

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE PERSON OF CHRIST :

A PROBLEM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION.

PART II. CAN THE PHILOSOPHY OFFER A SOLUTION ?

WE have seen that Jesus was judged and handled as a common man by the Jewish priest and the Roman procurator, but conceived by the evangelists as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Hence came the appeal to history, whether in the process of our collective experience as a race anything has since then emerged that may help us to decide between these opposing judgments. We then saw that religion is the most universal fact of human experience, and the most potent factor of human progress, and so the most powerful persons in history are the pre-eminent religious personalities. Now a new question arises : Where in the order of the great personalities who have reformed, and as it were reintegrated religion, does Jesus Christ stand ? His place is indisputably the highest and the foremost. He is not so much a reformer as a creator, and His creation stands in a sort of solitary pre-eminence, forms as it were an order of its own. How, and why this is so, can only be indicated in the briefest way.

I.

1. His action upon our supreme and determinative religious idea : our sense or feeling for the Divine. This idea comes to us by nature ; no man made it, no man can escape it ; it is implied in all our thinking, enters into all our feeling, and sets an end to all our action. But it may assume an infinite variety of forms, be expressed in the fetish of the savage, the Zeus of Pheidias, the idol of the Hindu, the Jehovah of the Jew, the Allah of Mohammed, and the Unknown of the Agnostic. Yet the quality of the religion

depends on the quality of this, its supreme idea; as the one is the other must be, in kind, in degree, in character and in achievement. The meaner the god the lower the religion, the more majestic the deity the sublimer the faith. But two things have ever been difficult to man,—to conceive God as one, and to conceive Him as moral. These may seem to us so obvious as to be inevitable ideas, attributes without which God cannot even be thought. But how does the case stand? Take the Unity. Monotheism is a very late, nay, an infrequent faith. With that curious subordination of history to theory which distinguished him, Comte made Monotheism the last step in the first of the three stages through which man passes in the progress of his knowledge. But, what is the fact? Monotheism is a belief relatively recent; it has not been uniformly reached, was reached not by any general consensus, but by a small and exceptional fraction of the race, a single desert tribe, from whom all civilized men have received it. To-day Polytheism extends far further than Monotheism, for it is easier and more natural to man to embody in everything the Divine which he finds everywhere, to localize it, to split it up as it were into a multitude of defining and tractable individuals, than to refine it into an infinite personality, too abstract to be felt. But unless God be One He cannot be moral; in a multitude of deities morality is dissolved, for each of the multitude being divine has his own laws and does what is right in his own eyes. As a matter of fact, all Polytheisms are either unmoral or immoral. It is hard for us to conceive any sort of vice as godliness, or a pious man as other than virtuous. But our difficulty, which is due to centuries of Christian discipline, is one no ancient Greek would have felt, and no modern Hindu would feel. We must have one God before we can have the idea of a moral deity whose will is absolute law. But the moment this point is gained we are faced by difficulties of another order.

On the one side the philosopher lays hold of the Monotheistic idea, elaborates it logically, reduces it to an abstraction, translates it into the terms of the schools, names it Substance or Entity, Nature or Humanity, the Infinite or even the Unknown; but the idea so transformed has ceased to be the living God which religion needs in order to live. On the other side operates the sensuous temper and tendencies of the people. They cannot have a God afar off, they must have Him near at hand, manifest, palpable, living to spirit by being real to sense. Hence even within Christianity we find the energies of the Deity and His means of intercourse with man placed in stones, in temples, in images, in rites, nay, in the very garments men may wear as they worship. Men, indeed, will make anything into a god, if so be they can get command of the God they fear.

Now, Jesus took the idea man finds it so impossible to escape and so hard to realize, and gave it life. From His hands it received the shape we know so well, was as it were transfigured into the one personal God, moral, good, gracious, everywhere touching man and capable of being touched by him. We must not say, "This was not His doing; it was done by the Jews"; for they only made it possible, they did not achieve it. The God they conceived was their God, they owned Him, and as it were distributed Him, and their law was, not God possesses the man; but, in order to have our God, the man must become one of us, for the God who is the possession of the Jews only Jews can possess. Their tribal polity and worship reduced their monotheism to a tribal religion. In the hands of Jesus, on the contrary, God became the Father of all men, no distinction of race did He know, man was His and He was man's, and He was a Deity the philosopher could as little evaporate into an abstraction as could the child of sense impersonate and imprison in a symbol. For His name was the most concrete of all names, Father, and as His Father-

hood was necessary and eternal, the moment never was or could be when He was without a Son ; reality and relationship were of the very essence of His being. And, then, the Father could have one fitting image and one only, the Son ; His person was the single yet universal symbol of the God whose life was love and whose joy was the fellowship of His sons. And so the idea man most needed was made perfect for evermore.

2. How He affected the conception of the religious subject. We may say that two things, seemingly most opposite yet near akin, marked everywhere before Christ the idea of man ; the unit was without value and the race was without unity. The value of the individual is a late and Christian idea ; the ancient empires did not know it, nor do the heathen peoples of to-day. What cared the Pharaohs who were the builders of the Pyramids for the lives of the men who built them ? To sacrifice some thousands of men in building a tomb, made it all the fitter a tomb for a king. The English care of life is a curious thing to the Hindu ; his land so teems with the living that he need not too jealously guard or keep life. In China, with its hundreds of millions of men, the waste of man matters little ; there is the more to divide among the living if the mouths to be fed are fewer. But Christ, when He took hold upon and bore human nature, dignified the nature He bore. Man seen through His humanity became a being of transcendent value ; the nature which had been put of God to the most gracious of all uses was a nature that could be no more despised or mishandled. And so it became impossible to the parent to expose his child, or to the crowd to make holiday in the amphitheatre where the trembling man was thrown to the wild beast, or to the freeman to hold a brother man as his slave. But the same act which gave worth to the individual, gave unity to the race. There is nothing so easy as to divide men, and division abolishes the

higher duties. The little strip of silver sea parting island from mainland, the broad bosom of the river whose opposite banks smile to each other in beauty or rival each other in fruitfulness, the differences of speech, here nasal, there guttural, may make a gulf between peoples that even goodwill cannot bridge. And less things than these divide. Is there, for example, anything more divisive than colour? Is it possible to measure the contempt of the white man for the black, of the tawny for the yellow, of the lighter for the darker races? Men say, beauty is only skin deep, but there are few deeper things than skin, more prohibitive of unity, or even of the common intelligibility of man to man. But Christ abolished the distinction of races and families; as He lifted man to faith in one God, He breathed into him the sense of one mankind, causing the peoples in whom His Spirit has found a home to feel in their sane and lucid moments the awful shame of forgetting the brotherhood of their humbler neighbours with all the duties it involves. And so He perfected His first creation, the moral unity of God, by His second, the ethical unity of man.

3. Correspondent to His action on those two ideas was His action on a third, the medium of their union, religion. Before Him religion was the great means of appeasing God by ceremonial and sacrifice; but He made it the method of pleasing God by the service of man. There is nothing so agreeable to sense as pomp in worship, it is the commonest and most imperious of all æstheticisms. All heathenism knew it, and the measure of its ethical deficiency was the luxuriance of its ceremonial. But Christ breathed into religion another spirit; He made its highest function and noblest service the rescue and recovery of man. He was never to be despaired of; though a sinner, he was no mere offender in the hands of an angry God, but a soul to be saved, a brother to be redeemed. Is there anything in

history parallel to this saving power of Christ, and this power to create in the man He saves love of the outcast, pity for the lapsed, the belief that the divine way is not to mend the universe by ending the wrongdoer, but by mending the doer to end the wrong? He is by pre-eminence the Redeemer, and the pre-eminent work of His church is redemption, going into the slums where men lie soaked in sin, going into the palace where men and women live in selfish and luxurious vice, going into the places of religious concourse where the Pharisee avoids the publican and the publican fears to come, and creating in the midst of their death the life divine. If, as Browning said,—

“ A loving worm within its clod
Were lovelier than a loveless God
Amid His worlds,”—

what must be the loveliness of the man who embodies for his own age and society all the love of the loving God for His universe? And this, the loveliness He Himself realized, is what Jesus is progressively creating in the hearts of His people in order to the saving of the world.

4. From this threefold action of His there follows two differentiating characteristics of His religion.

(a) It is in the strictest sense universal,—indeed, it alone has the note of universality. This it has by virtue not only of its constitutive ideas, but even of its formal character. Under this aspect two limiting agencies tend to dominate the more active and aggressive religions, place and polity, or the home and the social framework. As to the first of these place has so set its mark on Brahmanism that it could not live out of India, its thought alike in matter and texture, its gods alike in multitude and quality, in behaviour and relations, in easy capability of increase and extinction, its worship alike in spirit and method and aspect, are so thoroughly and entirely Indian that they could not survive a change either of climate or scene. Buddhism, too, is

Asiatic, the indelible mark of place is stamped upon its very soul, its asceticism, its views of life, its notion of being, its ideal of virtue and dream of beatitude are all of the orient, without actuality, without even intelligibility for the occident. Islam cannot escape from Arabia, its centre is geographical, tribal traditions and customs, local fetishisms and acts form the very warp into which the woof of its monotheism is woven, and bind it to the barren monotony of its home. But the religion of Christ is without the image and superscription of any place; born in Judea, it is yet not Jewish, is indeed, while historically the child of Judaism, yet essentially its very antithesis; formulated in Greece, it still is not Greek; organized in Rome, it yet is not Roman; received by Frank and Teuton, it has never become either Frankish or Teutonic. It has never been subdued to the complexion of any land or people, but has made even the tribal soul cosmopolitan, and transmuted patriotic avarice into a humane generosity. Indeed, Christ's religion has acted like the leaven of a universal ideal in those aggregated masses of selfishness we call the kingdoms and nations of the earth. The only home it needs is the soul of man, and where that soul is, there is the only place it knows.

As with place, so with polity. Its social framework is of the essence of Brahmanism; it is the apotheosis of a society, a system of castes made into an inflexible and inviolable divine law; to break it were to break up the religion. Buddhism, too, is a social polity; its despair of life is expressed in the society it sanctions, its saints are celibates; without monks and nuns it would have no church and Buddha would have no honour. Islam, too, in its fasts, in its pilgrimages, in the very completeness with which it embodies what Gibbon called "an eternal truth and a necessary fiction, That there is only one God, and that Mohammed is the apostle of God,"—is bound to a

polity which compels it to restrict the freedom, retard the development, and prevent the higher civilization of man. But Christ's religion is too essentially spirit and truth ever to become merely a framework or special polity. It has existed, it does exist under the most dissimilar forms. It has been realized under the Papacy, which is simply a political autocracy or kingdom in the religious sphere; under an Anglican episcopacy, which is only the ancient theory of the divine descent of rulers translated into the formula of apostolical succession; under a Presbytery, *jure divino*, which is only the theory of a representative republic incorporated in an ecclesiastical system; under Independency, which is only the notion of the Greek Ecclesia rendered into a religious society; but it has never been coextensive or identical with any one of these. Each may have done justice to some single element in it, but no one has ever either comprehended all its people, contained all its truth, or exhausted all its virtue. As truth it everywhere creates its own distinctive life, as spirit it fashions its own body; but the function of the body is to be the vehicle of the life and to serve the spirit, and its merit is to be measured by its fitness for its end. The religion that is thus above place, and independent of peculiar social forms, is manifestly universal, capable of being realized anywhere by any one.

(b) But even more significant is the second characteristic, what we may call alternatively the permanency or suitability of the religion. Suppose this question were raised:— Since man cannot live without religion, which of all the religions of the world has most proved itself suitable to collective man? Is the question even capable of being argued? There is not an Oriental religion that could live in the occident; our colder climate, our aggressive temper, our insolent intellect, our devouring energy would be their death. They are too fixed in their social types

to create or to tolerate or to be tolerated by the more complex civilizations. Nor is any one of the eclectic faiths which the over-luxuriant phantasies of our decadents so easily turn out, able to do more than amuse the idle hours of a wearied master and his pious disciples. If any religion has a future, it is the Christian ; and if vigour of life, degree and range of intellectual acceptance, have any gift of prophecy, we may safely say that its promise was never so splendid or its future so assured. The creation of Jesus has, in a measure all its own, the qualities of permanent adaptation and effectual adaptability to all men in all their varieties of place and time, of culture and need.

II.

Our limits compel us to leave the picture incomplete ; but broken and fragmentary as it is, enough has been said to enable us to return with more intelligence to the problem with which we started, the relative truth of the two interpretations of Christ.

1. Does the truth lie with the rigorous naturalism of the priest and procurator, or with the audacious supernaturalism of the evangelists? The answer of history may be rendered thus: there were two results, an immediate and an ultimate. The immediate result appeared to justify the naturalism. Jesus suffered death, seemed indeed, feebler and more mortal than the malefactors who were crucified with Him ; but directly, as it were, on the heels of the immediate followed another and very different result—the death of Jesus was the birth of Christianity, and with it He enters upon the stage of universal history not as the obscure Jew or the ill-fated Galilean, but as the Creator of the highest and mightiest of all religions, the main factor of human progress, the maker of a new social order. How then, philosophy asks, is this to be explained? Without Him or through Him? As the result of natural forces or

of supernatural purpose and action? If the former, then we have to explain two series of quite dissimilar yet organically connected phenomena; viz. (a) the rise of the evangelical history and all its related literature with their wonderful religious ideal, and (b) the progressive realization of this ideal through centuries of struggle.

(a) The first problem is serious enough: here is a literature remarkable not simply for its supernatural history, but for its ethical sanity, its intellectual sincerity and integrity, its gracious reasonableness, yet intensity of conviction as expressed in word and conduct. Nor is this all; it does not express the passing mood of certain exalted dreamers, who were yet resolute doers; it is the programme of the vastest, deepest, strongest, most revolutionary yet persistent of all historical movements, and is at once entirely conscious of being such a programme, and possessed of belief in its sure fulfilment. Is then our explanation to be this—the dissolution of the history into a mythology created by the retrospective imagination, under the impulse received from a winsome personality, out of the material supplied by the Old Testament record, and the resolution of the most remarkable portions of the literature into the illusions of a neurotic temper or the fancies of a hysterical nature? It has, indeed, been gravely proposed so to explain the Gospels on the one hand, and the Pauline system on the other; but we cannot deal with the question as if it concerned a literature alone, it concerns still more the religion whose birth the literature describes, the peoples who have believed it, the place it has filled, and the work it has done in the collective life of man. For if the literature be thus conceived and resolved, then the religion appears as a web woven by illusion out of airier nothings than were ever spun by poet's fancy. It becomes, as it were, a sport, a freak of nature, a sort of midsummer madness of the human spirit,—which means that man in all the centuries

through which he has believed and obeyed it, has lived and acted in the highest regions of thought and experience as if he were without any reason. To deal with our sacred history as if it were but a series of phenomena in pathological psychology, is to draw up the most serious indictment ever framed against the rationality of man, for it is a question not simply of how certain things came to be written, but how they have continued to be believed and to accomplish such extraordinary and beneficent results. Nay, more, it is to involve us in a host of inexplicabilities, questions as to how the creation of morbid mental states could be so sane, so healthful and wholesome, so potent to heal the sick of mind and conscience, and to secure realization at the hands of the most critical peoples of both ancient and modern times.

(b) These are not problems for curious literary speculation, they involve the whole order and purpose of history, and through it the whole meaning of man and his universe. For let us consider what is involved in the marvellous relation between the evangelical conception of Christ and His actual place and function in history. What is the principle fundamental to all science? This: we do not live in a world where things come uncaused. We conceive nature as the realm where order and causation reign. Chance is a word science does not know. Accident is a term which only denotes ignorance. It is used because vision has not found the secret it searched for. The growth of science is the decay of chance; when the one has finally prevailed there will be no place for the other. But order cannot reign in the nature now around man, and yet chance govern man himself; and if order reigns in history as in nature, then the great persons, who are in history what forces are in nature, must belong to this order, are indeed the very factors by which it is constituted. But if we hold this most scientific principle, we must mark the inevitable

question, Can Christ stand where He does uncaused, un-ordered? If He had not been what He was, and stood where He did, could anything in history be as it has been or as it is? Is there any person necessary in the same sense as He is to the higher history of Man? The extension of the Greek empire might have happened without Alexander. It was not any one man, but a multitude of men, who created the supremacy of the Greek spirit in literature and art. Imperial Rome would have been though Cæsar had never lived; but without Christ there would have been no Christianity. It is impossible to conceive it getting into being without Him; and even now that it is, were faith in Him withdrawn, its inspiration would be gone, its hopes, aims, spirit, would die. What can we compare to the power He wields? Love of Him makes the drunkard sober, changes the criminal into a saint, constrains the lustful to become chaste, sends our sons as workers into the slums at home and as labourers into the mission fields abroad. There are no societies that have more graciously served or more deeply offended man than the churches; in some lands the church is an offence alike to intellect and conscience, and hatred of it has made multitudes of men apostatize. But Christ is never hated; He holds men obedient to religion when all other forces have failed, holds them often in face of the offence given by men who all too proudly bear His name. Love of Him is the most godlike love men know, and it has lived as the creator of all those beneficences that stamp the Christian centuries with their only noble and distinctive characteristics.

2. Here, then, we have a most scientific question—what is the reason for the being of this Person, who is of all persons the most necessary to the order and progress of history? Science cannot regard Him as an accident, the rarest of all the sports ever thrown out by chance. So to

conceive Him would be to conceive that history with the nature behind and beneath it, is an inexplicable somewhat, a thing so without a reason that the very note of rationality would be the inability to understand and explain it. Do we seek to bring Him under one or other of the categories which lurk in the large term evolution? Well, as a young theologian I pleaded nearly thirty years ago for its acceptance, and from that early pleading I am not going to retire to-day. But, if we would apply it to the explanation of so transcendent a form as Jesus, we must first ask, what does evolution mean? Can it not only explain the conditions and processes out of which new forms arise, but also reveal the causes of their origin? In other words, does it mean the process which nature follows, her creative method, the mode in which she does her work? Or does it mean the cause which lies behind all processes, and methods, and modes? If the method, then evolution is studied by every man who simply observes how nature does her work; but if the cause, then the observer must get behind the process and ask why nature does her work in this way. Why is it that by this method she accomplishes such results? Now the standpoint of the man in these two cases must be very different. In the one case it is enough that as a chemist he use his crucible and watch his experiments; as a physicist he make sure of his forces and instruments; as a biologist he compare and relate his organisms; as a physiologist he use his microscope, explain his organs and determine his functions; as an anatomist he bring bone to bone and build up his skeleton. But in the other case his problem and method are alike different; he has to seek and to discover the cause which creates the unity yet variety of the objects and fields of all the distinct and several sciences which study nature in detail, but never know her as a whole. And in order to this where must he stand? He cannot get out of himself, and so it must be through

himself. He is the interpreter, but also the interpretation of nature; as it is to him nature shows her forces, so it is through him that nature tells her secret. He is her latest product, her consummate achievement, the final result of her creative process; and he is mind. But if the process has ended in mind, mind must have been implicit in the cause. Science desires continuity in nature, and the only complete continuity is the one which binds together beginning and end. As is the end such must have been the beginning; the reason that interprets nature is the interpretation of its cause.

Now, the same principle that gives us a philosophy of nature, supplies us with a philosophy of history. We see an immense process, the ordered movement of man through the ages, and we conclude that the most efficient factor of the process is the most necessary, which means has the most reason or is most deeply rooted in the order of things. This most efficient factor is Jesus Christ; He is as it were the keystone of the arch which spans the gulf of time. Now can we conceive that the keystone stands there by accident? or otherwise than by operation of the Cause which produced the world and determines the course of history? And can the nature or character of this Cause be known? Causes are known in their effects, for cause and effect ever correspond in quality and character. This Jesus, then, as He stands in universal history, accomplishing those marvels of the Spirit which we have seen indissolubly associated with His person and His name, is an effect, and as He is the Cause of Him must be; *i.e.* must be a Cause in nature as holy, as gracious, as rich in the mercy that redeems, as invincible as the love that saves, as the Christian ages have believed the Christ Himself to be. Nay, more, is not the effect only as it were the cause embodied, the old force, unspent, persisting in a new form? And how shall we express this idea in this case better than

in the evangelical formula, "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us"? and how better describe His continuous action through all the centuries of our Christian experience than by the verse, "We beheld His glory, glory as of the only Begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth"? The grandeur which thus comes to His person transfigures through it all nature and the whole history of man, and may well bid us adopt as our own the words of the same Evangelist, who did not fear to set his audacious conception in the very forefront of his Gospel, certain that its justification would come in the events which are as the articulated judgment of Providence: "No man hath seen God at any time; the only Begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him."

A. M. FAIRBAIRN.

ON THE SPIRIT OF THE TRUTH NOT
SPEAKING FROM HIMSELF.

"When He, the Spirit of the Truth, is come, . . . He shall not speak from Himself."—*John* xvi. 13.

THESE familiar yet strange words follow close upon the announcement that Jesus had yet many things to say, concerning which the deficient preparation of His followers kept Him silent. But their loss should not be for ever, because, when the Spirit of the Truth should come, He should lead them along the road into all the truth.

It is to this promise that He adds the strange reason, "for He shall not speak from Himself." How does such an assertion help the context?

Before examining this question, let us pause to observe how strong a light this passage throws upon the mystery of the Divine Nature.