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CHRISTIAN SCIENCE, THE HIGHER THOUGHT, AND SPIRITISM

AN ETHICAL AND RATIONALISTIC VIEW

By GUSTAV SPILLER

I.—CHRISTIAN SCIENCE.[1]

At one time the popular and pious mind shrank from science as being essentially impious; but gradually it has accustomed itself to the term, until it finds nothing strange in coupling the two words "Christian" and "science," and speaks of Christian science. The Christian scientist boasts that he alone is scientific, and that his science is based on experience. It is true that the term "science" has here suffered a sea change through being patronised by a popular sect; for Christian science knows nothing of deliberate and exhaustive scientific methods, and yet there is this similarity, that the supernatural, as hitherto understood, has vanished, and that the appeal is to experience.

This last fact is interesting as marking the gratifying extent to which science has permeated even the uncultured. What would have been attempted by faith, by prayer, or by muttering formulas, is boldly achieved to-day without any of these. Christian science, while not without its God, eliminates him by denying that anything else but God exists. Matter and self are delusions, and only God is. Consequently, all profession of weakness or imperfection, which is the very core of historic Christianity—think only of the doctrine of total depravity—is discarded. We are well, we are strong, we are good, we are all that is desirable, since God only exists in whom there is no illness, no weakness, no evil, and nothing undesirable. The whole Christian scheme, with its Fall, its Redemption, its complete surrender, is reversed in spirit since these imply imperfections, and since all imperfections are delusions which we should scorn.

From this point of view Christian science is altogether unchristian both in theory and in practice. And yet there is a reason why the Christian scientists should call themselves Christians. Christ, according to the New Testament, went about doing good, which consisted mainly in healing the sick, and he is said to have performed the cures by mental and not by physical methods. The Christian scientist merely claims that he is doing what Christ's disciples could and can do, according to the Master's word, even though they otherwise ignore the Master. Mental cures represent a favourite form which superstition has taken in all ages—in our age as in those preceding it—and the stimulus to such practice has been the universal belief that short cuts to health are not impossible, an assertion made every day by innumerable patent-medicine vendors. Naturally the medicine man's theory will differ with the times. Thus, in the Middle Ages saints and devils would have been the supposed healers, while in more recent times the healing would have been performed through Jesus or Mary, his mother, or by professing a strong faith in some supernatural power or powers. With the spirit of the times, this has changed. Men are simply told that they can shake

[1] Mrs. Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, my authority throughout.

off all imperfections, and that salvation is to be obtained only from within oneself. Here we have stoicism of a consequent type and freed from materialism.

Seeing that all evil is delusion, one might have expected that Christian science would be chiefly busy with denying all reality to moral weakness, or that it would be thorough, and deny all ignorance, all falsehood, all ugliness, and all pain. Instead of that, it has chosen the easier and more popular course of almost exclusively laying stress on the cure of disease.

A religion of health, abstractly considered, seems an anomaly, if not an absurdity, for we picture the normal, typical man as healthy, at least under ordinary circumstances. A diseased mankind appears very unattractive, and scarcely in accord with the buoyancy and progressiveness of nature. Casual indisposition we may naturally expect; but illness so prevalent that it should give rise to a religion is indeed startling, especially in an age like ours, which is said to be enlightened and superior. Yet the very fact that a religion of health has millions of followers suggests that health scarcely exists in the average man, and that nearly everybody is ailing. Nor is the suggestion without a basis of truth. Not only do men suffer from constitutional weaknesses or from illnesses due to bad economic conditions, which is natural, but intemperance in drink, in food, in dress, in idleness, in sex relations, draw a vast number of our fellows to the doctor, the patent-medicine vendor, or the Christian scientist. Farsightedness and self-control scarcely exist in any stratum of society, and the social conditions are deplorable, with the result that the earth resembles a large hospital, instead of being filled with men and women overflowing with robust health.

Christian science takes the bull by the horns. It laughs at hygiene, at doctors, at being thoughtful, at being clean, or at preventing illness. It simply asserts that bodily illness is a delusion, since all illness is mental, and that, therefore, we need not trouble about drains or diet, but only be quite clear that we are a prey to delusions when we believe that we are ill. Only God exists, and how absurd to speak of God being ill.

The Christian scientist asserts that by fixing the mind on health, disease will vanish, and he holds that not only may it do so, but that it does do so. Now, wise men will hardly deny that much may be said in favour of the healing method of Christian science. Ordinary life is so redolent with instances where our beliefs affect our physical health that it is but a corollary that experts will be able to heal much illness by turning the attention towards health. One need only watch how people show all the symptoms of sea-sickness before even they are on board, or how, being busy, men ignore sharp pains, to deduce from it that it is difficult to tell the limits of mind-healing. The strong man is a natural mind-healer, and the Christian scientist merely wishes to bring this boon of mind-healing to all.

Yet the Christian scientist goes too far. His theory is too general and too sweeping. After all, it is a question whether it is not less troublesome to button up the overcoat as we leave the theatre than to sit afterwards half-a-dozen times for an hour or so denying that colds belong to the realm of reality, or to have the drains seen to instead of spending twelve months battling against delusions. Furthermore, there is a limit to one's power of asserting one's self, and that limit is soon reached. Infinitely better is it to insist on simplicity and regularity of diet, on general temperance and thoughtfulness, than to ignore these in favour of the Christian science method. For if the body be a delusion, why eat, breathe, sense, move, or walk? Why not remain in the mental realm altogether? Manifestly, the theory proves too much, and has in it great danger, leading as it must to general neglect, and thus to insanity and death. That is to say, if Christian science were followed without any regard to hygiene, we should have more illness and more misery than we have at present. In this way Christian science, like all extreme reforms, would intensify the evil it purposed to cure.

A cheerful view of things can be cultivated; but it is obvious that this also is true of a gloomy view of things. From the theoretical point of view we may as well assert, as pessimists do, that goodness, truth, pleasure, and health are delusions, and that their opposites are realities; and the Christian scientist might thus prove that only the Devil exists, and, therefore, only evil. On reflection, one can see that the Christian scientist goes too far, as popular teachers usually do, and that he is partly impelled to go so far in order to appeal strongly to the popular imagination.

The wise man, as we have seen, will suppress all suppressible illness, accepting, when necessary, the help of experts; but his main object will be to preserve health by guarding himself against illness. Prevention, and not cure, must be our watchword; and, if we are to have a religion of health, we shall do well to emphasise to the utmost the necessity of a far-reaching system of mental, moral, and physical hygiene. Christian science, like all panaceas, tacitly encourages neglect by presuming to cure the results of neglect.

On the moral side, Christian science is unsatisfactory both in theory and in practice. To assert that evil is a delusion is to question the existence of good; for, if God only exists and he is good, why need we trouble about goodness? Why help some one else if he can help himself and if he needs no help? Why rise in moral stature if we are good? Why trouble about morality at all? Why not be quietistic, and take the world as it is, and say that all's well with the world?

Here, as with disease, and probably more so, Christian science is right in emphasising that much depends on our attitude. If we firmly fix our minds on the good, the evil will disappear—at least, it will do so if the inner and outer conditions are passingly satisfactory; for if they are not, and if we wholly rely on this fixing process, we shall intensify the evil. Morality, besides, is no mere question of attitude, and hence Christian science, with its short-sighted, rigid scheme, is likely to produce disastrous results in morals.

Christian science is wholly individualistic. It does not study nature, nor society, nor the State. It leaves economic systems where they are, and the political constitution or situation is something it does not concern itself with. Hence it is conservative and anti-social, and must be fatal in its general consequences, as distracting men's attention from dealing with the conditions surrounding them. A pure Theism, such as Christian science offers, is anti-human, anti-moral, and self-contradictory. If only God exists, and delusion be a fact, who but God is deluded?

II.—THE HIGHER THOUGHT.

A MOVEMENT resembling that of Christian science is the one which goes by the name of the Higher Thought Movement, except that here there is no closely-connected system, and that the emphasis rests on morality, or rather on a Stoic attitude. Theology is generally absent in this movement, or, where it is introduced, is no better than an adornment, and this is so in the nature of the case, for self-improvement, falling back on oneself, is the principle of the Higher Thought. Here, then, we again observe how the theistic tide is ebbing away, for the Movement is, no doubt, due to persons desiring a substitute for the time-honoured Christian theism. And here, also, we see the tendency to ask of the self what one had previously asked of supernatural powers, and to replace prostration by self-assertion. The change in fundamental thought is, in this case, at its minimum. Natural relations, social and economic relations, and all the other forces which determine conduct, are still left out of sight, simply because they had been left out of sight before. There is here a rebound from slavery towards licence, from dependence towards pride. The relation was at one time regarded as being between the self and its maker; now all the relations are between

the different parts of the self, and the maker has no place of honour, because the modern drift is towards naturalism. Instead of the old exaggerated pessimism about human nature, which asserted that there is no strength and no goodness in us, we have the new exaggerated optimism that joy and strength will be ours if we but care to cultivate them.

The Higher Thought resembles the old doctrines in another way, for in both systems men seek strength and happiness rather than goodness, and this will also be evident when we notice that both doctrines are individualistic, even to the extent of concerning themselves almost exclusively with the individual's welfare. Life is hard, and the Higher Thought wishes to make it easy. Hence it cultivates cheerfulness, a disregard of difficulties, a general optimistic view, and a training which consists in systematically excluding thoughts of evil or ill and systematically contemplating physical or other good. There is here not only a considerable gain to humanity in people being happier, but their being happier and stronger tends to make their fellows happier and stronger. Cheerfulness and a capacity to deal coolly with difficulties are sometimes states cultivated because they are desirable in themselves; but, from another point of view, they are important social virtues, and may be cultivated for that reason. Such an attitude is generally an enemy of luxury, tyranny, idleness, and the like, though not really inconsistent with them.

This Stoicism, so far as it is Stoicism, is in many respects beneficial, minimising the results of necessary evils and discouraging brooding and nervousness. These are not unimportant matters. With large numbers of men and women petty details absorb the attention as well as the interest. They shrink from small difficulties, till they have manufactured for themselves a hell on earth. They look at events from a near and narrow point of view, and are constantly irritated by what would leave them indifferent if they were cooler and less reckless in their judgments. And assuredly, too, this pettiness overflows the self, and others have to suffer in consequence. By discouraging, therefore, this spirit we encourage a healthy social atmosphere. For that reason, a true ethics must have these elements prominently emphasised, for they represent, to a large extent, the ethics of the individual—*i.e.*, what the individual can do.

In this respect, the Higher Thought favours a line of conduct which is frequently overlooked outside that movement. Feeling, as men do, the great influence of the environment, they tend to forget the individual and his responsibilities. Accordingly, purely social improvements prove often barren, and can never be wholly successful. We must not only study and elevate society; we must study and elevate ourselves. Our attitude makes a crucial difference to every social change. It is a congenial task to quarrel with one's surroundings, and it is delightful to improve others; but that leads nowhere, unless we are also ready to examine ourselves and to change in those respects in which we are deficient. To be effective, we must improve our environment and ourselves, and not omit either of these lines of action.

The Higher Thought goes to an extreme, since it deals essentially with an attitude or mood, and nothing else. It is not even, speaking generally, ethical in its express tendency. Tacitly it assumes that men wish to be happy, and not that they wish to be good, and consequently there is a danger of forgetting the charities of life. Then, too—and this is an inherent defect in individualistic Stoicism—the belief in self suggests that others can and should take care of themselves, and that, therefore, we need not trouble about others. Both directly and indirectly, then, the Higher Thought tends to make its disciples non-moral. However, its chief and radical defect is its neglect of social conditions. In this respect it is quietistic, and suggests that suffering should not perturb us. If we are poor, if we are ill-treated, if we are suffering, it does not inspire us to battle with the causes and remove them; but, ignoring social possibilities, it merely tells

us that a brave man or woman can very well bear poverty, ill-treatment, and suffering. This policy defeats itself, since it encourages a state of society where poverty, ill-treatment, and suffering become unbearable. Social conditions cannot be ignored with safety, and in any attempt to do so our smiles become grins and our heroism turns into heroics. Again, being individualistic, the tendency of the Higher Thought is to be sentimental and short-sighted, thus leading to a callous and an idle optimism. The true ethical method will ignore neither the individual nor the social factor, and it will study these so as to encourage both morality and individual happiness.

The discipline in the Higher Thought naturally appeals to the many because they can all practise it to some extent. This is a decided advantage over social reform movements, for here the average person is ever at a loss as to what he personally can do. He has, perhaps, no special abilities to do public work, and he may have little or no time to assist, and consequently he feels almost a hypocrite in professing allegiance to such a movement; but when individual perfection is demanded no one can say that he lacks time or opportunities. The Ethical Movement must, therefore, ask of its supporters not to neglect social reform, but also to be anxious for self-improvement.

Still, the Higher Thought does not preach virtue or happiness in the abstract. It asks its followers to cultivate certain Stoic virtues whose importance is undeniable. In that it has a decided advantage over popular moralists who vaguely speak of perfection and ask too much from the listener. A right ethics will also be concrete in that it will urge certain courses of discipline rather than only exhort men to virtue as such. Here, however, lies also the defect of the Higher Thought Movement. Having no single leader, no single doctrine, nor being strenuously scientific, its courses of discipline have not that breadth and depth that would effectually meet the difficulties which the individual has to encounter. Such a discipline must be the result of a very careful study of the whole moral problem in all its chief bearings, and this has not as yet been done. The books written by Higher Thought believers only skim the surface of things, however interesting and shrewd they may otherwise be. For the Movement to be stable and universal, it must have clear views as to the supernatural; it must cease to be merely individualistic and only concerned with the individual; and its disciplines must be much more thorough than they are at present. Such a change seems scarcely possible. It is more probable that a philosophically broad-based and well-organised movement such as the Ethical Movement should expand its activities by making systematic individual perfection a plank in its platform. It would then urge not only definite social reform, but definite individual reform, in the place of a general preaching of virtue.

The Higher Thought has, therefore, a contribution to make to ethical theory and practice, and that is that not only must we demand definite social reforms, but we must also insist on extensive and definite changes in the individual.

III.—SPIRITISM.

We have seen how, through the pervasive influence of modern thought, Christian science identifies God with man, and how, owing to the same circumstance, the Higher Thought also either ignores supernatural powers or else takes little note of them. Spiritism in a manner illustrates this same fact. Startling as it may appear, the belief in spirits is generally disconnected from a belief in a deity, and that in such a way that disembodied human spirits take the place of the deity. Here, also, there is no conscious atheism, but an unconscious neglect of the old thought as being strange to the modern world.

Spiritism also resembles the two other disciplines mentioned, in that it is anthropocentric. Its interest is in man; its hope is in man; and it expects salvation only

through man. It, too, rejects the pessimistic view, which asserts that human nature is corrupt, and that man cannot help himself. Only it extends the term "man" to men regarded as dead and disembodied spirits. Its hope lies in another world, and help, too, it seeks from beyond the border. Spiritism removes the emphasis from this world to a supposed next world, where all those who have ever died on this planet are said to be still existing.

Moreover, spiritism also, like Christian Science, the Higher Thought, and Christianity, is, in its essence, individualistic and non-moral. The supreme quest of its devotees is not how to become perfect, but how to be happy and free from care. They wish to be secure against death; they desire to continue keeping in touch with those dear to them who have died; and they seek help from the spirit-world in all their troubles. Morality is not ignored, but it occupies a subordinate place. This follows partly from the individualism referred to above, for such individualists do not band together to achieve some general good; they do not even think of that; they are merely absorbed in their own woes and joys, and expect others to be equally absorbed and to appeal to spirits when in difficulties. Morality becomes thus sentimental, since it has no scope. The idea of perfection becomes personal, and leaves out of account social perfection. Indeed, that could not be otherwise. If this world is merely an inn in which we stay for a single day, we can obviously spare little time and energy for it, since eternity claims our attention. If we wished to beautify the world, if we desired to press wide social reforms, if we essayed to deliver mankind from the bondage of ignorance, this would argue an intense and organic interest in this world which would exclude a lively interest in any other. We should wish to continue to live here on earth so as to continue to be useful. The poet would desire to publish more poetry; the artist to paint more pictures; the scientist to extend the realm of knowledge; and the statesman to introduce more social reforms. Everyone would wish to extend his period of human service indefinitely. There would be no consolation in being told that we shall see those who have gone before us, and that individual progress would be certain. Like Whittier's Brother of Mercy, we should loathe the thought of a personal immortality which assumes a deadening of all passive and active interest in the fortunes of this world.

This sudden disruption of contact with our fellows here on earth might be conceivably tolerable if, as spirits, we could continue working for the good of mankind. And this is indeed the contention. Spiritists consult the spirits, and the spirits appear to them. Plato, Christ, Shakespeare, and other distinguished immortals are said to come and put their wisdom at our disposal. The dead are regarded as having an interest in human affairs and to be active in promoting earthly good. Yet the evidence for this is preposterously inadequate, for one of the stock objections against spiritism is the inanity of the spirit messages, however high the supposed authority for the utterances may be. People object to twaddle, even though it come from departed spirits; and Mr. Bradley has urged, I do not know whether seriously, that the evidence distinctly proves that there is marked intellectual deterioration with those who have left this sphere. The proofs are hopelessly inadequate for the continued working of great or, let us say, intelligent spirits. Even the most famous mediums have such indirect and long-drawn-out ways of communicating anything at all that it seems audacious to speak of continued interest. Homer is silent, Shakespeare writes no more plays, Shelley has ceased to produce poetry, and Raphael paints no more pictures; and yet who could imagine these and innumerable others to continue to exist without sending us their treasures? With death, then, all activity ceases, or we must either adopt Mr. Bradley's theory, and reason that with the change of death comes a vanishing of genius, or that the interest of these spirits

ceases to be human and possibly becomes anti-human. Moreover, what strange, unnatural positions would these spirits occupy who are with us, but not of us, and who are, in so many essentials, changed.

We must, then, conclude that with death comes a sudden and fatal change of interest—a change at which every lover of the race must shudder. To be, under such circumstances, is worse than not to be. To offer us perfection outside society is to mock us with hideous masks. To assure us that death does not end all is to drive us to despair. At least, this is true of social beings with whom interest in self is not the Alpha and Omega of life; and this suggests that spiritism takes its rise in individualistic cravings, and is a suitable religion for those who are eager for their own sakes only, since no lover of humanity could find satisfaction in the kind of immortality offered by spiritism.

Furthermore, such an individualistic, non-moral religion must seriously affect man's relation to his fellows. If a non-social state is desirable; if we can be happy without social service and without taking an active interest in those we serve now; if we can be reconciled to cease to write poetry, or paint pictures, then why trouble about these things now? If for an eternity we shall ignore our pursuits, why continue them at all? If all things will be righted and well in another world, why trouble much about reform, or contemplate with satisfaction the historic evolution of man? In short, human interest is an organic whole, and excludes entirely the spiritistic view, for that view leads to painful contradictions which compel us to decide once for all whether we shall serve humanity or not. From the point of view of many spiritists, of those who are really its logical disciples, an answer is forthcoming, and it is this—that the earthly abode is transitory, and should not absorb our whole interest.

Here we have a fundamental contradiction between which men may choose and will choose. According to the scientific contention, life is one and organic, and morality forms a part of this life; and, if this is so, spiritism, if proved, would be an unimportant fact which we should be bound to ignore to the last moment, as if we were convinced that we would cease to be rational and moral at a certain moment of our existence. As a consequence, too, we should, while in this world, ignore those who have become spirits.

In the nature of the case, spiritism has no clear moral theory, since its concern is with the individual as such, and only this as regards his well-being. The other world being non-social and utterly different from this, and that world being the world which the spiritist is interested in, it follows that morality scarcely exists for him. Under these circumstances, we think no longer of improving society and respecting posterity, and we refer the individual who is in need of assistance to the spirits. Individual perfection means, then, individualistic perfection; and that, we have seen, is not only not moral, but contradictory and impossible. Spiritism, therefore, as a moral theory can only be defended while we are content not to be too curious about the social implications of perfection or morality.

If the other world of spiritism resemble this one, we might think of leaving, however regretfully, one country for a far-distant one, and in that case our morality would remain intact; but the world of spiritism is radically different. There we have no sensations, no movements, no eating, no pain, no labour, no physical environment, and, if we are exact, no thought or memory. Morality is out of the question in such a world, and such a world can only console us while we think of it as resembling ours. Once mental confusion ceases we shall see that that world is not only non-moral, but that it can yield no satisfaction of any kind to any man. Spiritism tells us that we shall continue to exist in some form or another, which form can be no more like ours than is the dead body like the living body. The proofs it offers are messages from the dead; but, as these messages are most ambiguous and involve fundamental contradictions, nothing

remains for us but to find non-spiritistic explanations of the alleged phenomena.

Spiritism, therefore, is irreconcilable with a scientific morality. It ignores society; it de-polarises moral relations; it centres interest on an unintelligible world; it puts the self into the focus of attention; and it misses the fact that life is an organic whole and that morality is one of its essential parts. Its insistence on continual progress is a relieving feature; but then its interpretation of progress makes even this good doubtful. Spiritism, therefore, with its unavoidable encouragement of deception and fraud, and with its emphasis on another world, can scarcely be said to offer a serious contribution to morality.

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