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THE PERSON OF CHRIST :

A PROBLEM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION.

PART I. THE PROBLEM.

IN the Gospels, the Synoptic no less than the Fourth, the two views of Jesus which we are accustomed to distinguish as the natural and the supernatural, are both represented. It is their conflict which turns the simple story of a humble and beautiful life into the supreme drama of history. The natural was the obvious view, taken as a matter of course, and acted on by the men of cultivated intelligence. They judged Jesus to be a common man, and held any who believed otherwise to be deceived.¹ As they judged, they handled Him, and He died at their hands just as any ordinary person would have died. So universal was this view, that Scribe and Priest, Pharisee and Sadducee, Herodian and Roman, agreed in it, and so convinced were they of its truth that they allowed it to govern their conduct, with results that seemed to themselves satisfactory and conclusive. The two men that most completely impersonate the view are Caiaphas the High Priest, and Pilate the Roman Procurator, for these two so believed it as to become the joint authors of the tragedy of the Cross.

I.

1. The relation of these two men to this tragedy was very different; the one was the author of the plot, the other the cause of the catastrophe. Caiaphas was a Sadducee, an aristocrat in family and feeling, head of the Church, and an authority in the State, with the instincts and habits of the ruler controlled by the mind and exercised in the manner of the ecclesiastic. In the Sanhedrin his characteristic qualities had room for the freest and most effective play,

¹ John vii. 47.

especially when it met in such confusion and alarm as had followed upon the events at Bethany and the triumphal entry.¹ The Passover was at hand, Jerusalem was filled by an expectant crowd, massed, as it were, into a colossal person, sensitive without to the softest touch of national hope or fear, while within, like a fire in the bones, burned the fierce passion for its religion of their ancient race. Through this crowd the sudden fame of Jesus swept, fused it, inspired it, moved it by the delirious hope that here, at last, was the Messiah come to break in pieces the heathen oppressor, and to purge the holy city from the defilement of his presence.² The council knew the people, knew, too, the procurator, whom it seemed to see sitting in his palace, jealous, vindictive, watching as if with a hundred eyes for an occasion to interfere. And it stood bewildered between the rival terrors: on the one hand, the uncalculating and incalculable passion of the crowd, and on the other, the cold omnipotence of Rome, here so easily roused and so pitiless when provoked. Just then Caiaphas stood up, the one masterful spirit who could command the storm. He had the significant yet dark distinction of being "High Priest that fateful year," and was about to fulfil his office in a sense and manner he little dreamed of. He spoke with a certain imperious scorn words that may be paraphrased thus:³ "Ye know nothing at all: the public safety is the supreme law, and must not be endangered by the passion which in a multitude is a fitful madness, easily kindled, but only to be cunningly quenched. In this case it can best be quenched through its cause; smite the hero the multitude admires, and their admiration will die into disgust." The words seemed those of gifted sagacity; Jesus was nothing; the mere creation of a fanaticism blinded by many disappointments, and, though He was guiltless of crime, yet it

¹ John xi. 47. ² Matt. xxi. 8-11. Luke xix. 35-40, 47, 48. John xii. 12-15.

³ John xi. 49, 50.

was the high expedient of statesmanship to save the people by making an end of Him; and if He were only the common man the priest and the council conceived Him to be, who will say that the priest was unwise?

But now let us turn from the man who planned the tragedy to the man who caused the climax. Pilate is an unconscious actor in the drama, with only the dimmest sense that anything extraordinary is proceeding, or that he is playing more than his ordinary part.¹ There is something fateful and pathetic in the position and action of this man; when we think of him we feel that justice must be blind, or she would pity too much to be just. Here is the only Roman known to history who saw Jesus, but his eyes had no vision in them, and so he looked as one who did not see, or so saw as only to misjudge and mishandle. In him Rome was impersonated. Out of him looked her imperial strength, in him dwelt for a subject people her statesmanship. As he faced the Jew he thought of Cæsar, and ruled him with his feet firm planted on an empire which stretched westward to the Pillars of Hercules, northward to the forests of Germany and the utmost coasts of Gaul. And what was the Jew to him? A turbulent man, intolerable for his intolerant superstition, a people that the imperial image on a banner provoked into madness,² who would not allow the shadow of a Gentile to fall on their temple, though, indeed, it was so poor a place as to be unadorned by the statue of any god. Still it was necessary, the people being subject, to rule them considerately—if they behaved; but if at this high feast they were, or even if they only threatened to be, seditious, then in Cæsar's name their blood would be mingled with their sacrifices.³ And what did Jesus seem to this man as He stood before him? A Jew, only a Jew, though most unlike the typical Jew in the

¹ Matt. xxvii. 24. John xviii. 31, 37; xix. 6.

² Josephus, *Antiq.*, xviii. iii. 1-2.

³ Luke xiii. 1.

gentleness of His bearing, the mystery of His speech, and the glamour of soul which the Roman felt now touch his heart, now wake his mockery, now move his pity.¹ He knew the chief priests, and had for them the sort of contempt the conqueror feels for those of the conquered who seek by excessive suppleness to keep themselves in place, mollifying by the one hand the strong-willed victor, and soothing with the other the irritable impotence of the vanquished. Jesus was a being of another order than these men, and though Pilate, listening to His discourse, and vividly by contrast reminded of Epicurus and his great Roman disciple, threw out the jesting question, "What is truth?" yet he turned away with the feeling that he would save Him,—unless, indeed, the obstinate unreason of this most excitable people made it too troublesome.² For Rome did not mind the shedding of blood when it was necessary, but it did not love too frequent bloodshed in any province, Cæsar being prone to suspect some fault in the governor. So, then, it might happen if His death were needed to keep the turbulent quiet, it would be easiest to let Him die—worse things were done daily in the amphitheatre under the Emperor's own eye. And so Pilate stood, now scornfully temporizing with the multitude, and now patronizing Jesus, befriending Him with a sort of lofty condescension, touched with regret, looking Him, as he thought, through and through. But let us imagine that in the very moment when he boasted his power to crucify or to release,³ a lucid vision had come to him, and that he had beheld the centuries before him unroll their wondrous secret. In less than eighty years he sees in every city of the Roman world societies of men and women meeting in the name of this Jesus and singing praises to Him as to God, while so powerful has His name grown in some provinces that the

¹ Luke xxiii. 4-7, 13-22. John xix, 8-9, 12, 19-22.

² John xviii. 38, 39.

³ John xix. 10.

very temples are deserted, and the most famous governor of the day writes to ask the Emperor what policy he is to pursue. Then he sees Rome, astonished and angry at the might of His Name, lose her proud tolerance, become vindictive, brutal, and even turn persecutor, making profession of the Name a crime punishable with death. But even the resources of the Empire are powerless against the Name; the legions that had carried the Roman Eagles into the inaccessible regions lying round the civilized world, forcing the tide of barbarism back before them, here availed nothing, and he beholds in less than three hundred years the symbol of the Cross on which he was about to crucify this Jesus floating victorious from the capitol, while the Emperor was sitting, not amid patricians in the Roman Senate, but in a council of Christian pastors, all without pride of birth, all without names the Senate would have honoured, many maimed, some even eyeless, disfigured by the tortures Rome had inflicted in her vain attempt to extinguish the infamous thing. In another hundred years he sees the very empire herself fallen, while in her seat sits one whose only claim to rule is that he represents the Crucified, and he there builds up a kingdom beside which Rome at her vastest was but as a hand-breadth, and the city that had been proudly called eternal was in duration only as the child of a day. And if Pilate had waked from his dream as suddenly as he had fallen into it, and looked at Jesus sitting before him mocked and buffeted, helpless in the face of the howling mob, deserted of man, manifestly forsaken of His God, what could he have said but this? "What foolish things dreams are! Their world is a sort of topsy-turvydom of reality, for were this vision of mine true, then the invisible kingdom of this Man would be the only real empire, and my claim of power either to crucify or to release Him a vain and empty boast! Happily the cross will soon show the vanity of the dream."

2. This much, then, and no more, Caiaphas and Pilate saw in Jesus, and as they saw they judged, and as they saw and judged so did all the men of cultivated intelligence in their time and place. They were not unreasonable, nor without integrity; but honest after their kind, only, like all who are consciously and proudly men of the world, they made their experience the measure of other men and all their possibilities. I wonder how many of all the sagacious intellects composing the Royal Society or the British Association would, similarly situated, have judged differently; certainly not many—possibly not even one; for the modern idea of the limitations of nature is more positive than the scientific belief in its potencies or in man's capabilities. But there were even then a few men who had mind enough to differ from those scholars and statesmen who imagined that the duty of the world was to think their thoughts after them. These men were for the most part poor and ignorant enough, but their disadvantages were lost in one supreme advantage—they had known Jesus, and had learned of Him, and because of this learning they were able, by what I can only describe as an act of extraordinary faith, to read a meaning into Him which the men of cultivated intelligence had failed to find. They had formed a theory—or, more correctly, an hypothesis—of His place and person, which had this remarkable peculiarity—it was an hypothesis which did not so much explain facts that had been and that were, as facts that were to be. It was what we may term a prophetic and a creative hypothesis,—prophetic because centuries of history were to be needed, not only to justify it, but even to make it conceivable; creative because it was to call into existence the very facts that were to be its justification. And what was this hypothesis? It was the idea embodied in our Gospels, common to all, though differently complexioned in each. Jesus is conceived as the Messiah, sent of God, descended through the Jews, come

to live and die for the saving of the world. For Him all past Jewish history had been ; towards Him the hopes of men and the events of history had alike converged. From Him went out the light that was to enlighten—the life that was to quicken—the nations. And how was it that He had this transcendent place and function? The author of the Fourth Gospel explained it thus :—“ The Word which had ever been with God, and was God, became flesh and dwelt among us—the only begotten Son in the bosom of the Father came forth and declared Him.” And Jesus was this incarnate Word, this manifested and manifesting Son. His person was, as it were, the tabernacle or tent of meeting for God and man ; and they that could look within and bear the light saw the symbol of the invisible Presence, the living image which expressed the Eternal God. Jesus, in a word, was Deity manifested in humanity and under the conditions of time.

The Evangelist, we may say, then, does for the historical Christ—and through Him for man, and all that man signifies—what the imagination under the long discipline of science has attempted to do for the earth — viz., so places our time in relation to eternity, our space in relation to immensity, as through the greater to explain the less, though only by the less can we know and understand the greater. Here we swim in the bosom of two infinities, and only through these infinities can the process be conceived by which our finite has come to be. To our fathers earth had no mystery. It was but a narrow plain, bordered and washed by the inviolate sea. It could hardly be termed venerable ; its whole history lay within the brief period of six thousand years. On a given day in a given month of a given year, God had spoken through six successive days, and the earth had become what we know it to be. But now inquiry has crept slowly back through the centuries behind us, pushing time before it as it crept, and the few thousands

of years have lengthened into millions; and as man in imagination has ascended this vast avenue of ages, he has seen the successive generations of being slowly descend in the scale until organic being has disappeared; and he has stood, as it were, on an untenanted earth, a slowly cooling mass, with fire within, with vapour around, like a monster sleeping in its own thick breath; while the vapour, slowly condensing, forms the seas, and the mass, cooling, hardens into the rocks. And even here the imagination has not remained; it has travelled back, and has looked, as it were, into the void which is the womb of time, and seen the raw forces of things mustering for their creative career, the atoms falling through space, striking against each other, aggregating, combining, solidifying, so as here to form a sun, there projecting smaller masses to form planets, though rigorous law so bound the severed masses together as to make them constitute one system. And then the imagination, unexhausted by its backward exploration through time, has crept out into space, pushing before it the walls that limit our immensity, and by the help now of the telescope, and now of the photographic plate, it has added realm upon realm of being to our known and observed universe, till we feel as if earth were but a mote floating in the midst of a measureless expanse, which yet is no wilderness, but, as it were, a fair and fruitful land, peopled with innumerable worlds. But infinitesimal as seems the earth in this infinitude, it yet for us holds the secret which explains it. It is one of the mighty host amid which it swims and floats. It shares their being, it partakes in their life, it marches in their order, it belongs to their system. We, though but a part, are yet in and through and because of the whole, and so in us the problem of the whole is concentrated. Our existence, little as it seems, is big with the meaning of the universe, holds the only solution we can ever find of the over-mastering mystery of

being. Now just as our earth becomes at once more majestic and intelligible through these infinities that bound its finitude, and as it yet is the key to all their secrets, so Christ is conceived by the Evangelist as a mystery that must be read through the eternal God, and yet as a reason that makes all His mysteries intelligible, credible, lucid, and, as it were, articulate. The secrets which were in the bosom of the Father are so manifested in Him as to be perceptible by our grosser sense. Hence, within the limits of the sensuous lives a spiritual expressive of things the eye hath not seen, nor the ear heard, nor the hands handled. And the humanity which so reveals Deity could not be other than universal, embodied indeed in a person, but a person who is as essentially related on the one side of His being to man in all his phases and in all his ages, as on the other side to God. And so to the evangelists He is at once the Son of Adam and the only Begotten of the Father.

II.

Here, then, we have two views facing each other in sharp contradiction, and our problem is: Which of the two is the more reasonable and scientific? As the views differ, so do the men who hold them. On the one side stand the culture, the science, the theology, the political wisdom, and the judicial faculty of the place and the hour; on the other side stand the simplicity, the inexperience, the faith of the men whose only claim to be heard was that they had been His disciples. Does it not seem almost too ridiculous a thing to ask, On which side did the truth lie? It would, without doubt, have so seemed to us had we been in the Sanhedrin with Caiaphas, or in the Prætorium with Pilate; *then* we should have said without a moment's hesitation, The truth lies with the cultivated statesmen and scholars. This extraordinary hypothesis is a dream of the credulous, belief of it is possible only to the rude imagination of the

ignorant. But between that time and ours the most incorruptible and unerring of judges has come. "Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht." And to this inexorable judgment-seat we carry our appeal and invoke it to help us to determine whether the truth lies with the priest and the procurator or with the evangelists and the apostles.

1. Now this surely is a problem grave and imperious enough to tax the scientific and the philosophical mind. We have many Societies that cultivate special sciences, and one Association that makes the cultivation of the co-ordinated sciences its special function. In its presence two things fill me with wonder—the immensity of the field these sciences cover, and the inadequacy of them all combined to the interpretation of man as at once the interpreter and the interpretation of the universe. If we think of it, is not the point where these co-ordinated sciences stop even more remarkable than the point where they begin and the goal whither they tend? They start with those mathematics which are pure metaphysics, those ideas which the reason cannot think without or think away, and which underlie all its attempts at the interpretation of Nature as being in space. And then from this they rise through the more concrete sciences—physical, chemical, geological, biological—till they terminate in man as a social and economical being. The field is vast and crowded with marvels; but what is more marvellous than even its extent is its limitation. What is most cardinal and characteristic in man and his creations remains untouched, or is touched only at a point remote from the centre, and so distant from the enquirer that he cannot so see it as to bring it within the terms of anything that can be called scientific knowledge or discussion. The thing I mean is religion, and the point at which science attempts to touch it is savage custom and belief. Without religion can we have man? He is never found without it, and as it is to him he

becomes to history. His first attempt to interpret Nature is governed by religious ideas, and from his last attempt they are inseparable. He must, as he is rational, think, and what is the thought of a reasonable being but a factor which relates him to the infinite and the eternal? The society man creates embodies his religious idea, and the same idea orders his history: in it his customs find their reason, his laws their sanction. Language in all its terms is instinct with religious feeling, and thought in its whole development is governed by the religious problem. In theology philosophy begins, in theology science ends; all the more that it may refuse to name the very notions which transcend its sphere and yet are implicit in all its premisses and will not be excluded from its conclusions. For what is the Agnostic but a man who confesses that there are ideas he will not express but cannot escape from? These beget the ideals which have an infinite meaning for man, for they are born of religion and for ever cause religion to be born anew within him.

Man, then, as he appears in history, a voyager between life and death, is governed by religious ideas, is held in the hands of religious sanctions which he may be unable to explain yet can neither dissipate nor repeal. There is no vision so impressive to the imagination as the vision of the race of man feeling after God if haply it may find Him. Anthropology, like a new and more formal comparative anatomy, or a sort of psychological palæontology, may take up the dried and broken and scattered bones of savage myth and custom, and, with the benevolent condescension which marks the child of culture when he deals with those lower civilizations out of which his own was born, attempt to discover for us the process by which primitive ideas entered the primitive mind and then organized themselves into the customs and the myths which are the originals of our civilized religions. Yet when

it has spoken its last word does it not leave unexplained the mystery of thought within the savage that compelled him to make and follow the custom, to think and create the myth? Our speech tends even now to become bewildered when we stand in presence of the mysteries of being, but are we to cease to think because the expression of our thought is inadequate? And is the scientific way to discredit thought through the inadequacy of its vehicle, or to read the vehicle through the reality of the thought? For how strong must have been those instincts in the savage that moved him to the creation of these naïve beliefs and rites we seek so curiously to explain? And is not the nature behind the beliefs more significant than the beliefs it causes? Or let us go back to our most ancient civilization, unbury the temples of Egypt, disinter her cities, rifle her tombs, unswathe her mummies, and read her hieroglyphs, and what do we find? That the thing that made her the mother of the arts that bade her build her pyramids and her temples, that forced her to preserve her dead that the disembodied soul might yet again find a home, was belief: faith in the life that never died—her religion. Or let us move eastward till we enter the old Mesopotamian valley, dig into its shapeless and melancholy mounds and dig out its winged bull or its man-headed lion, discover and decipher its cuneiform inscriptions, and there read the history of its wars, the ambitions and the achievements of its kings, the myths and the legends of its people, and what have we discovered? That the thing all lived by and lived for was religion. Or let us go still further eastward into India, and what is the idea that there penetrates everything, that fills all nature, that builds up and organizes all society but the idea of an omnipresent Deity, impersonal yet impersonated in all things, out of whom all came, into whom all return? Let us move still eastward till we come to China, and there we find man held in the lean yet iron fingers of his

dead ancestors; but all his ancestors, with the heaven above and the spirits of the earth below, speak to him of the one thing—the religion which the people did not make, but which has made the people. And if we think that by returning to the saner west and investigating its sanest and sunniest peoples we may escape from this all-environing belief, what do we find? That the poetry, the art, the philosophy of Greece live and move and have their being in its religion, and without it they could not have been either what they were to the Greeks or what they are to us. And what was Rome in all her State and Empire save the creation of the religious idea? The gods built and ruled the city, and all the city achieved was by the favour of the gods. And what does this ubiquity of religion, what does its action as the creative and architectonic idea of our race, mean? Not simply that man possesses it, but that it, as it were, possesses man. Till it is explained he is inexplicable, and only as it is purified and strengthened can he be made perfect.

2. From this rapid survey of religion as of all facts the most universal and distinctively human, as of all factors of progress and of civilization the most potent and determinative, two or three important consequences follow. First, the circle of the sciences concerned with man and his universe can never be complete until it embraces the religions—enquires into their cause, their function, the ideas they embody, and their action on man in history. Secondly, religion is so essential to man that he cannot escape from it. It besets him, penetrates, holds him even against his will. He may will to have nothing to do with religion, but instinct is stronger than will, and religion returns, be it as the memory of a dead woman as with Mill or Comte, or as an abstraction like Humanity—*le grand Être*—loved of the Positivist, or as the Unconscious adored by the pessimist, or as the Unknown affirmed by the logic and worshipped by

the awe of the Agnostic. And so thirdly, if religion be, as it were, so built into man as to be the very heart of his being, it follows that the greatest religious personage will be the most important person in history. Genius is varied and can accomplish great things in all the provinces and spheres of thought and life. In art it can give us the things of beauty that are joys for ever, and that govern the taste of all later ages; but art is not the whole of life. Sensuous beauty and moral uncleanness have before now lived together without any feeling of mutual dislike or disgust; but in the course of ages the moral uncleanness proves mightier to harm than the sensuous beauty to bless. Genius in literature may create the classical forms that educate all later intellects, but the most cultivated literary societies have often been cursed by the most absolute selfishness. In music the imagination of the master can blend the harmony of sweet sounds in the *opera* or *oratorio* that speaks to man in the language of the gods. But the delight music may give is of the sense rather than of the soul. Religion, on the other hand, affects and controls all these. To it art, classical or Christian, owes its noblest subjects and highest inspirations. From it literature has received the problems which have given it dignity, the spirit which has breathed into it sublimity, and the soul which has been its life. Without religion music would lose its power to charm, for it elevates in proportion as it is the vehicle of the religious idea, the minister of the religious emotions. The religious is thus the architectonic idea of society, the commanding idea of conduct, the imperial idea of all our being and all our thinking, and he who can create its most perfect form is our supreme benefactor—the foremost person in all our history.

Our problem, then, is, What inference must we draw as to the nature of Him who occupies this foremost place? This will be the subject of our second paper.

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