

THE UNION SEMINARY MAGAZINE

VOL. XXII. DECEMBER, 1910—JANUARY, 1911 No. 2

*THE OLD THEOLOGY AND THE NEW.

R. A. WEBB.

Mr. President and Brethren of the Board of Directors:

In calling me to the Professorship of Apologetics and Systematic Theology you have created for me a great opportunity and conferred upon me a high distinction. I trust I am duly appreciative of both, and adequately thankful for what you have done.

My task is not irksome, my duties are not drudgery. The subject which I teach fascinates my mind, charms my powers, and evokes my enthusiasm. To walk the raised fields of sacred truth with aspiring young men puts me on my mettle, challenges my spirit, and converts my occupation into my joy.

In signaling my induction into my professorship, I shall attempt a comparison of the Old Theology and the New, with a view to showing that the Old is better than the New.

I begin by saying that Systematic Theology is becoming once more the dynamic center of Christian thought. It is beginning to be seen that the very best apologetic is that harmonious and self-consistent statement of Christian doctrine which articulates with the human soul as the tenon fits the mortice. The facts of nature must be reduced to scientific form in order to satisfy;

* INAUGURAL DISCOURSE, delivered by R. A. Webb, on the occasion of his induction into the professorship of Apologetics and Systematic Theology in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary of Kentucky, at Louisville, Ky., May 3, 1910.

and the rational demand is just as imperative that the facts of the Christian religion shall not be dispensed by its teachers in a disorganized and disunited condition. Even the "New Theology," which had its rise in a revolt against dogma, is beginning to proclaim its triumph, and formulate its findings into a complete scheme of dogmatics. Man's supreme concern, man's supreme demand, is for a system of religious truth which is at once biblical and satisfying to reason, conscience and heart.

For centuries the Church has been laboring to develop just such a scheme of Christian doctrine. By controversies within and without, by criticisms friendly and hostile, by study and prayer, by altering and amending, by re-adjusting and re-stating, progress has been made in clarifying and defining and articulating the tenets of the Christian faith. An historic outline has been created, the general trend of doctrine has been established, traditional orthodoxy has been defined, the *communis consensus* of Christendom has been registered. These generic findings of the past, verified by the studies and experiences of the fathers, baptized by the blood of the martyrs, have come to be denominated the "Old" or "Traditional" Theology, and define the lines within which the conservative student prosecutes his investigations and seeks to make more accurate adjustments. He declines to nullify the historical results achieved by a Church under the tuition of the Holy Spirit—to abandon that highway which is crowded with the foot-prints of the flock of Christ.

But a modern school of thinkers, adopting new premises and new processes, seeks, not the clarification of the theology of the past, but its radical reconstruction. Its disciples have named it the "New Theology."

It is a "cross" between Rationalism and Orthodoxy. It has the voice of Jacob, but the hands of Esau. It has swept the entire gamut of the Christian faith, and given diluted statements of every fundamental article of the Christian religion. It has elected the adjective "new" as the common prefix to all its hybrid conclusions. It essays to give us a "new" Bible, a "new" God, a "new" man, a "new" sin, a "new" Saviour,

a "new" gospel—all, the products of concession and compromise.

The "new" Bible is not the Word of God, but a book which merely contains the Word of God—the old book with every shred of the supernatural and miraculous torn out of its texture.

The "new" God is not an extramundane, but an intramundane, being—a deity who is transcendent only in his majesty and glory, but immanent in all his life and activities—somehow or other identified with the forces of nature

The "new" man is not a creature of God, but an evolute of deity—a being who is only human in form but divine in reality.

The "new" sin is not want of conformity unto and transgression of the law of God, but non-conformity unto and transgression of the course and constitution of nature—miscarriage in evolution, abnormality in development, the unnatural, the uneconomic, the unsocial, the unsanitary.

The "new" Christ is not God of very God, consubstantial with the Father, but that particular member of the human race in which deity has come to himself in fullest consciousness and in finest form—the divine man by pre-eminence.

The "new" gospel is not an evangel of saving grace, but a metaphysic of subtlest speculation—a scheme of reconciliation, not by the atoning cross, but by the mystical fusion of humanity and divinity through the processes of evolution and education.

These are all results of an effort to establish a cartel between Christianity and Rationalism—to reconcile supernaturalism and naturalism by a method of concession and compromise—to show that natural law reigns in the spiritual world—to prove that the method of grace is identical with the method of nature.

The New Theology began first as an *attitude* towards the Christian religion; then it progressed to a *method*; and finally advanced to a *dogmatic interpretation* of all Christian teaching.

Schleiermacher, the modern Plato of German theology, whose ministry fell in the first half of the Nineteenth century, must be held to be the father of the present-day New Theology. This remarkable man appeared at a time when the religion of Germany had degenerated into cold rationalism and dead orthodoxy. Constrained by the piety of his mother, he believed

with his heart while he denied with his head. Having become a convinced Pantheist in the University, with the premises and postulates of this philosophy he sought to harmonize his own religious experience with the formal Church of which he was a member. He became a powerful expositor and advocate of the religion of feeling, and labored to lift his conceptions of Christianity, not out of the Bible, but out of his own Christian consciousness. His aim and his task was a theology of the heart which would contradict the theology of his head. That is, Christianity, to his mind, was false to thought, but true to faith; untenable on intellectual grounds, but tenable for fervid reasons. Religion made a schism between his intellect and his emotions; he destructively criticised with the one while he ardently embraced with the other. Not the Christian Scriptures, but the Christian consciousness—not the sayings of God in the Book, but the actings of God in the soul—were to him the sources of theology, the guide of faith and conduct.

Thus did Schleiermacher, in the first half of the Nineteenth century, create a new attitude in the investigation of the Christian religion—one which surrendered it at the bar of reason, but defended it at the bar of feeling—one which denied it in its external sources, but admitted it in its internal phenomena. And there sprang from his loins a party which fell upon the Scriptures and tore them to shreds, while unctiously asserting its devotion to Christ and his cause.

In the latter half of the Nineteenth century science popularized and made almost universal the hypothesis of evolution, as nature's historic and universal method of procedure. "To all questions concerning the origin and the essence of things, of heaven and of earth, of minerals and of plants, of animals and of men, of marriage and of family, of religion and of ethics, the same answer is invariably given: evolution is the key to the origin and existence of all things."

The disciples of Schleiermacher and the apostles of modern thought have applied evolution to Christianity, and found in it a mode of interpreting what their heads denied and their hearts affirmed. They laid it down as an axiomatic and *a priori* proposition that nothing supernatural or miraculous could be

true, because nature's universal and uniform method is gradually ascensive from lower to higher forms.

Accordingly the Bible must be held to be evolved and all that is supernatural and miraculous in its pages must be explained away. Christ must be held to be evolved, and his Virgin Birth and Resurrection, with all intervening miracles, must be so dealt with as to bring him to the level of a natural, though extraordinary, man. Christian experience being evolved, Christian life, in all its phases and phenomena, must be held to be the product of a purely naturalistic gospel. The Christian religion itself being an evolution, the theologian must make an induction of the facts of universal religion, and then systematize these results of his investigation into a scheme of doctrine which shall be purely empirical in all its tenets and articles: the Christian religion but the resultant of all religions.

So did the New Theology receive its attitude from Schleiermacher, and its philosophical method from Darwin. It is now in the beginning of the Twentieth century formulating its results, and offering them to the Church and the world as a satisfactory reduction of the doctrines of Christianity.

It would take a very long time to compare the two constructions in detail. I shall, therefore, restrict myself to their disagreements upon three fundamental topics:

- (1) The Scriptures and the Rule of Faith;
- (2) God and his Relation to the World;
- (3) Christ and his Gospel.

I. THE OLD THEOLOGY AND THE NEW ARE IN SERIOUS DISAGREEMENT AS TO THE SCRIPTURES AND THE RULE OF FAITH.

The Church has historically looked upon the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the very Word of God—the inspired, infallible, inerrant and authoritative Rule of faith and duty. It has held that all legitimate theologizing consisted in finding the meaning of the Bible by sound exegesis, and then organizing its teachings into a logical and consistent body of religious truth. It put the Book upon the pedestal, and de-

manded that thought bow down before it, and practice be conformed to it. It was magnified as the objective standard of faith and conduct—supernatural, divine and final. Its texts were proof-texts. When properly quoted, they were held to close debate, end controversy, and settle doctrine and precept. The fathers felt that they were standing upon solid rock when they felt unequivocal Scripture beneath their feet. And so did our Lord, if we could only believe that he was correctly reported when he supported himself with Moses and the Prophets.

But the new Theology has reduced the religious value of the Scriptures to a minimum. It was compelled to dethrone the Bible from its ancient supremacy for two reasons. *First*, it had learned from Schleiermacher and his successors that Christianity was not a doctrine but a life; and this premise logically required the Christian consciousness as the rule of faith and duty. Then, in the *second* place, it had been convinced by Darwin and his fellow-naturalists that evolution was true; and this doctrine logically necessitated the *a priori* generalization that nothing supernatural and miraculous could be true, no matter upon what testimony such allegations rested; and, since the Bible was made up almost wholly of supernatural and miraculous incident and narrative, it was bound to be discredited by the neo-theologians.

The only problem was, How can the Bible be so naturalized as to leave a remnant of its teachings? What method of explaining it away can be adopted which will not outrage Christian reason and revolt Christian sentiment?

A school of critics began to draw attention to certain errors and discrepancies which they found in such copies of the Scriptures as we have today. They steadily magnified their number and seriousness. The controversy soon advanced from these "despicable trivialities" in copies to a flat denial of the reliability of the Scriptures as a record of divine revelation. The net conclusion reached was that the Bible is profitable, not for doctrine, but for life; not a divinely given instruction in dogma but merely an edifying literature floating out of the past; fitted and intended only for general religious instruction as contain-

ing a scrappy and untrustworthy account of the religious life of the Jews, but laying no claim to any such authoritative function in religion as was assigned to it by scholastic theology.

But as long as man remains a religious being, and a thinking being, he must have, and will have, some sort of theology. He is compelled by the very laws of his own mind to be concerned with the religious phenomena of his life, to interpret and rationalize himself, to get at the fundamental principles of his character and history. A creed without a religion is conceivable, but a religion without a creed is absolutely unthinkable.

The new theology, having convinced itself of the utter worthlessness of the Scriptures for dogmatic purposes, offers in lieu the religious consciousness as the source of general theology, and the Christian consciousness as the source of special Christian theology.

The new method is wholly empirical. It is an induction of the general religious phenomena of the race as disclosed by the comparative religions of mankind, coupled with a generalization of Christian experience as a special, though the highest, form of religious evolution. As astronomy, geology, chemistry, botany, natural history—all the sciences—are formed by an inductive generalization of the facts and phenomena of nature, so theology—it is held—must be formed by an inductive study of the religious life of the human family; and as the race itself is held to be the product of naturalistic evolution, so its religious history is held to be the result of natural development; and everything in that religious history, wherever found and upon whatever testimony resting, of a supernatural and miraculous character, is prejudged to be a sheer impossibility. The new theology is an attempt to write the natural history of man as a religious being, as evolution is an effort to tell his story as a physical and rational being. Hence it carries back its conclusions, thus obtained, to the Bible, expunges the supernatural and miraculous from its pages by one method or another, and rewrites it as it ought to be in the light of the new speculation.

The old method put the Bible first, and made it define what Christian character and conduct ought to be; the new method puts Christian life first, and makes it determine what the

Bible ought to be. With the one, the Bible defines the Christian; with the other, the Christian defines the Bible. For the one, the Bible creates Christian experience; for the other Christian experience creates the Bible. For the one, the Bible is the judge of Christian life, telling us what it is; for the other, Christian life is the judge of the Bible, telling us what it ought to be. The old hailed the religions of the world to the bar of Scripture, and pronounced upon them; the new hails the Scriptures to the bar of the world's religions, and they pronounce upon it. In the view of the one, the Bible exists that there may be a pure religion in the earth; in the view of the other, religion exists that there may be a pure Bible in the earth.

We could thus translate the Christian into the Bible if he were really what he is ideally. Christ was the personal Word of God even as the Bible is the impersonal Word of God. If we were to translate the Bible into a person, we would get Christ; and if we were to turn Christ into a book, that book would be the Bible; because the real Christ and the ideal Christ exactly coincide, and are one and the same. But we cannot thus translate the Christian and the Scriptures, nor convert Christian experience as it is into theology as it ought to be, because all Christian life is imperfect and every Christian consciousness, except the Redeemer's is defective. We cannot go back, therefore, from life to doctrine as it ought to be; we must go forward from doctrine to life as it ought to be. The inductive method is as correct for theology as it is for science, but the induction must be an induction of the facts of Scripture, and not an induction of the facts of experimental religion.

What, then, is the *raison d'etre* of the Bible? To the old school it is evangelical; to the new, it is ethical. To the one, biblical doctrine is for the edification of Christian life; to the other, Christian life is for the edification of biblical doctrine. To the one, theory is definitive of practice; to the other, practice is definitive of theory. To the one, a correct Christian consciousness is one which accords with the Scriptures; to the other, a correct Scripture is one which accords with Christian consciousness.

The new Bible is the old Bible edited, revised, re-written, reconstructed in the light of the empirical generalizations of man's religious history, with every item of the supernatural deleted from its pages.

In fixing his color in his fabric so that it will not fade the dyer uses what he calls a *mordant*. So God, when he made his evangelical revelation to this world, recorded it in the Hebrew and Greek languages; and then by his providence killed those tongues, plunging his revelation into a mordant bath and fixing it and immortalizing it. It is thus preserved against all the mutations of evolution, and abides forever the changeless standard of Christian doctrine and the fixed rule of Christian life. Man's supreme duty is to regulate his faith by the Word and square his conduct by the Scriptures. He who rules himself by his individual Christian experience is a law unto himself, the guide of his own steps, and the lord of his own life. He who rules his life by the public Christian consciousness is but the subject of other men, borrows his faith from the community, and follows the example of those around him. He, however, who rules his faith and practice by the Bible has a standard of life and behaviour as changeless as the dead Hebrew and Greek languages.

Nothing can grow when the seed is dead. The aspiration of the new theology is for a living rule of faith and duty—one that can change with times and seasons and keep up with the evolutions of philosophy, science, sociology and all the forms and phases of our earthly life. Hence its substitution of vital experience for the Bible in dead languages as the rule of religious faith and duty.

II. WHEN WE TURN FROM THE SCRIPTURES TO THE RELATION OF GOD TO HIS WORLD, WE AGAIN FIND THE OLD THEOLOGY AND THE NEW AT SERIOUS VARIANCE WITH EACH OTHER.

Upon this fundamental point, Christian Theism has persistently and consistently defined God as the *Creator*, *Preserver*, *Ruler* and *Benefactor* of the world. These four conceptions of God have been precious articles in the historic faith of the Church. As *Creator*, he was held to have brought the world

into being out of nothing by the exercise of his intelligent almightiness; as Preserver, he sustains all the second causes, all the personal and impersonal forces of nature and keeps them operative and efficient; as Ruler, he superintends by his wisdom and directs by his power all the ongoings and movements of the universe; as Benefactor, he is the author of every good and perfect gift, the donor of all the multiform and manifold blessings of providence. He was held to be an extramundane person, omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent, distinct from the world as the product of his hand and the subject of his direction.

The rationalistic Deism of the Eighteenth century conceded the creatorship of God, but vigorously and scoffingly denied his providential lordship. God was held to be a "God afar off"—a mere spectator sitting upon the flaming circle of the heavens watching the universe develop itself, make its history, and work out its destiny—a carpenter standing to one side and admiring the workmanship of his hands—a mere mechanic beholding at a distance the operations of the universal machine which he had set in motion—an absentee God leaving the world and all things that are therein to the fate of its own making. This deistic philosophy invoked a deity to give the world a start, and then dismissed him as ever after needless. Nature once begun, could do the rest by itself.

The speculative theism of the Nineteenth century vaulted to the opposite extreme. It held God to be the intramundane, immanent evolver of all cosmic forces and phenomena, the active ground of all world-developments. If nature is dependent upon God, God is none the less dependent upon nature. If the rationalistic deist banished God from the world, the pantheizing theist imprisons him in the world. If the one construes him as a spectator of the world, the other interprets him as the inherent life of the world. If the one took the mechanical view, the other takes the organic view, of God's relation to his world.

This is precisely and definitely the theory of the universe propounded by the new theology; it is an *organism*, an organism of which God is the spirit, the life, the internal developing and formative energy. The divine life is not held to be personal, voluntary and decretive, but spontaneous and fluxive. What-

ever is has *become*, and the becoming has required time and a process. Whatever the world is, it has become; whatever its flora and fauna, they have become; whatever man is, he has become; whatever Christianity is, it has become; and God is but the genetic principle of this universal becoming. The distinction between the natural and the supernatural is obliterated; the difference between secular and sacred history is denied; and the difference between heathen religions and Christianity is, at bottom, only a difference in degree and not at all in kind. The world and all its changes, human history with all its phenomena, is but a natural flux with the deity as the *fons et origo* of the entire stream. If deism pushed God out of his world, modern speculative theism entangles him with his world.

It is just here where the new theology threatens to topple over into crass pantheism. Schleiermacher, its real founder, was an avowed pantheist; Gerhart, its ponderous expositor, boldly calls it "Christian Pantheism"; and Bruce says modern thought has brought us nearer to Spinoza than to any other philosopher, and that there can be no great difference between this view and the *natura naturans* of the arch pantheist.

The theism of the fathers which has run through the history of doctrine like a golden thread, avoided both these extremes. It neither held that the world was a machine of which God was the absentee artificer, nor that it was an organism in which God was the indwelling life, but that it was a creation of his personal and voluntary power, over which he exercised omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent lordship. He is never away from it, nor immersed in it, but stands related to it as its creator, preserver, ruler and benefactor. While Paul says man "lives and moves and has his being" in God, our modern reconstructionists tell us that God "lives and moves and has his being" in man. This great reversal is made logically necessary by the primal premises that religion is only a life and that life is an evolution. Under its tuition man becomes embryonically divine, and God becomes a developed human, and sin becomes a naturalistic miscarriage in development to be corrected by education and a more intelligent alignment with nature.

III. WHEN, IN THE LAST PLACE, WE TURN FROM THE SCRIPTURES AND THEISM TO CHRISTOLOGY AND SOTERIOLOGY WE AGAIN FIND THE OLD THEOLOGY AND THE NEW AT SERIOUS OUTS WITH EACH OTHER.

According to the *communis consensus* of Christendom, Christ, being the eternal Son of God, became man by taking to himself a true body and a reasonable soul, and so was and continues to be God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever; and that the chief end of his mission into the world was to save sinners by the vicarious sacrifice of himself to satisfy divine justice. He was born that he might die; he had a cradle that he might have a grave; there was a Bethlehem that there might be a Calvary; the cross was the crown and glory, the goal and meaning, of all his career, the center of gravity of the entire gospel. The importance of the Saviour's incarnation culminates in his work as a Redeemer.

The new theology professes to be Christocentric above all else. The person of Christ is made to bulk large in all its voluminous and rhetorical literature. Indeed it claims to have called the Church back to Christ.

The respectful and unctious tone which it has assumed in speaking of the Saviour, the warm devotion which it declares for his person and cause, must be gratifying to every disciple of the Redeemer. Whatever it has done to the sacred Scriptures by its destructive criticism, whatever it has done towards ruthlessly smashing cherished traditions of the past, it is a splendid tribute to Jesus that it still idealizes and idolizes him. The beauty of his character, the saintliness of his life, protect him against the most reckless iconoclasm. It proves that Christianity without Christ would be empty and worthless. There is no rational way to get rid of him. A sinful world must have him. He is, without exaggeration, at this present moment, as he has ever been—the center of the world's life and interest. Thoughtful minds feel bound to explain him, to come to some understanding about him and with him. But to the modern reconstructionists and theological innovators he is a *problem*—an insoluble problem.

(1) The first element in their problem is to find him—to discover the real, historic Christ. In their view the Scripture account of him has been so overlaid with stories of impossible miracles as to render their *prima facie* testimony utterly worthless. No man who has been taught by modern science the uniformity of nature can possibly respect his intelligence, we are told, and yet believe in the virgin birth, the resurrection of Christ, and all that long list of miracles which have been unwarrantedly sandwiched between the two. The modern critic must excavate the true story from under all this rubbish. Some of them think they can perform the task, that they can separate between the wheat and the chaff; but all seem to be agreed that the surest place to find him, is not in the Christian Scriptures, but in the Christian consciousness. That is, Christ is not what the Evangelists reported him to be, but he is what the Christian heart feels that he ought to be. But how can the Christian consciousness be a trustworthy informant as against the gospel narratives, when (the critics themselves being the judges), it was the primitive Christians who overlaid the truth about him with their fabrications? In thus setting forth the supernatural and miraculous character of Christ, they were but expressing the religious consciousness of the early church, and with that consciousness the *communis consensus ecclesiae* down the ages agrees. Upon what principle can the Christian consciousness of the early church be untrustworthy and the Christian consciousness of today perfectly reliable?

It follows, therefore, that the true historic Christ cannot be discovered—not from the Scriptures, because they are not genuine—not from the Christian consciousness, because, from the very beginning, the testimony of God's people has represented him as supernatural and divine. Upon their own premises the historic Christ must remain an unknown and an unknowable person.

(2) If, however, the first factor in the problem for the neotheologians is to find the historic Christ, the second is to interpret him after he is found. Whatever their admiration for his person and religion, however unctious and fervid their declarations of devotion, their fundamental principles require the

reconstructionists to keep Jesus within strictly human limits, and to explain him as a natural, though extraordinary, member of the human race. Strauss says, for example, "We know with perfect certainty what Jesus was *not*, and what he has *not* done, namely, nothing superhuman and supernatural." "No gospel can claim that degree of historic credibility that would require us to debase our reason to the point of believing miracles." Whatever encomiums may be passed upon the character of our Lord, whatever applause may be accorded to his work, the new theology is squarely committed to the task of holding him strictly to the rank of a mere man, on the *a priori* ground of the utter impossibility of any thing supernatural. The virgin birth, and all miracles, must be held to be myths, legends, romances, fictions, or some other unhistorical thing, and the Syrian stars, as Matthew Arnold says, still look down upon the grave of the Nazarene, not empty but occupied by his dead body.

But when they have somehow accomplished the task of excavating the real Christ from under the mass of impossible stories which his disciples have heaped upon him, as the old Romans piled their shields upon Tarpeia, what is the net result of their discovery? A Galilean peasant; the son of Joseph and Mary of Nazareth; a disciple of John the Baptist; the originator of a remarkable religious movement when he was about thirty years of age; an implacable critic of the ceremonialism of the Jewish Church; an uncompromising antagonist of Pharisees and official ecclesiastics; who lost his life as a result of his polemics, but became the founder of the kingdom of God on earth by virtue of his advocacy of a spiritual religion; whose first disciples worshipped him as a religious hero, and whose later disciples, looking at him through the haze of distance, idealized him and deified him and handed down to subsequent generations impossible stories concerning him.

This is the real historic germ, we are told, from which Christianity and the elaborate system of Christian theology have been evolved. And how do these men know that even this much is real fact? Have they derived these things from the documents which they discredit? No; they have taken the presuppositions

of the new theology and with them re-written the narratives of the evangelists, as they ought to be.

(3) But there is yet a third element in the problem which Jesus creates for the neo-theologians. They must explain his saving work. One thing is certain upon their premises: Jesus can exert no supernatural influence in the moral renovation of the world; the sinner must be transformed into a saint by a naturalistic evolution as every other lower species has been transmuted into a higher; nature will tolerate no other mode of action. There can be in the scheme no such thing as the supernatural grace of regeneration, justification and sanctification. The only way in which Christ can contribute to the moral betterment of the world is by lesson and example, beautifully and pathetically impressed by his tragic death. Christ is not a Sacrifice, but a Revelation; not a Saviour, but a Teacher. The net influence of Christianity is upon environment—a naturalistic factor in the upward struggle of the race. The Christian religion becomes simply the best religion—the most wholesome school of moral culture in which any human being can matriculate.

These three things would seem to put Jesus before the New Theology as an inexplicable problem. It must read between the lines and go behind the biblical narratives to find the true historical Christ; it must so explain his person as to eliminate the divine from his constitution; it must so interpret his work as to account for the faith and life of the Church for historic centuries.

“Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein.”