

IS THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING
OPTIMISTIC ?

“CHRISTIANITY,” says Von Hartmann, “like every genuine religion, grew out of a pessimistic view of the universe and, rooted in this Christian religiosity, has continued to draw thence its nourishment until the Renaissance, with its pagan delight in things of the world, came into conflict with the Christian contempt for, and effort to escape from the world; when a dwindling faith in transcendent bliss made the outlook of terrestrial happiness more attractive.” Then it was that the process of dissolution in Christianity began, and thence the necessity of finding a new form of religion,¹ in the opinion of this writer.

It will be our aim in the present paper to show, on the contrary, that pessimism is not a distinguishing mark of Christianity, as in a former paper we discussed the subject of Hebrew pessimism by way of proving indirectly that it is not true that the Old Testament is essentially optimistic. We shall here endeavour to show that although sorrow and sadness are predominating notes in the utterances of Christ and His immediate followers, the sounds of joy and gladness are by no means wanting, that Christ’s message was an Evangel, a message of joy, that the occurrence of such words as *χαρά*, *ἀγαλλίαν*, *μακαρίζειν*, or such expressions as “sorrowful yet always rejoicing,” “joyful in tribulation,” warnings against the tendency to succumb under a weight of care (*μέριμνα*) and exhortations against despondency in the Epistles (a recent writer in the *Spectator* speaks of the optimism in the Epistle to the Hebrews) display a harmonious blending of sadness with gladness, of cheerfulness in suffering, and a hopeful assurance of a final victory in the conflict with the world—the thirteen parables of the

¹ *Die Selbstzersetzung des Christenthums und die Religion der Zukunft*, p. 88.

Kingdom of God indicate the triumph of good over evil—the survival of the fittest (see Mathew x. 22, and xiii. 43)—which are utterly at variance with the principles of thoroughgoing pessimism. True, in the later developments of mediaeval Christianity, and in the writings of such as Buonaventura and Thomas à Kempis, pessimistic mysticism makes its appearance. But the fathers of the first four centuries and the Reformers, like Luther, manifest optimistic tendencies. In fact, Protestantism is condemned by modern pessimists together with Rationalism for its advocacy of optimistic views of life and its alliances with the forces of material progress. This easy accommodation to the spirit of worldliness, it is said, is in complete contrast with the self-denying asceticism and rule of self-mortification which are the true marks of primitive Christianity. Here it is forgotten that in its beginnings Christianity was *une force régénératrice*, reviving the drooping spirit of the ancient world, sunk into pessimistic despondency, as the works of Tacitus, M. Aurelius, Pliny, and Seneca amply testify.

As it was pessimistic scepticism which brought about the decay of the ancient civilization, so it was the vigour of the new faith in the healing power of Christ, applied to the needs of suffering humanity, which effected a moral and social regeneration. Christianity fully recognizes the existence of physical and spiritual evils, but suggests at the same time the means for their removal; it accentuates the ennobling and refining power of pain, and in its promise of a future life deprives death of its sting. It is, indeed, optimistic so far as it regards the world as the object of redemption and sees a teleological aim in the course of nature, “that far-off event to which the whole creation moves,” and a remedy of universal evil in the promise of “a new heaven and a new earth in which dwelleth righteousness.” Thus every *πάθος* becomes an *ἔθος*, as Dr. Gass

in his treatise on the subject puts it, the triumphs of faith culminate in triumphs, the dissonances of life end in peace, harmony is re-established as the passions of men are being pacified and subdued by a higher law. The whole creation is represented by St. Paul as groaning and travailing in pain, waiting for deliverance from the bondage of corruption. But then in relation to this he also says: "The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed to us" (Rom. viii. 18 seq.)

In fact, both the elements of optimism and pessimism are in a measure contained in Christianity, as, indeed, they are both to be found in human nature. Tolstoi's view of Christianity as a "world-shunning" system is one-sided, as was that of Schopenhauer, whose portrait occupies a prominent place in his sitting-room. The same is true of Ibsen's presentation of the tragical in life; yet both in their idealism approach the Christian standpoint. "The renunciation of personal happiness and life," says Tolstoi, "is, for a rational being, as natural a property of his life as flying on its wings, instead of running on its feet, is for a bird." Self-renunciation, though not stated with the same rigour, as a force arrayed against the malign influences of the world, has its appropriate place assigned to it in the Christian scheme. Yet Tertullian, living in the age of Nero, says in his Apology: "Unam omnium rempublicam agnoscimus, mundum"; St. Augustine in *De Civitate Dei* pronounces a solemn funeral oration over the ancient world, yet in other of his writings expatiates with philosophical cheerfulness on the cosmological order of the universe by means of which evil is transmuted into good. If Pascal and the Port Royalists, like Calvin and the Puritans, display a temperamental tendency towards gloomy pessimism, Leibnitz and the optimists of the eighteenth century

restore the balance, though in so doing they may go too far in an opposite direction.

Again, if the rationalistic school of theology was too much inclined to speak of ours as the best of worlds, the Agnostics of our own day, tossed about in the "turbid torrent of doubt and despair," are far too ready to yield to mental despondency. "It is good!" said Kant on his death-bed—it is the last word of the eighteenth century. The nineteenth is essentially pessimistic. The oriental notion of the veil of Maja, hiding the unrealities of existence and deluding the senses, has been exchanged for "the veil of sadness," spread over the Cosmos.

"The cosmos," said the late Mr. F. W. H. Myers, in his collection of Essays on "Science and a Future Life," "we now say, is a system of ether and atoms, in which the sum of matter and the sum of energy are constant quantities. And the cosmos is the scene of universal evolution. Hence it seems to follow that no human soul or will can add a fresh energy of its own . . . it seems to follow, too, that even the highest of these automata (who fancy that they direct the currents along which they inevitably flow) have been brought into a momentary existence by no Heavenly Father, no providential scheme; but in the course of a longer and unconscious process, which in itself bears no relation to human happiness or virtue," and in consequence of this "*we find pessimistic systems more vigorous than any other*, and the intellect of France, Russia, Germany deeply honey-combed with a tacit despair." In order that the race may find a new practical ideal, he says further on, "We must somehow achieve a profound readjustment of our general views of the meaning of life and of the structure of the universe."

But the last word of science is simply a passive resignation, or acquiescence in "the final insoluble mystery of the Universe," at best a cheerful obedience to "cosmic law." But this view the modern symbolist rejects and characterizes as the "bankruptcy of science" in its failure to satisfy the spiritual needs of men.

"Vain is your Science, vain your Art,
Your triumphs and your glories vain,
To feed the hunger of their heart,
And famine of their brain."

The Christian view of the "world process" is utterly at variance with this. The parabolic teaching of Christ, as in the lilies of the field and the poems of St. Francis with his love for nature, are instances of its tendency to dispel the gloom caused by pessimistic materialism, or science robbed of the consolations of a spiritualistic philosophy. Von Hartmann, indeed, speaks of pessimism as the grave-digger of materialism, because it dissuades man from his futile "hunt after happiness." He holds up, too, his own system, the "ethics of pain," as best calculated to cure the world of the "pseudo-morality" founded on hedonistic principle, as Schopenhauer derives sanctification from suffering. Christianity, too, has been justly called "the religion of suffering," self-renunciation and a readiness to sacrifice life is part of its system. "To die is gain" is the cheerful spirit acquiescence in some of its martyrs; but it is the willingness to renounce life for God and goodness, and for the promotion of higher life in others. "No cross, no crown," is its motto, but then it holds to the promise of the crown of life—*finis coronat opus*.

"There is nothing like the bitterness of life for taking away the bitterness of death," says a well-known pessimistic writer of modern fiction. There is no such conception of the bitterness of life or death to be found in any expression contained in the Christian writings.

"To me the wretchedness and apparent failure of the world is terrible," says Bishop Westcott, writing to his wife in 1888; but he adds: "However, I hope that life will come."

In order to show what Christianity has in common with pessimism, and wherein it essentially differs from it, we may compare briefly Von Hartmann's pessimistic presentment of the teleological process and its finality compared with the eudaimonistic view of the course of this world and its goal from the Christian standpoint. The peculi-

arity of Von Hartmann's system is the blending of pessimistic views of the Universe with optimistic principles of evolution so as to fit them into his ethical scheme, by means of which he hopes to attain his ideal annihilation. For his conception of the redemption of the world is the united effort of "cultured piety" to attain to the happy state of non-existence. He uses such theological terms as "the grace of salvation," and "faith"—*Erlösungsgnade* and *Gemüthsglaube*,—and speaks of these as necessary to salvation; the former being dependent on the universal spirit, the latter coming from man, and both acting together, resulting in the return of all sentient being with the immanent spirit to a state of blissful unconsciousness. Or, as he puts it elsewhere, the tragedy of the world's process ends in the peace of non-being. In this cosmological view there is no room left for "rejoicing in hope" of blessedness here, or hereafter, *Weltfreude* becomes *Weltfriede*, not everlasting joy but eternal rest—the unbroken peace of Nirvâna.

Christian Eudaimonism, too, expects a deliverance, but it is the liberation of the individual soul and that of the world at large from evil. It is not a deliverance from life itself, except for the purpose of attaining the higher life, "the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body" (2 Cor. iv. 10). Christianity estimates life and the world at their true value from the point of view of the higher optimism, according to which self-renunciation and the renunciation of the world become means to an end, not the end itself. To overcome self and the world is to further individual and universal progress, ethically and spiritually. "In the world ye shall have tribulation," but "*Be of good cheer*, I have overcome the world." The world thus becomes a high school of ethical culture, and the saints being made perfect learn to regard the existence of evil, even moral evil—*O felix culpa!*

—as instrumental thereunto. Of the several pessimistic views of the world, as an inn, a house of correction, a mad-house, or a sink of corruption, it adopts, with certain limitations, the first two. Our transitory existence here serves the purpose of improvement; it becomes a suitable environment for moral training (see 2 Cor. v. 1 *seq.*), in calling forth the feelings of love and pity, stimulating sympathy and compassion, leading up to corresponding effort to ameliorate the condition and alleviate the suffering of others. Christianity is not misanthropical in its pessimism, but philanthropic in its ethical optimism.

“Whoever looks at serious misfortunes from a distance,” said the blind philosopher E. Dühring in his book on the *Value of Life*, “and only knows it from observation, is ready enough with a malicious wholesale condemnation of this world and its wickedness. He speaks of its demonic origin and its evil nature, and so freely dispatiates on its genesis and mutations adversely, because it does not affect him immediately and personally. He feels as happy in his pessimistic twilight, when unfriendly views of life assume a romantic glamour, as owls and bats feel happy in the dark after sunset.”

Pessimism thus becomes simply an anodyne for selfish minds indulging in moody sadness which is incapable of altruistic effort.

According to the Christian view, life is a state of probation, preparatory for another state of existence; hence its evils have a disciplinary quality, in helping to develop “the powers of the world to come,” thus inspiring that “serious joyousness” which Dr. South associates with paradisaical bliss. It is quite distinct from the calm aesthetic pleasure, or philosophical contemplation, which is the only source of unmixed delight of which we are capable, according to Schopenhauer. It also differs from the ideal optimism of Emerson, the serenity of spirit arising from the conviction that the universe benefits in what the individual loses, that nature which is all-good will bring good out of evil in the working of her inexorable laws. Therefore, he says: “Let

us build altars to Beautiful Necessity," for "Fate involves melioration," and in the "ascending order" all works out for the best. Christianity does not take up the standpoint of satisfied optimism or dissatisfied pessimism. It partly agrees with the pessimist when he dwells on the illusionary character of perfect happiness in this life, and for this reason, that "without sorrow the divine seriousness of life would be unknown." But, whilst admitting that life contains many joys as well as sorrows, it insists on the reality, if it does not define the nature, of felicity in the life beyond the grave. This hope pessimism discards as an unreasonable and vain desire for posthumous existence. The supreme joy of Christianity is not eternal and unbroken sleep at death—the pessimist's ideal, but "them that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with Him" (1 Thess. iv. 14, R.V.).

Thus Christianity avoids the fallacy of extremes, the gloomy outlook of orientalism, yearning for absorption in the inane as well as the blithely light-mindedness of Hellenism, and their influence on modern thought. It is equally distant from the gloomy pessimism which despairs of human nature and an easygoing optimism which overlooks the sad aspects of human existence. "It is the half-seriousness that is gloomy," says Bishop Brooks, the great American preacher, "the full seriousness, the life lived in its deepest consciousness, is full of joy, as it is full of seriousness." Religious minds brooding over the anguish of life and the shadows cast athwart the path of progress, cannot escape from moments of sadness and fits of melancholy thoughts. But there are, too, the brighter moments of "the cheerfulness of soul" and "buoyancy of spirit" for saints and sages, as in the case of our Lord, who "rejoiced in spirit" upon the return of the Seventy from their successful mission, yet exhorts His disciples: "Howbeit in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but

rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke x. 20); or when He extorts His followers with the hope of a final restitution and compensation for life's trials (*vide* Luke xiv. 18). All periods of decay, it has been said, have been pessimistic; all periods of active productivity optimistic. The Christian religion was not, as Harnack puts it, "the religion of a despairing section of the Jewish nation . . . the last effort of a decadent age driven by distress into a renunciation of this earth, and then trying to storm heaven . . . a religion of miserabilism." It is because it is the opposite of all this that it can impart the vigour which is indispensable to progress. For this reason it has nothing in common with the dismal wanton pessimism attracted by evil in its craving for "cerebral voluptuousness"—the pessimism of decadents; nor, on the other hand, does it favour an idle, self-sated optimism given to sensuous indulgence. Christianity does not regard this either as the best or the worst of worlds. In Nature, and Society, in the spiritual and moral environment, in the historical process without and individual development within, we meet serious hindrances and opposing forces. These are the cause of disturbance and disharmonies without and discords within; they are known to exercise a baneful influence and serve as impediments to progress.

"The gospel of work" offers unremitting activity as a consolation, with Voltaire, a pessimist of the eighteenth century, it seems to say: "Let us work without reasoning,—it is the only way of rendering life supportable." The dynamic optimism of Christianity serves as a spur to effort under the Divine taskmaster's eye in helping forward the general plan, the new order of things to be evolved from the old. Pessimistic fatalism, as it holds that all effort is a futile attempt to amend what is beyond repair, and destined to perish in the end, is apt to enervate and enfeeble. Christianity suggests for man's highest

aim a new type of life in the light of moral liberty by means of heroic action and noble suffering effecting the final victory of the spiritual forces in the universe through the power of Divine grace and love. Thus, in the words of Professor R. Eucken,¹ the world becomes the workshop of spiritual activity, and the present dialectical process consists in the developing of the spiritual force which is to effect this.

Here, then, we have a less depressing aspect of life's struggle against the powers of evil than is contained in "the pagan melancholy" or capacity for painful thought, "the malady of soul" of our cultivated classes, as the result of growing refinements of the senses and the intellect with the weakening of religious beliefs in the present day. There is nothing in the Christian writings comparable to what we see exhibited in the love of the lugubrious in contemporary literature and art. Christianity stands between the extremes of pessimism and optimism, as a *meliorative* system. It does not with pessimism regard the world as a madhouse, or a hospital for incurables, still less as a charnel-house where all the inmates are condemned to die. It regards it rather as a sanatorium, or convalescent home, for the complete restoration to health. Life, liberty, disinterested love are the ultimate issues expected from this treatment. The limitations of sin, sorrow, and suffering serve the purpose of maturing human nature so as to render it fit for a higher state of existence.

In this view of life and the Cosmos there is something bracing and apt to produce a cheerful fortitude of mind which enables a man like Hamerton, amid the ills of life and the baffling incoherency of things, to say near its close :

"With the passing of years, the decay of strength, the loss of all

¹ *Der Kampf um einen Geistigen Lebensinhalt, neue Grundlegung einer Weltanschauung*, p. 343.

my old native and pleasant habits, there grows more and more upon me that belief in the kindness of this scheme of things, and the goodness of our veiled God, which is an excellent and pacifying compensation" (*Autobiography and Memoir*, p. 535).

Thus the world becomes a wide field for exercising noble activities, and bearing suffering and privations with enduring courage, a theatre for the most vigorous exertion of our powers, and training them for the ultimate performance of higher duties in a more perfect state, and the enjoyment of that felicity which consists in noble being and service, a view of life at once serious and serene, and most fitly expressed, perhaps, in the phraseology of the Hebrew psalmist, anticipating as it were the Christian conception of life, its course, and its goal: "Thou wilt show me the path of life, in Thy presence is fulness of joy, at Thy right hand pleasures for evermore" (Ps. xvi. 11).

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