

German Christianity (?) and the Great War.

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WE have learnt much during this terrible war, but possibly the most painful revelation we have received has been with regard to the moral standards of those German leaders who are ultimately responsible, not only for the war itself, but for the methods by which (on their side) it has been conducted. Here we have not to deal only with theories or principles, as these have been embodied in a great number of books and pamphlets; we have to deal with these principles expressed in conduct, such conduct as has produced nothing less than horror and loathing throughout the civilized world, even we believe (if the truth were known) among a very large number of Germans themselves. We are quite prepared to make large deductions for unpremeditated actions done in the heat of battle, also for exaggerated statements due to second or third hand information. But after all possible deductions have been made, there is left a simply appalling list of crimes for which not only German soldiers but German statesmen and military leaders must be held responsible.

Possibly few of us, even those who knew something of the anti-Christian ethical teaching which has been at work in Germany, realized how far this teaching had penetrated, how thoroughly it had affected the German character. We knew of the wild ravings of Nietzsche, and of the way in which his teaching had been popularized in the stories of Sudermann and Gerard Hauptmann; we knew how Treitschke had taught his pupils what he considered to be the practical lessons of history, and how Bernhardt had shown what Germany might hope to gain from the application of these principles in a particular sphere of conduct; but until the publication of official documents revealing the methods of German diplomacy, and until the committal of the almost indescribable atrocities of almost every

possible nature of which Germany has been guilty in her campaign against Belgium and France, we little realized how far these anti-Christian principles had actually affected those responsible for the government of the German people.

The whole experience is a striking example of a very definite—indeed, an inevitable—process, one to which I should like to call the careful attention of my readers.

Bishop Westcott always used to impress upon his pupils the following truth: that doctrine is the fruit of history, and that it supplies or forms both the motive power and the guidance for action or conduct.

It was especially in Germany that certain historical facts upon which Christian doctrine is built up were first assailed and then discredited. It is largely due to German scholars that the Incarnation and the Resurrection as historic *facts* have been widely denied. The next step—an inevitable one under the circumstances, though perhaps taken with a measure of reluctance—was to censure the *doctrines* founded upon these historic facts. Here, probably, many of Germany's theological and philosophical teachers deceived themselves into thinking that it would be possible to stop. But one cannot maintain a superstructure from which the foundations have been withdrawn; or, to use a more exact simile, one cannot expect a process to continue from which the motive power has been taken away. The secret of perpetual motion in the sphere of ethics has not been any more surely discovered than in the sphere of physics. Of this fact the earnest Christian worker has, every day of his life, only too abundant experience. Take from the traveller both guidance and the means of sustenance, and there is little hope of his reaching his journey's end in safety.

Many examples among German teachers might be quoted to illustrate the process I have briefly indicated—first, the discrediting or denial of the miraculous historical facts of Christianity; secondly, the ceasing to believe in the doctrines based upon these; and, thirdly, the weakening of the moral motive, or rather the moral imperative, deduced from these doctrines. But

as my space is limited I will confine myself to one of these teachers—namely, Rudolf Eucken: for Eucken has not only for a long time held a foremost place among German teachers, but through a recent notorious utterance he has, at least in name, become known to a still far wider circle.

One of Eucken's most recent works is that entitled "Can we still be Christians?" (*Können wir noch Christen sein?*) The answer which Eucken gives to this question is as follows: "We not only can but must be Christians—only, however, on the one condition that Christianity be recognized as a progressive historic movement still in the making, that it be shaken free from the numbing influence of ecclesiasticism and placed upon a broader foundation" (p. 218). It is surely unnecessary to point out that this answer to the question must be taken as a whole, that when Eucken uses the term Christianity he uses it with a certain definite meaning, one which he has at least to some extent explained in the latter or conditional part of the answer before us. For a fuller, indeed a fairly complete, explanation of what Eucken understands by Christianity, we have only to study the book from which I have just quoted. Such a study will, I am sure, convince every unprejudiced reader that what Eucken means by Christianity is certainly not what the writers of the New Testament—who, we believe, wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—meant by it.

We will begin with the fact and doctrine of the Incarnation. Upon this fact and this doctrine the teaching of the first eighteen verses of St. John's Gospel is, if extraordinarily profound, yet perfectly clear. We now turn to Eucken's view: "The doctrine which teaches that God, at one particular point of history, assumes a human form—that a person is at once very God and very man—implies conceptions of God and of man which are and must be repellent not only to the scientific spirit of the modern man, but also to his religious conviction" (p. 30). A few lines farther we read: "The Church could of course decree that the two natures were one, but it did not thereby make the doctrine conceivable (*denkbar*), or invest it with any

vital power" (*Lebenskraft*). By the way, we may remark that the New Testament has never asserted that the doctrine of the Incarnation is "conceivable," if by that we mean what can be explained by the unaided human powers of reasoning. We may also notice that, if there is one fact more clear than another from the records of Christian history and experience, it is the "vital power" of this doctrine over the conduct of those who have whole-heartedly accepted it.

Of another great Christian fact and doctrine Professor Eucken writes: "The conception of an atoning, vicarious suffering is repellent and distasteful to our modern minds. . . . To our scientific, and still more to our religious temper (*Denkart*), there is something impossible in the idea of a God who is wroth with our sins and demands His Son's atoning blood before He can again become gracious to mankind" (p. 31). It is almost unnecessary to notice that this last sentence is more than a travesty, is in fact a direct contradiction, of the teaching of the New Testament, which asserts that "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son," surely an act of infinite graciousness and one of bestowing rather than of demanding! Upon the combined facts and doctrines of the Incarnation and Atonement—as these have been received from the New Testament and held and taught by the Church—Eucken's comment is: "No power on earth can force us to respect as religious a conception which we once perceive to be of the nature of a myth" (p. 32). Does not Eucken here go far beyond the denial of what we have been accustomed to call "Christianity"? Does he not actually overthrow the highest spiritual teaching of the noblest teachers of the ancient heathen world?

Now we come to the next step. Eucken knows the age in which he lives, and so he reminds us that, "The loosening of this complex of metaphysical assertions led modern Christianity to turn with gladness to that other assemblage of facts which, as belonging to history (which apparently the Incarnation and Resurrection do not), is so much nearer and simpler, and

seemed so much less debatable. We refer to the personality and life work of Jesus, and to His doctrine that the kingdom of heaven is at hand and that man is a child of God. The irresistible force and freshness of this preaching, its wonderful earnestness, its joyous, childlike confidence, were so purely human, and so free from all taint of dogma, that they seemed to offer a sufficient compensation for the weakening of the old metaphysical belief" (p. 33). Though Eucken does not mention his name, the position here indicated is surely not entirely different from that held by Harnack, one of Eucken's co-signatories to the letter which has now become so famous. At any rate it is a position which many German, and we fear not a few English, scholars, who still call themselves Christians, have flattered themselves they could maintain. Eucken well describes the feelings of those who think thus: "Let us rejoice in the life of Jesus as a valuable possession for the human race and an inexhaustible source of genuine power and sentiment" (p. 34). But Eucken is far too acute a thinker not to see how untenable this last position really is. He sees that it is a superstructure from which the foundations have been withdrawn, and therefore he quite rightly asks, "Can the personality of Jesus, once its metaphysical foundations are shaken, continue to hold that central, regulative, controlling position (*normierende und beherrschende Stellung*) which ecclesiastical Christianity assigns to it?" Eucken freely admits that "that position rested after all upon the unique (*einzigartigen*) relationship to God involved in the belonging to the Divine nature: only from this point of view can Jesus rank as the unquestioned lord and master to whom all ages must do homage. . . . In this case we should no longer see in Jesus the type and standard of what all human life should be" (p. 34).

It must surely be admitted that nothing could possibly be clearer than the process here delineated. First, the facts, at once historical and metaphysical, are denied, and together with these go the doctrines, the working principles of life which faith in the facts involves, then inevitably also go the motive power

and guidance for conduct which these doctrines contain. We would certainly commend a study of Eucken to those who still flatter themselves that a "moral" apart from a metaphysical Christianity is possible. Yet we fear there are many such. We should not put Eucken in the first rank of logical thinkers, but he is far too logical, far too clear-sighted, to be misled into such a position as this. Eucken knows well how "this dis-severance of Christian thought from both historical and metaphysical statement has been regarded as a triumph for breadth and freedom,"¹ but he is perfectly convinced that, however attractive the position may be, it is a perfectly untenable one; in his own words, "Christianity is left without any solid foundation of fact whatsoever, and at the same time is deprived of any sure central truth to bind together all its individual convictions and give them an unshakable certainty" (p. 35).

The question before us therefore is, Christian facts having gone, and with them Christian doctrines, what is to become, or rather what has become, of Christian ethics or morality?

The manner in which German diplomacy was conducted during the period previous to the outbreak of the war, and the behaviour of German officers and soldiers during its course, is one, and a very practical, answer to this question. Bearing these in mind, people have come to the conclusion that this conduct was due simply to the influence of avowed anti-Christian teachers like Nietzsche and Treitschke, and to strategists like Bernhardt, who would put this teaching into practical application. This conviction reminds us of that which was held until a few weeks ago—that this war was in Germany simply the war of a dominating minority, and was not the war of the nation as a whole; but few, we fancy, now hold this to be the case.

In the present paper I have no intention of dealing with the moral teaching of either Nietzsche or Treitschke, I simply desire to consider the position of those who, like Eucken, have given up the "metaphysical and historical facts" of Christianity, but who at the same time would give to the question, "Can we

¹ "Can we still be Christians?" p. 35.

still be Christians?" the same answer which Eucken himself gives—"We not only can, but must be Christians." Reading between the lines of those pages which deal with the subject in the book before us, as also in the chapter of his "Main Currents of Modern Thought" ("Geistige Strömungen der Gegenwart"), which is entitled "The Problems of Morality," I cannot feel that Eucken himself is altogether happy concerning the moral question at the present time. The opening words of the chapter to which I have alluded are as follows: "To-day our conception and our valuation (*die Schätzung*) of morality are alike extremely unsettled." Eucken admits that "from one point of view morality seems to offer a solid foundation in the midst of the upheaval of philosophical and religious convictions. . . . If all else be insecure, there still remains man and his relationship to man; our social life offers us tasks the reality of which is beyond dispute."¹ But Eucken sees that a morality which "is practically synonymous with altruism"—the placing of other people's interests before our own—"and which has no higher motive or stronger foundation than this—is at least in a somewhat insecure position; it may be," he says, "that men so readily unite on the basis of altruistic morality because it places the deeper moral problems in the background, if not actually denying their existence."² One or two further remarks of Eucken's upon this subject may be quoted: "Our age," he says, is "without a characteristic morality capable of satisfying its most inward necessities. Regarded from the point of view of its innermost nature, morality is to-day at least as insecure as is religion. . . . How greatly the fact that we have no morality of our own reduces the power of morality in the present age . . . is made abundantly clear by numerous observations of modern life."³ Certainly this last sentence might easily be thus applied: The fact that the section of the German people responsible for the cause and for their conduct of the present war do not possess what we have been accustomed to call morality is made only too "abundantly clear."

¹ "Main Currents," p. 385.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

The next section of the chapter from which I have been quoting—an extremely interesting one—is entitled “Morality and Metaphysics.” Here Eucken plainly confesses that the moral cannot be separated from the metaphysical; to attempt to do so is “unavoidably to reduce it to a state of lamentable superficiality.” Then follows this—considering all that has gone before—almost startling assertion: “It is our conviction that all morality sinks to a mere appearance (*zu einem blossen Schein*) if the spiritual life—the appropriation of which is the object of morality—does not form the kernel of morality.”¹ But this is just what Christian teachers have always asserted; only, instead of saying that the appropriation of the spiritual life being the “object” of morality, they would say that the appropriation of this life gave the power to “do righteousness.” To put the matter quite briefly, it seems as if Eucken, having denied the metaphysical basis of Christianity, now proceeds to assert the necessity for a spiritual basis of morality. This “metaphysical basis,” consequently, cannot be Christian. Then what does Eucken mean by his assertion that “We not only can, but must, be Christians”? Does he not show himself here an example of those who deny the Christian explanation of life and its phenomena as too difficult, and then immediately proceed to demand our acceptance of another explanation which is infinitely more difficult?

In the first work of Eucken's from which I quoted the subject of Christian morality, is treated with greater fulness. But if the treatment is full, it is in places extremely one-sided, and shows a strange blindness to the facts of experience. For instance, he states that “Christian morality has been influential in controlling the individual disposition rather than in transforming general conditions.”² But by what means, we would ask, have “general conditions” (*die allgemeinen Verhältnisse*) usually “been transformed”? Has not one man, or a small group of men, influenced other men, who, in their turn, have convinced a still wider circle that the relationships (*die Verhältnisse*)

¹ “Main Currents,” p. 391.

² “Can we still be Christians?” p. 36.

between individuals and groups within society needed reform? Is Eucken entirely blind to the changes produced by Christianity during the first three centuries of its existence, or to what it has done towards ameliorating social conditions during the last fifty years? Again, when he says that "it seems as though Christian lore were limited to private relationships and were not equal to grappling with general" (*allgemeinen*) "problems," it almost appears as if in these "general problems" he would ignore the personal relationships. We know from history how often this method has been attempted, we know how frequently the human factor has been ignored—possibly never more egregiously than by Germany in the present war—but we also know how fatal the forgetfulness of this element in the problem has always been. We fully admit that "the status of morality in Christianity was [we should say *is*] conditioned and determined by the fact that Christianity regarded [regards] the relationship of spirit to spirit, of personality to personality, as constituting the kernel of life," but we should add that Christianity does not consider merely the relationship of one personality to another, but also of each personality to an Infinite Personality which is at once human and Divine.

A little further on we arrive at what appears to be the key to the position we are attempting to examine. We are told that "the concept of the Personality of God cannot be regarded any longer as a symbol of ultimate truth, but merely as unseemly anthropomorphism." We have already found the denial of the Divine Personality of Christ, now we come to the denial of the Personality of God—in spite of both we are told we "must" still be Christians; then what, we would ask, is left to us, as either the motive power or as the ideal of morality or conduct, especially as altruism or love to one's neighbour has also been thrown overboard? And, it must be carefully remembered that we are not engaged in considering the wild ravings of a Nietzsche, but the calm and dispassionate reasoning of one whom Germany regards as one of her most spiritually-minded teachers, and who bids us "still be Christians"!

It may be thought that I should now proceed to show what Eucken does mean by "Christianity," what he implies when he asserts that "we not only can but must be Christians." But an adequate examination of his positive teaching, besides demanding far more space than is at my disposal, would be foreign to my present purpose, which is to show that one logical conclusion of dethroning the unique supremacy of Christ—of His example, His teaching, and His spirit—has issued in the absolutely contrary doctrine, that "might is right," a principle which, in the present war, Germany has expressed in action, in such a way as it has rarely, if ever, been expressed before. I have, of course, made no attempt to prove the truth of the Christian position, the truth of those facts and doctrines which Eucken denies, for this has been done in many an excellent English treatise on Christian Apologetics. The task I have set before myself is thus a strictly limited one—namely, first to remind my readers of certain very recent experiences—the diplomatic methods employed by Germany previous to the outbreak of the war and the way in which the war itself has actually been conducted by Germany—both of which may, I think, be regarded as expressions of conceptions of morality held by an influential section of the German people; secondly, by taking Professor Eucken as an example—and he is certainly one of the most highly and most widely honoured of German philosophical and religious teachers—to draw attention to the nature of the religious and ethical teaching which of recent years has been given in Germany. What I would now ask my readers to do is, to put the conduct of the war on the part of Germany side by side with this teaching, and to consider them together. Everyone must surely admit that this conduct has been marked by an extraordinary absence of what we have been accustomed to regard as Christian morality. It must equally be admitted that from the teaching there has been withdrawn practically everything which we have been accustomed to regard as the essential foundation and also the essential motive of Christian conduct. Can we dissever the behaviour of Germany in connection with the war

from the teaching which apparently Germany has been widely receiving? Is the former wholly independent of the latter? Are we not rather driven to the conclusion that the conduct is the logical issue of the teaching?

May I, in conclusion, very briefly refer to the influence of another great religious and, at the same time, great philosophical teacher—an English teacher, the late Bishop Westcott? In England we have for the last hundred and fifty years been engaged in a great warfare; I refer to the industrial conflict. That the conditions under which, and the spirit in which, and the weapons with which, this warfare has for the last five-and-twenty years been waged are far more truly and more loftily moral than they were previous to that time, has been chiefly due to the influence of Christian teachers who, like Bishop Westcott, began their teaching with a clear statement of the fundamental facts and doctrines of Christianity—*e.g.*, the Incarnation—and then showed the inevitable issue of a real belief in these upon the conduct of the struggle.

One thing the present war has clearly proved: That it is impossible to exaggerate the power of ideas, which are really the motive powers which govern conduct. It has been said that this war is largely due to the influence of German professors, that is, to the ideas so persistently disseminated by these, and the influence of Treitschke is generally held to have been especially powerful. What, we would like to ask, has been the influence of the professors of theology and of philosophy in Germany? If Eucken's teaching upon ethics may be taken as a fair example of this, we cannot say that this influence has been exerted either in the highest direction or towards the purest ideals.

I trust I have made quite clear the process which, when once the first step is taken, seems to be an inevitable one. First, the *facts* of the Christian revelation are denied—Christ is no longer a Divine Figure or Personality; consequently, neither His example, nor His spirit, nor His words have a Divine authority. The *doctrine*, which is, of course, founded upon the

facts, must vanish when the facts vanish. The third and final step is as inevitable as the second. We can no longer be called upon to put into action principles for which authority no longer exists. Hence, having once denied the Divinity of Christ, we cannot be called upon either to obey His teaching or to copy His example, or to cultivate His spirit. But more: even if we would do all these, the Divine help whereby to do them has been removed. The faith which is the channel of the power through which the lower impulses of our nature should be subdued exists no longer.

Germany has, of course, set before us both an ideal and a power to realize it in the place of the Christian ideal and of the strength of Christ. What is this ideal and this power? The ideal is the self-determined object of the covetousness of the nation, or of the military leader, or even of the common soldier. The power to obtain it is absolutely unrestrained force, whether that of an intellect which uses truth or falsehood just as either best suits its purpose, and then, if this proves unavailing, employs, without regard to any feeling of justice, pity, or reverence, every instrument of destruction which modern science has invented. The tiger in man is let loose against every form of human prey whose cunning or whose weapons are weaker than its own.

The result is seen not only in the wholesale massacres of Belgian peasants—old men, defenceless widows, and little children; not only in the burning and looting of unfortified towns and villages, and the absolutely wanton destruction of some of the noblest monuments of medieval piety; but in the fact that in hundreds of thousands of homes in seven countries of Europe to-day there is found the bereaved parent, the broken-hearted widow, and the fatherless children.

This is what is offered us as a substitute for a true faith in the Divine Son of God—the Express Image of the Eternal Love.

