

Fairbairn's 'Philosophy of the Christian Religion.'

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IN this remarkably able and comprehensive work,¹ Principal Fairbairn seeks to vindicate for the Christian religion the unique and pre-eminent position among the religions of the world which its disciples claim for it. In doing so he proceeds, in a logical and masterly fashion, from the philosophical interpretation of Nature to the Theistic conception of Creation; from Creation as an unfinished work, an evolutionary process, to the philosophy of History under the guidance of Moral Intelligence; and from the philosophy of the historical training and development of Man as a free and ethical being to the Philosophy of Comparative Religion.

Among the religions of the world the author ascribes superior significance and value to those which are differentiated from the rest by the fact that they were founded by historical personages in whom their disciples have found 'the interpretative and normative term of the highest religious ideas,'—namely Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.

This line of thought occupies the first half of the volume before us. As would be anticipated by all who know anything of Dr. Fairbairn's wide reading and dialectical skill, the discussion of the various topics dealt with is conducted with conspicuous ability and thoroughness.

Among the features of special interest and value in this part of the work, reference may be made to the way in which through the entire process of human evolution, the co-ordination of the objective and subjective factors is emphasized and appreciated. Nature and personality, energy in the universe and spontaneity in man, an external intelligible world and intelligence in man competent to interpret it, and an ethical purpose and trend in the divine guidance and government of history and the moral nature with which men are endowed, are traced in continuous correspondence and co-operation. The congruity and kinship of man and his environment, which is really the keynote of the doctrine of Evolution, is fully recognized and insisted upon; and yet the spiritual and

divine principle in man, his intelligence and ethicality, is never regarded as absorbed in or subordinated to its cognate manifestations in the external world.

The educative purpose and efficacy of the various physical evils incident to human life are lucidly and suggestively expounded in some of the most eloquent passages of the volume. In explanation of the existence of moral evil, it is contended that 'if it were good to have moral beings under moral law, evil must be possible.' Probably this is as satisfying an attempt to solve the mystery as any that finite intelligence can suggest, though the *dictum* upon which it rests will seem to some minds to preclude too dogmatically the possibility of the existence, in other realms of the wide universe of God, of moral beings not exposed even to the risk of moral evil. Dr. Fairbairn's further contention that 'to allow evil to become and continue without any purpose of redemption, were to us an absolutely inconceivable act in a good and holy and gracious God,' is of less questionable validity.

The section treating of the Evolution of Religion is an extremely valuable one, especially in its application of the principle of reciprocity between man and his environment, to the mutual character of the relation which the human consciousness recognizes between suprasensible being and himself. Religion is thus shown to be not a mere subjective process, but one 'in which man's whole environment takes part,' as the medium through which his Maker is continuously exercising influence over him.

The examination of the manifold forms of religion and the consideration of the secondary causes of the variety in the phenomena of religion is full of interest and, for the most part, is illuminating and convincing. But on one point, and that a point somewhat vital to the main argument of the work, it may be doubted whether the view advanced can be maintained. In chap. 8 of bk. i., Dr. Fairbairn contends that 'founded religions constitute a class or order by themselves'—a founded religion being one 'whose ultimate truth is a historical person speculatively construed.'

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For this class he claims, in addition to Christianity, Buddhism and Islam.

Spontaneous or impersonal religions 'are not the work of any one man or any special body of men, but rather of our common nature,' and 'may be termed apotheoses of Nature,' whilst founded religions 'may be described as apotheoses of personality.' The author admits that there is needed for the creation of a personal religion, 'a historical background or a fit ancestry,' and 'a congenial society or environment upon or within which the genius may operate.' But it was, it is urged, 'the transcendental interpretation of its founder, his apotheosis, as we have termed it, which made Buddhism a religion.' 'On the one side he personified the moral energies of the universe; on the other he became the governing ideal and example of human duty, the humanity of the standard making the ethics humane.'

In the case of Islam, its 'primary belief is not the unity of God, but the apostolate of Mohammed.' 'His authority was ultimate, for through him God had finally and fully spoken, and only through him could God be really known.' These are undoubtedly significant and characteristic features of these two great religious systems; but the emphasis placed upon these features as a *principium divisionis* by which these religions are brought into a class by themselves (along with Christianity) has too much the appearance of the exaggeration of special pleading with a view to the line of exposition to be pursued in the second part of the work. Notwithstanding all that is said respecting the relation of Moses to the religion of Israel, the difference between the function of one who is described as 'not only its lawgiver, but its prophet, as indeed the greatest because the first of the prophets, the type of the ideal servant of God whose voice men were to hear and obey,' and the founder of Islam, is not so obvious or marked. And hero-worship has, of course, had a place, even to the extent of apotheosis, in connexion with other religions besides Buddhism.

The second part of the work applies the principles formulated in the first part to the relation of the Founder of the Christian religion to the religion which He founded. The life of Jesus is examined not simply as a historical event recorded in biblical literature, but with a view to the discovery of the seeds and causes of the

thought and belief in which the Christian religion essentially consists. The question to be investigated is stated thus: 'Can it be claimed for His Person that, as interpreted in the apostolic writings, it made an absolute and ideal religion possible?' It is pointed out that the Gospel narratives were written after the interpretative process was well advanced, and by men who read the life in terms of the supernatural. To the evangelists Jesus was 'a Being who transcends Nature even while He lives under the forms, and subject to the conditions, of the Nature He transcends.' With this part of the argument, Dr. Fairbairn deals in a remarkably fresh and suggestive fashion, pointing out that the supernatural power with which Jesus is credited and the miraculous acts He is said to have performed are never represented as rendering Him 'anomalous or abnormal, but as leaving Him simple and rational and real.' He never ceases to be like unto His brethren nor to be dependent upon God. Moreover, His supernatural power is always held in control by the perfect righteousness and beneficence of His moral nature. 'Men think Him so possessed by a moral will that they do not feel fear in a presence they believe to be supernatural. He is more marvellous for the grace He impersonates than for the miracles He accomplishes. He was higher as a moral miracle than as a physical power.' And further, whilst the ideal of ethical character which Jesus embodies is unique, original, catholic, and transcendently perfect, He is still truly human, 'not so much taken out of humanity as placed at its head, and so becomes the First-born among many brethren.'

Closely connected with the view taken of the life and work of Jesus by the evangelists is the light in which, as gathered from the Memoirs, Jesus seems to have regarded Himself and His special function in religion. The claims which He makes 'represent a sovereignty which only a singular and pre-eminently privileged relation to the Father could justify.' Christ's view of His death combines, Dr. Fairbairn contends, two distinct elements. 'From the idea of death He never shrinks; He contemplates it calmly, speaks of it with the serene dignity of one who knew that the most tragic moment of His life was at once His own supreme choice and the real end of His being. But when He knows its mode, and thinks of the agents it needed, His feeling changes, and

His speech is charged, now with admonition and judgment, now with pity and regret.' 'The antecedent of the agony was not the idea of death, but the feeling as to its means and agents.' Christ's thought as to the result to be attained by His death, as it found expression in the words spoken at the Last Supper, is expounded in accordance with the significance of the Paschal Lamb, whose blood was not shed to propitiate a vengeful Deity,' but as 'the seal of a mercy which had been shown and was now claimed, not the purchase of a mercy which was withheld and must be bought.' The blood shed for many denotes that 'the inner obedience which is accomplished by His spirit' becoming 'a fact of their history, and a factor of their new experience,' sets them free from the law of sin and death, and as the inspiration of a new and spiritual life produces in them a character increasingly conformed to all righteousness and goodness. 'Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.' The frank statement by a theologian of the eminence and ability of Dr. Fairbairn, of what may be called the *dynamic* theory of the atoning efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ, may be commended to any who are still enthralled by judicial notions as to the meaning and purpose of the Saviour's death.

The discussion naturally passes next to the inquiry, 'What idea had the men who followed Jesus, the apostles and the apostolic writers, of His person? How did this idea come to be?' The teaching of the Epistles of Paul, the Apocalypse, and the Gospel by John is accordingly briefly reviewed with a view to arrive at their interpretation of the Person of Christ. Paul is shown to have conceived Jesus 'as the Son of God, not officially nor figuratively, but essentially, *i.e.* as Himself Divine.' It is argued that whilst Christ's 'potency to command obedience and to inspire with the love that was willing for His sake to endure the loss of all things and even of life itself,' had its place and value as the subjective factor in the formation of this conception, its true historical source was the mind of Christ Himself, 'the expression of His own consciousness touching His own being.'

In a too brief section Dr. Fairbairn then proceeds to expound the thesis which will be regarded probably by some earnest seekers after truth as the weak point in the entire argument—that 'the idea

as to the Person of Christ created the Christian religion. That religion is built upon the belief that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God.' 'What made the religion was the significance His Person had for thought, the way in which it lived to faith, the mode in which it interpreted to reason God and the universe, man and history.'

The meagreness of the treatment of this point is certainly to be regretted. The author, no doubt wisely, avoids any metaphysical discussion of the essential nature of the Person of Christ, but it would have been satisfactory if he had explained somewhat more definitely what is to be understood by the idea of the Person of Christ which created, as He holds, the religion that He founded. Professor Harnack, for instance, in his *What is Christianity?* agrees that Jesus describes Himself as the 'Son of God'; but the interpretation which he puts upon that term is very different from that which is formulated in the ecclesiastical Creeds. 'The Gospel,' he asserts, 'as Jesus proclaimed it, has to do with the Father only, and not with the Son.'

Moreover, it may well be doubted, even by those who have no hesitation in accepting in the fullest sense the conception of the essential Deity of Christ, whether any idea of His person is to be recognized as the fundamental and formative one of the Christian religion. In the chapter on 'The Death of Christ and Christian Worship,' it is affirmed that 'the function which apostolic thought assigns to His death can be better described as an institution than as a doctrine,' and in some eloquent pages of exposition it is shown how the Apostle Paul 'translated the Person who had been made the sole religious institution into a sovereign and sufficient divine law.'

The question that may be raised is, Was it the idea of the Person that was thus translated into the formative principle of the religion? or, Was it the grace of God which Christ proclaimed and which was manifested to men in and through His life and death which really made and constituted the Christian religion, from which, in turn, human thought deduces, as a more or less necessary corollary, the highest possible conception of Him by whom this Gospel message has been mediated and brought home to the hearts and consciences of men?

In the closing pages of the work, Dr. Fairbairn

seems himself to endorse the latter view as to the 'relation between His person and the function He has actually fulfilled in history.' 'Causes are known,' he says, 'in their effects, for cause and effect ever correspond in quality and character.' And so, all who know the grace and power of

Christ may be justified in expressing their conception of Him in the biblical formula, 'The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us, and we beheld His glory, a glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.'

Recent Foreign Theology.

M. Jastrow's 'Religion Babyloniens und Assyriens.'¹

Nor long ago it was announced in these columns that a German edition of Professor Jastrow's well-known *Religion of Babylonia and Assyria* was in the press. The first issue, running to 80 pages, has reached us, and we have read it with eager interest, anxious to ascertain what judgment its author has formed upon certain questions that have arisen or have been thrown into a new light by discoveries that have taken place since the English edition of his work was given to the public. It goes without saying that Professor Jastrow appreciates to the full the value of the work of the Pennsylvania University at Nippur and the excavations of de Sarzec at Telloh, and that he takes account of the historical investigations of Winckler, Hilprecht, Scheil, Thureau-Dangin, Price, and others. Fuller materials have been supplied also by the publication of King's *Letters and Inscriptions of Hammurabi*, 3 vols. (London 1898-1900); the *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum* (London, 1896); and by the numerous additions made to the religious literature by such Assyriologists as Delitzsch, Haupt, Hommel, Zimmern, Jensen, Jeremias, Knudtzon, Craig, Boissier, Johns, and Thomson.

In his Preface the author informs us of the principles he has kept steadily in view throughout his work. One of these is admirably fitted to gain the confidence of the reader, the principle, namely, of *adopting such results only as have found general acceptance, and may thus be regarded as final*. Professor Jastrow is careful, too, to remind us again

and again that the time has not yet come for writing an exhaustive history of the Babylonian and Assyrian religion. This will be the task of the children or, it may be, the grandchildren of the present generation of Assyriologists. Yet the store of materials at our command is a very rich one, and the more fully these are examined, the more clearly do we see that their study is indispensable for the proper understanding of the Old Testament.

The first instalment of this great work is made up, in nearly two-thirds (50 pages) of its extent, of introductory matter, regarding the history of Babylonia and Assyria, with an account of the material available for a description of their religion. The story of the excavations, etc., of the past sixty years has never been told in a more lucid and interesting manner, and the account of the land and the people, whose civilization probably goes back to at least 4500 B.C., is all that could be desired. Then comes chap. 4, entitled 'Die Babylonische Götter vor Hammurabi,' in which the author proceeds to tell us all that is known, from that stage of Babylonian history, about the cult of En-lil or Bel, Ea, Sin, etc. etc. P. 80 ends in the middle of a sentence belonging to the section on Nina, and we shall have to wait for the appearance of part ii. to continue our study of the Babylonian Pantheon. These 80 pages have only served to whet our appetite for more.

We may touch on one point in a little more detail. The great 'Sumerian question,' to which we presume Dr. Jastrow will return later in his work, is presented to us (pp. 18 ff.) clearly by our author, whose impartiality and freedom from dogmatism are very striking. He points out both the strength and the weakness of the traditional opinion that the cuneiform style of writing and many other elements of civilization were borrowed

¹ *Die Religion Babyloniens und Assyriens*. Von M. Jastrow, jun. Giessen: J. Ricker, 1902. Lieferung i. Price M. 1.50. Price of work, when complete, about 15s.