourselves back to a primeval miracle of God, to Christ. That is one of the answers, the supernaturalistic answer, to the question of the origin of primitive Christianity. It stands and falls with the fact of the miracle of revelation. The other answer is much younger: it is a child of the period of "enlightenment," of the eighteenth century. It sets itself against miracle as such, and yet seeks to retain Jesus of Nazareth as starting-point. Here it is not the miraculous man Jesus that is spoken of, but the "historical Jesus,"—that is the Jesus who must be thought of wholly after the analogy of all other everyday history. It is said now, that this Jesus was an extraordinary man, a hero, a religious genius—empty predicates, which may reach up to the very verge of miracle, but never pass over that verge. The origin of Christianity is, then, accounted for by saying that this Jesus has left behind him an extraordinary "impression," which has led to the building up of a community.

Against this "historical" Jesus now, modern science raises an ever more active protest. It looks upon him as a modern invention of rationalism. It is clearly perceived that it is impossible for primitive Christianity to be understood on the basis of the portrait of Jesus which Liberalism has proclaimed to be the historically true one. The alternative remains: either to return to the church's portrait of the miraculous Christ,—in which case primitive Christianity is also thought of, after its fashion, as a miraculous world, which goes back to a miraculous cause; or else to let the person of Jesus fade wholly away, and to conceive the whole of primitive Christianity as nothing.

else than the gradual development of a Christ-myth. The notion or the idea of Jesus, the Christ, as the God-man, is almost identical in both views. The difference is only that on the part of the church it is maintained that this idea of the God-man is the historical truth, while in this latest opposing camp it is banished into the realm of myth, of religious invention. But the opposing sides, the churchly and the radical, are alike sure, are wholly at one, in this, that the intermediate position which would imagine a "historical," or actual, Jesus, who was only Jesus, that is, a man, a hero, but not Christ, God's Son, is excluded. And why?

Primitive Christianity cannot have sprung from this "historical" Jesus. Primitive Christianity remains, with the presupposition of only this "historical" Jesus, absolutely incomprehensible, dark, problematical. For what purpose, moreover, is he assumed? Clearly on grounds of practical intelligibility, in order to maintain a connection with the Christian religion as ecclesiastically determined. Here, as everybody knows, the whole history of the development of Christianity is passed over, back to Jesus; firm attachment is made to this Jesus, and the whole of the subsequent history, since the days of the Apostles and especially of Paul, is set aside as nothing but a more or less gross perversion of the "Christianity of Christ." Even a further step is boldly taken, and a distinction drawn in Jesus himself between form and content. The whole body of Jesus' ideas are declared to be of his times and unauthoritative for us. To these belong his moral instructions and his naïve religious conceptions. But the form in which he clothed everything remains valid; that is the form of "autonomous moral-religious personality." From this form is inferred the strong "impression" which Jesus must have made upon his contemporaries. And it is from this "impres-

sion of Jesus" that it is imagined primitive Christianity can be derived.

Is this historically tenable? Is it possible or thinkable? A great man, a moral-religious hero, full of enthusiastic, naïve and primitive ideas, makes upon a small band of companions so great an "impression," that they, first, "witness" his resurrection; secondly, crown him as the "Messiah"; thirdly, make him the living bestower of the Spirit and the central point of their worship; and do that in spite of the issue of his life of the utmost humiliation and suffering in the death on the cross? This construction offers no explanation of primitive Christianity when once the question is seriously raised, How shall we account for the entrance of this movement, the greatest which we know, into the religious history of the world? And further: What shall we do with Paul, who never knew or saw Christ?— who, therefore, obviously never received any "impression" from the "historical Jesus," whose Christ was clearly conceived as an ideal apart from any influence from an individuality? The Pauline gospel remains here altogether an enigma.

And, finally, if we assume that this "historical" Jesus was really the founder of Christianity, it is clear that he founded something which is wholly different from what he *intended* to found; and to revert to him as merely an "autonomous personality" would be necessarily the instauration of a religion of humanity, which should consist of just "autonomous personalities," that is to say, the radical individualization of all religion or its formal dissolution as church and community, particularly as dogmatically conditioned.

These are, in general, the fundamental ideas which are here made powerfully operative, from the churchly or the radical side, against the "historical" Jesus of Liberalism. They culminate, no doubt, in the belief that by its assumption, primi-

tive Christianity comes to be nothing but a problem. We can speak of the superiority of this portrait of Jesus to that of the church, only if we pronounce, from the outset, all that is miraculous scientifically untenable. But, then, the miracle of primitive Christianity remains,—and from the standpoint of purely "causal" explanation, the latest theory, that of the "Christ-myth," naturally triumphs. We can come to rest here only when we feel that we have dealt with definite earnestness with the abolition of the miraculous. To theologians, however, who vacillate hither and thither, the cry goes out with Albert Schweitzer, "When will theology ever begin to become thoroughly honorable?" (Drews).

The question, accordingly, is purely historical. It concerns the problem of the origin of Christianity. The churchly answer, which makes Jesus as the Christ its starting-point is rejected from the outset as unscientific. There remain only two ways. Either Jesus may be left as the historical starting-point, stripped of everything that is miraculous, worked, formed, chiseled, planed, until he looks just like a "modern man," until he at last presents nothing further than the modern "autonomous personality." In this way the pretension of being a Christian theology, that is a theology which goes back to Jesus, may be preserved; but the problem of primitive Christianity is left unanswered. Or else—and this is the second way—this problem may be kept in view unencumbered by any churchly considerations whatever, and the conclusion reached that this Liberal remnant of Jesus is given up, and therewith the entire historicity of Jesus is with good logic denied. Let us be exact: it may still be allowed that "possibly" a man named Jesus existed (Kautsky, Kalthoff); but this man is, for the origin of Christianity, wholly without significance. Christianity is, here, a "syncretistic," that is a composite, religion, compound-

ed out of innumerable sources of Asiatic religion-history, Jewish Messianic hopes, Greek philosophy, Roman social movements; and the person of Jesus of Nazareth is neither the founder nor the occasion of this syncretism. Nothing can be explained by the "impression" of this Jesus: we get along much better, indeed, without this "impression."

And really, we are asked, what sort of an impression did the first communities in Asia Minor, Cyprus, Macedonia, Syria, Greece, receive from Jesus? Just as little as Paul received. What worked here (we are told) was ideas, thoughts — thoughts which stood in close relation with the surrounding heathen world, and were comprehensible to the men of that day, because they were born out of their *milieu*. Long centuries before Jesus there were similar communities everywhere, religious societies, which revered their Divinity, a Divinity of which it was said that it eternally dies and eternally rises again. This Divinity is alleged even to have borne, among some, the name of "Jesus," that is, in English, Divine Helper, Saviour, Redeemer. The cry goes out from Antioch, Cyprus, and other places, "Jesus" has come, been crucified, died, risen again! How natural this explanation is! How superior to all this obscure mediating theology! If only — it were not merely a new monstrosity! But into this I will not go here, but will refer to my criticism of this standpoint, which I have already mentioned.

But thus far we have looked at only one side of the situation out of which an understanding of this remarkable phenomenon of our day may be gained. The question stands ever before us: Why has this so surprisingly simple explanation not been discovered long ago? How does it happen that the honor of its discovery has been left to precisely our time?

To this, too, there is an altogether satisfactory answer. It

ries in a wholly new conception of history. A conception of history, a philosophy of history, is the foundation and presupposition of every world-view. It can also be said, inversely, that the world-view which any one has, documents itself, first of all, in his conception of history. A materialistic world-view thinks of history materialistically. A world-view which places in the center the person and the autonomy of the human spirit, personality, views history "heroically," as dominated, led, by great men (Carlyle). A religious world-view, and very especially the Christian world-view, looks upon history as governed by God's thought. The great men disappear, and the masses of the people revolve in eternal remoteness around their sun (Rev. xvii. 26, 27; cf. xiv. 15-17), like wandering stars. Here no "hero," no "great one" helps; here helps only God himself through his miracle of revelation.

Out of these three world-views there result three possible estimates of Jesus. The last is the ancient Christian one, and the Christian one in general: Jesus is the Christ, God's revelation for the salvation of the world. Not one of the great men, not even the greatest born of woman — here the saying applies that the least in the kingdom of Heaven is greater than the greatest born of woman (Matt. xi. 11). But Jesus was unique, the "first-born" of all creatures. The second world-view is that of Liberalism. Its roots are set in the idealistic philosophy of Germany. To it, the human spirit is the formative power in nature and history. This spirit — in its essence, reason — is the sole revelation of the divine world-spirit. In ever advancing development the spirit unfolds itself, led by the towering spirits, Carlyle's "heroes." In this conception of history there is but one role that is open for Jesus,— that of hero.

These two world-views have up to to-day been struggling

with one another on the field of history. Up to a little while ago, there was not known any other philosophy of history than these two. It may be asked: Did not materialism then, which has always existed and from of old had much to say for itself, produce a philosophy of history? Of course it did, but a wholly unusable, untenable one. The old materialists, who naïvely lived only in force and stuff, were too manacled in their mechanical, purely natural-scientific world-view to make for history in general a right or sphere of its own. That has now changed. And it is precisely this which is decisive for our question. The old metaphysical materialism has altered its form, has revised its methods, has transformed its entire interest. Instead of, as heretofore, conceiving nature as an aggregate of stuff and explaining history out of natural-stuff relations, it has rather arrived at the perception of the history of man too, the combinations, therefore, of men, as a sphere of its own, which must be especially taken in hand. It has recognized that materialism lacked a materialistic philosophy of history, and that this had to contend with peculiar difficulties. But men had faith that the materialistic principles had their application to history also. In a very special way an impulse was given thereto by the rising social movement about the middle of the nineteenth century. Out of its midst sprang up the new materialistic philosophy of history, under the leading of Marx. The hall-mark of this philosophy of history is the idea of socialism in contrast with the individualism of "hero worship." History is made by the masses and their instincts: the individual is nothing to it. His "autonomy" is illusion. The masses, however, are formed by their economical, natural, so to say stuff, needs, and life-conditions. All "spiritual" movements go back in the last analysis to these things. There is no such thing as the "independence" of the spirit. The his-

tory of men is only a department of the history of nature, under Darwinian illumination.

And here we understand why precisely in our day and precisely now and not sooner, the "Christ-myth" could arise and has arisen. It is the result of the materialistic philosophy of history, which did not exist heretofore and could not exist until now.

And here it is exceedingly interesting to observe that it is precisely also the theologians who have come out of the camp of idealistic personalism who, without their knowledge or wish, have been made the path-breakers of this new movement in theology. For what is the drift of the latest so-called "history-of-religions" phase of theology except to oppose the personalism of the conception of history hitherto obtaining? The history of religions is dominated by the ideas of the masses, which propagate themselves with endurance (tenacity) and manifoldness (variation),—that is to say after a wholly Darwinian fashion. The history of religions does not reckon with great men, who "found" religion; it reckons only with great combinations, which obtain between all religions. The catchword of this conception is "syncretism." All religions are more or less syncretistic, that is to say complexes of ideas, the historical analysis of which is the task of the historian of religions. Not even the independence of religion itself appears to be assured here. Religion can even in and of itself be syncretism, a turbid mixture of illusionary ideas, as indeed was already perceived by Auguste Comte, the founder of the "positivistic" conception of history.

If, then, the very peculiarity and independence of religion is at least problematical, it is certainly no longer doubtful that the religions of revelation—that is to say the Israelitish and Christian religions—can no longer be looked upon as singular,

as "islands" in the ocean of the history of religions. The most that can be said is that they present the relatively highest stages of development, and it must be added that the standard by which this judgment is formed is a thoroughly subjective one, a "judgment of value."

It is clear that in a theology oriented after this history-of-religions fashion, the significance of the person of Jesus, as it was conceived in Liberalism, came necessarily into doubt. What is the significance of persons in general in this "sociological" science of religion? The echo of hero-worship is strangely contrasted here with the new method of research. It sounds very odd to hear together of Jesus the founder of the Christian religion and the syncretism of the Christian religion. It is easy for the scoffers who resolutely intend to deal seriously with the idea of syncretism to insist that here "atavistic" reminiscences and practical ecclesiastical accommodation are apparent. Away, then, with this remnant of hero-worship; away with the "historical Jesus."

And thus the history-of-religions method stands in present-day theology at the parting of the ways, to which the sociological philosophy of history has brought it. It unites in itself two irreconcilable opposites: the sociological philosophy of history, on the other hand, rightly demands consistency precisely in method.

We understand now why it is precisely our time which has "discovered" the "Christ-myth." Arthur Drews's book¹ on the "Christ-myth" is thoroughly symptomatic: we understand why it is precisely now that it finds an echo and draws to its banner ever-widening circles. The Kalthoffs, Kautskys, Maurenbrechers, Drewses, speak out of the spirit of a new time.

¹ *Die Christusmythe*. By Arthur Drews. 8vo. Pp. xii, 190. Jena: E. Diederichs. 1909. Improved and Enlarged Edition, 1910.

The era of personalism is passing away, and a new era demands entrance into German theology.

What will Theology do? This is certainly a hard, serious question. But she must make up her mind what she will do. And that will be a blessing.

We may await the future with quietness and confidence. For nothing is more necessary and healthful than clarification. And to clarification we must come, even though slowly. The hero-Jesus will disappear, the Christ alone abides, and the question will run again simply and clearly: For or against Christ? Shall the revelation of God in Christ or the Christ-myth prevail? But it is all up with the "historical Jesus."

It is perfectly true that the "sociological" conception of history will comprehend the nature and the truth of Christianity just as little and even less than the "heroic." For it, the history of religions crumbles necessarily into a history of myths and imaginations, and religion itself passes away like a dream on awaking. The awaking of the modern culture-man is at the same time the vanishing of the religious dream-state. At the most there remains behind a philosophy of the fashion of Schopenhauer's and Hartmann's, such as Dr. Drews has added in outline to his "Christ-myth." A cheerless philosophy which calls on the world to deliver the Godhead from the conditions of the being of the world in general.

But the author of the "Christ-myth" could scarcely have done a more unskilful thing than with such open-heartedness to give such a tendency to his strictly scientific, "unprejudiced" "Christ-myth." The eager epigone of modern pessimism may be personally convinced that only in the light of his philosophy can history and its great figures be understood, that primitive Christianity only from this point of sight can be rightly comprehended as what it is. But what of those who do not share

this philosophy? What of those who for themselves are compelled to estimate it as an outworn stadium of the development of the nineteenth century?

And is it not an unparalleled naïveté when this philosopher of the unconscious declares Christianity unacceptable because of its "logical contradictions"? He will of course find "believers" enough, as Haeckel has found them, — and who is there who has advocated any nonsense with the necessary assurance who has not found "believers"? But it is the fate of all these wavelets on the pool of culture that they quickly sink.

Christianity will still go forward in its world-historical progress. It bears its truth in itself. Here it is not heroism or individualism or personalism which is the decisive word: nor is it socialism or evolutionism, and the like. Here the last word is the Word which was in the beginning, through which all things were made, which was with God, and the Word was God. The history of men, the history of our own being, will ever be to us an enigma, a problem. No reason, no philosophy, can explain the existence and the nature of the world. But in this darkness there shines a bright star: the Word of God, the word of revelation and its fulfilment in Christ. The light that shines upon us thence, no doubt, does not illumine our scientific knowledge of the world, does not advance our research into nature, or our knowledge of history; but it opens to us a view into a higher world, which embraces ours, and which offers itself to us as our true eternal home.

To find this star with "the wise men out of the east" in Christ, and to go to him and worship — that is the essence of Christianity. His power, however, is that he does not disclose himself to the wise of this world, but to those who are to experience with him and in him an inner transformation, a new

birth, which makes them new creatures. Herein lies the secret of the world-conquering power of faith, that it forms men who as new-born place themselves at the service of the new, great task. And when they inwardly experience this, then they know that God is here, and that he has truly sent his Son, and they will defend their faith in Christ against the modern Gnosticism of faith in myths with the words of that Apostle to whom even a Drews must grant an immense superiority to all Gnosticism: "Every spirit who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God" (1 John iv. 3).