

Theosophy and Christianity by Annie Besant

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[Page 1] ONE of the saddest facts in human history frowns forth from the records of the faiths of the world: that Religion — which by its name should be a binding force has been the perennial source of discord and of division among men. No hatred — it is a truism — is so bitter as religious hatred, no wars so bloody as religious wars, no persecutions so cruel as religious persecutions. The proverb as to the corruption of what is best has been but too often verified, and it would seem as though the very effort of man's spiritual nature to rise were the signal for the more furious outburst of the brute nature which is his darker side. Men's Religions have been made into walls of division, separating mind from mind, and heart from heart; it would seem as though the effort made were to see how many could be excluded from the pale, rather than how many could be included within it, and the bread of life has too often been used by men, as Maurice sadly confessed, as a stone to throw at their enemies.[Page 2]

Today the religious field is a field of combat; rival Churches, rival war-cries, rival Religions, and if Theosophy be but one more combatant, one more rival sect, the world could well enough do without it. But the stately figure of the ancient Wisdom Religion does not enter the field as a combatant but as a peace-maker, not as a rival but as an explainer. "Sirs, ye are brethren, why do ye wrong one to another?" is the expostulation that falls from her lips. Truth may be sought by combat, and in the clash of rival opinions bright sparks of verity may be forth-struck; controversy, dialectics, keen questionings, sharp debates — all these are methods by which intellectual truths may be wrought out with strenuous effort and strong searching. But Truth may also be sought by cooperation, and spiritual truths are best seen in the clear air of brotherhood and mutual respect; each man may bring his contribution to the common store, and all may study it, not to see how little truth there is in it, but how much; for the atmosphere of love and sympathy has much to do with the growth of spiritual insight, and it is the surface of the unruffled lake that mirrors best the stars and the depths of space.

If we ask what divides men in Religion, we shall find that it is the different intellectual moulds into which they cast spiritual truths; the intellect is the analytical, the separating principle, it is that which individualizes, which makes each feel, "I am I". [Page 3] The dogma is the intellectual form into which a truth or a half truth is thrown, and this varies with national habit, national tradition, the stage of development reached, the religious history behind its enunciation. Now it is dogmas that divide religious bodies from each other; it is they that differentiate one creed from another.

On the other hand all Religions agree in their enunciation of some great moral verities, and in their founding themselves on a spiritual, as against a material, conception of the universe and of man. All alike proclaim the duties of purity, integrity, veracity, kindness, forgiveness of injuries, self-denial, service to man. These moral keynotes are struck again and again, and no higher note in ethics has been sounded at the end of the nineteenth century after Christ than was struck in the nineteenth century before him. So

also with the conception of the spiritual nature of man and of the universe ; all alike proclaim One Eternal Self-Existence, the manifestation in time of an emanation therefrom, the Root and Fount of all existence. Life, Will, Idea, in their highest, most transcendental condition, Ormazd, Brahma, the Logos, the Word. This Self of the universe is the innermost Self of man, the spiritual Root of the Kosmos and the spiritual Root of Humanity. Under whatever phrases, under whatever names, this idea lies at the foundation of every Religion, and the methods of each are directed, however inadequately and [Page 4] however clumsily, to making men realize this hidden spiritual life and evolve it into active manifestation.

At the beginning of last century, to go no further back, Christendom regarded this precious conception of spiritual life as peculiar to itself, and its own method as unique. A partial exception was made in favor of the Jews as the chosen people of God, the recipients of the one revelation, and the predecessors of the Christian Church. With this partial exception, all men lay in darkness, given over to false Gods and to ignorance, the one lamp of salvation being placed in the care of the Hebrew people, and after them of the Christian. Such a misconstruction of antiquity, such a partial and one-sided view, is now no longer possible to any educated man. The study of comparative Religion, the translation of Eastern Scriptures, the researches of antiquarians, the recovery of the records of past civilizations, have lifted the veil which hid the ancient world. Mighty Religions, sublime Philosophies, pure Ethics, great practical achievements, these have emerged out of the darkness under the wondering eyes of modern students. None now believes that man's spiritual nature was latent or even sterile during past millenniums, that Humanity was blind and without guide, that all the world was outcast save the Jew. All admit that China, India, Persia, Egypt, have much to teach us, and that the cradle of our ancient Aryan [Page 5] race was rocked by mighty Sages and blessed by lofty Saints.

Starting then with this recognition of the grandeur of Humanity, seeing in every Religion one of the guardians of man's spiritual inheritance, we may go on to see how the Esoteric Philosophy is related to one of these exoteric creeds, the bearing of Theosophic teaching on Christianity.

The question which springs to the lips of the devout Christian on his first acquaintance with Theosophy is: "What is the teaching of the Esoteric Philosophy as to the existence and nature of God; will it take away from me my belief in God, my trust in Him as the Father of men?" Entwined as is the idea of God with all that is loftiest in Religion, all that is most sacred to the human heart, all that is dearest and most inspiring to many of the purest and sweetest lives that have blessed the human family, those who think they have some deeper truth than that held by the orthodox Christian should be very careful how they deal with even the outer veil that covers the profoundest mystery of Life. Let us see if it be not possible to approach this question and to lead towards some suggestion of an answer, without tearing one tendril of a human heart, or jarring the sensitive nerves of a devout believer.

No idea has more changed, deepened, and widened with the unfolding of man's mind than his idea of the nature of THAT which men call God. [Page 6] When the mind is in its infancy, a mere baby Ego, its God is the aggregate of all which to it is desirable, enshrined in human form; always man's Ideal is man's God, and he upreaches towards that Ideal, striving to approach it, to propitiate, to serve. As he grows in experience, in range of thought, in nobility of moral character, his Ideal rises with his own growth, until a grandiose and sublime Ideal stands forth for man's worship, the Lord and Father of spirits, the Creator and Ruler of the universe. In Christianity the practical identification of the Logos, or Word, with God has rendered yet more definite this anthropomorphic conception, and the unlearned, unlettered, Christian finds his untrained brain and his warm heart perfectly satisfied with this view of a personal God, lofty

enough to stimulate his aspiration and his devotion, but not too vast for his limited comprehension. But when we turn to the more highly educated, and then to the philosophical, Christian, we find ourselves in a wholly different atmosphere. The whole tendency of liberal and philosophical Christianity is to strike away the limitations with which ignorance has surrounded the Divine Idea, and to rise into regions of abstract thought which leave far below the puny images of human personality. The Christian philosopher realizes that the Divine Existence stretches above, below, around him on every side, an illimitable ocean in which he lives and moves and has his being, That which is All in All. And Science steps [Page 7] in, and unveiling further and further depths in the universe presents to our dazzled thought a kosmos illimitable by our reason. To measure some of the enormous distances in space — beyond which stretch other distances unknown, immeasurable — she has invented a new unit of measurement, for the little miles which may serve in our solar system are useless when she comes to deal with interstellar space. Miles in billions convey no intelligible concept, one billion or two billions merely means to us a vast and inconceivable distance, and our halting imagination can sense no difference between their relative values. So light has been taken, and the distance it travels in a second has been made the unit of measurement. It travels 192,000 miles per second, and thus takes but the eighth of a second to travel round the globe; the distance from the earth to the sun is ninety-five millions of miles, and light passes from the sun to us in 8'2 minutes; the solar system has a diameter of fifty-three thousand millions of miles, and this is traversed by light in about 7'5 hours. Now space is measured by light-years:

192,000 miles per second.

x 60 seconds =

11,520,000 miles per minute.

x 60 minutes=

691,200,000 miles per hour.

x 24 hours =

16,588,800,000 miles per day.

x 365 days per year =

6,054,912,000,000 miles per year.

[Page 8] Hence a light-year means upwards of six billions of miles, a phrase that conveys no meaning whatever to our minds. The astronomer then speaks of thousands of light-years as separating us from some of the stars. With every improvement of our instruments fresh stars come within the range of vision; faint nebulas are analyzed into separate stars; every star is a sun, the center of its own system. Let the mind plunge itself into these unfathomable depths of space; let it try to traverse that measureless expanse; then, when it is dazed and giddy with the effort, let it remember that the Life of the Universe sustains, moves, guides all; that It shines in every sun, rolls in every planet, holds balanced every system in these infinite fields of space, peopled with innumerable globes; that It is the life of the atom as much as of the system, that it pulsates in every animal, swells in every bud, dances in minutest insect, as much as It burns in the cosmic central sun. All this must be an aspect of what men call God; all this but the burgeoning of that illimitable Existence. And then, when thought falls helpless, then when mind sinks dumb, then remember that man, a half-evolved organism on a grain of sand in space, dares to anathematize his brother, because his conception of that ineffable Existence differs in human language

from his own.

What IT is no human tongue may speak, no human mind may conceive. Only we feel we dare [Page 9] not limit, we dare not define, we dare not use words of IT which are taken from our petty attributes, our narrow limitations. Not by intellect may we know the Self of the universe, much less THAT of which the Self is but a fragmentary expression. Only in some moment of rarest and loftiest attainment, when some supreme renunciation of self has riven for a moment the illusion of separateness, when the Soul is poised in silence, and a stillness beyond earth's quiet holds its very life in suspense, then, it may be, that through the stillness will come a faint thrill of something mightier than Soul at its strongest, gentler than Soul at its tenderest, and the answering thrill from the deepest depths of our nature, sensed rather than felt, may remind us that our Spirit is one with the Spirit of the universe, and that sometime, somewhere, we shall reach a vision impossible today.

We have left the region of controversy, we have passed into the sphere of Religion; and there the Soul, striving upwards to its birthplace, cares not to wrangle over definitions by which it may ostracize its brethren. Our conceptions of the Divine are the wings of the Soul, but our wrangling over them the birdlime that glues those wings uselessly to our sides. Let us discuss matters of human duty and common effort; let each, in the sacred precincts of inner life formulate, or refrain from formulating, as he will, his own conception of the universal Life. All such conceptions, followed out, [Page 10] ultimate in a profound Pantheism, and Christian and non-Christian philosophers recognize equally the God that is the All. With each development the human mind widens out its conception, and if each Soul be left to grow, the earlier conceptions will fall, they need not be rent, away.

Closely allied to the idea of a personal God is the view taken of Jesus, as the incarnate Son of God. "What do you believe about Christ?" is the next question which comes from the Christian's lips. "Do you deny the divinity of Christ?" The answer comes straight and clear: "We do not deny the divinity of Jesus; we affirm the divinity of every son of man".

Every world-religion has its divine incarnations, its "Word made flesh"; in all ages this incarnation has been styled the Christ, the anointed, and it is round this Ideal Man that the hearts of men have clung, instinctively feeling that He is the promise of the future, and that where He stands in the present all men shall stand in days to come. But if we want to understand the difference between the Christian view of Jesus the Christ and the Christs of Theosophy, we must take these views in connection with the view of humanity as a whole of which they are severally the result. The theory of popular and ecclesiastical Christianity (now being so rapidly outgrown) regards mankind as a race essentially corrupt, cursed at its fall by its incensed Creator, and thenceforth lying under the wrath of [Page 11] God; in order that some of this race may be saved, God becomes incarnate, and, suffering in the place of man, redeems him from the consequences of the fall; out of the race some are saved by this sacrifice, and the righteousness of the Redeemer is imputed to the redeemed; man, naturally helpless, is rendered strong by the help extended to him by his Savior, without whom he can do nothing. This is the exoteric creed professed universally in the past by Christians, and professed by the great majority today.

The Theosophic view of man is the very reverse of this. It regards man as essentially divine, but the divine in him crusted over with a thick veil of matter; this divine essence in man is the Buddha, the Christ, and it is the "light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world". Through the veil of matter the light

shines dimly, but in the lowest and the vilest some gleams of light are seen from time to time. Every man is a potential Christ, and the work of evolution is to render this potential Christ an active one; man's strength wells up from the divine within him, it is an essential property, not an external gift; the light is there — his work is to render his lower nature translucent, and to let it shine.

That the Christ is "God in man", inclusively and not exclusively, might well be argued — for those who take the *New Testament* as an authority — from the Fourth Gospel. Neoplatonic throughout, [Page 12] this view of the meaning of the Christ comes out very plainly in chap. x. 34-36. Jesus had been accused of blasphemy, in that He made himself God; His answer was a claim to rank as God because He was man, and divinity was inherent in humanity.

Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said. Ye are Gods ?

If he called them Gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken;

Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God ?

It was not in virtue of a unique position, but in virtue of a common humanity that Jesus is here made to claim to be divine; He identifies Himself with man, instead of standing with a gulf between Himself and His race. And so Paul, writing to his Galatian converts:

My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you.

Men have thought to exalt Christ by degrading man, whereas that which *is* the Christ — not limited to an individual but the Soul triumphant — is the very light and life of men. This is the esoteric truth that has been hidden under the exoteric veil, and those on whom the beauty of this conception has dawned will no longer have any sense that they have lost their Christ, when they see Him incarnate in every son of man.[Page 13]

The truth of the Hermetic maxim, "Demon est Deus inversus" is borne in upon us when the Church lifts before our eyes the figure of the great "Angel of Darkness", and we see that his symbols are the same as those of the Christ. Satan has been painted as man's direst foe, as his adversary and accuser, his tempter and would-be destroyer; Christ is represented as the very antithesis of this; as man's most compassionate friend, as his helper and defender, his guide and would-be redeemer. How, then, comes it that two characters so diverse bear the same symbols, are presented under the same image ? Lucifer is the Son of the Morning, the star falling from heaven; Christ is the bright and morning Star. Lucifer is the Dragon, the Serpent, twined round the Tree of Knowledge; Christ is the Serpent lifted on the Cross, the Tree of Life. The characteristic attribute of the Serpent — Wisdom — gives us the key of the allegory, for both are types of the human mind, of the double-faced entity, by which alike we fall and rise. For the Star that fell is our Divine Ego, that was the bearer to animal man of the heavenly light, Lucifer, light-bearer, in

very truth. And entering into man, it became indeed his tempter, for the very powers it brought made such evil possible as the animal could never know and, united in man with animal desire, it brought memory and subtlety of enjoyment, and anticipation of renewal, and so became man's ever present tempter, plunging him [Page 14] into evil in its search for sensation and for experience of material life. And then it became his accuser, when evil brought suffering, and sensation brought satiety, and ignorant desire worked out into pain; for it accused the body as its deluder when itself had guided the body, and the man of flesh had been but the instrument of the thinking man. Thus was the Ego the bringer of disharmony, for its own will ruled it and it was ignorant in matter, and blindly eager for experience, and its ignorance and eagerness wrought for pain and hence for its education. And then it began to turn its face upward instead of downward, and to aspire to the Divine instead of seeking for the brute, until striving ever towards the Spirit it lifted animal man from animality, and became his redeemer instead of his tempter, his purifier instead of his degrader. For as intellect materialized is Satan, so is intellect spiritualized the Christ, and therefore is it that both bear the same symbols, and the Fallen Angel becomes the Angel of Light.

As these conceptions of man's real nature become clear and definite, it is manifest that our whole method of dealing with men will change, and the popular ideas of virtue and vice, with heaven as the reward of virtue, and hell as the penalty of vice, will appear to us to be at once puerile and inefficient. And here we come into conflict with popular Christianity. For if man's heart be naturally corrupt, if that which is deepest in him [Page 15] be evil and not righteous, if he turn naturally towards the bad and can only with difficulty be turned towards the good, then it seems reasonable to allure him to the distasteful good with promises of future happiness, and to scare him from the fascinating bad with threats of future pain. Whereas, if man's nature be essentially noble, and the Divine Ego, which is his very Self, be only blinded with matter, and even in its darkness seeks for light, and in its bondage yearns for liberty, then all this coaxing with heaven and threatening with hell becomes an irrelevant impertinence, for man's innermost longing is then for purity and not for heavenly pleasure, his innermost shrinking is from foulness and not from hellish pain.

What is virtue ? It is being in perfect harmony with natural order, Nature being but the expression of the Divine Thought. It is the complete unfolding of every faculty, the full development of every power, and the subordination of all to the perfecting of the whole, each unit in rhythmical accord with the rest. It is not a blind submission to an external law imposed upon man by an extra-kosmic Deity; it is the glad unfolding of the inner life in conscious obedience to an internal impulse, which seeks expression in the external life. True and wise are the words of a Hindu in agony:

Virtue is a service man owes himself; and though there were no heaven nor any God to rule the world, it were not less the binding law of life. It is man's privilege to know the right and follow it. [Page 16] Betray and persecute me, brother men! Pour out your rage on me, O malignant devils. Smile, or watch my agony with cold disdain, ye blissful Gods. Earth, hell, heaven, combine your might to crush me — I will still hold fast by this inheritance. My strength is nothing — time can shake and cripple it; my youth is transient — already grief has withered up my days; my heart — alas ! it seems well-nigh broken now ! Anguish may crush it utterly, and life may fail; but even so my soul, that has not tripped, shall triumph, and, dying, give the lie to soulless destiny, that dares to boast itself man's master. [Quoted from Conway's *Sacred Anthology*, pp 340-341]

There speaks the heroic soul, and what need has such a soul of promise of happiness in heaven, since it seeks to do the right and not to enjoy ?

And in truth, there is nothing that can pay virtue save continued opportunity for exercise, so accurate is the old proverb that "Virtue is its own reward" . Only virtue can reward virtue, for *to be* is all that it desires. Tennyson caught a glimpse of this, and threw it into noble verse:

Glory of warrior, glory of orator, glory of song,
 Paid with a voice flying by to be lost on an endless sea —
 Glory of Virtue to fight, to struggle, to right the wrong —
 Nay, but she aimed not at glory, no lover of glory she;
 Give her the glory of going on, and still to be
 The wages of sin is death; if the wages of Virtue be dust,
 Would she have heart to endure for the life of the worm and the fly ?
 She desires no isles of the blest, no quiet seats of the just,
 To rest in a golden grove, or to bask in a summer sky;
 Give her the wages of going on, and not to die.

[*Wages* in Tennyson's Works] [Page 17]

To become what it longs for, to be what it adores: that is the goal towards which virtue strives, and that only can reward it. You cannot reward selflessness with pleasure; you cannot crown self-renunciation with gold; virtue asks naught at the hands of any God or any man, for the joy lies in its own exercise and in the opportunity of deathless service.

Some will say that such stimulus is insufficient, and that natures that do not respond to inspiration too lofty for them must have sanctions and threats fitted for their lower powers of apprehension. None the less should this Ideal be placed before them, for in them, at the core of their being, lies the Divine, even though it be too thickly crusted over with evil for the impulse to penetrate to it, or for it to respond. And experience proves to us that it is ever the noblest Ideal that stirs man into most passionate response, and even though he may be unable to emulate, he feels in him the throb of yearning desire that is the first movement of the life within him, as the babe not yet ready for birth stirs beneath the mother's heart, and the movement is the prophecy of the future. Take any crowd, gathered together at haphazard, of the degraded as well as of the noble, and see what will move them to enthusiasm; you will find it will be the tale of some heroic deed, the story of some great sacrifice — for the human heart springs upward the Right as the plant strives towards the sunshine. [Page 18]

But let us grant that something more than the presentation of a great Ideal is necessary to stimulate the progress of the less developed souls. Then let us teach them, and prove to them, that pain follows the evil-doer as his shadow, or as the cartwheel follows the ox. Let us make them understand that they are in a universe of law, in things moral as in things physical, and that suffering and degradation are the fruits that are ripened from the blossoms of sin. Not misery in a far-off hell, which they can escape at the last moment by a prayer, but misery here on earth where the wrong was done, and where must be restored the equilibrium they have disturbed. Let us teach them Reincarnation, that brings the Soul back to the scene of its transgressions, and Karma, the Great Law, that sets each man reaping the harvest he has sown. Thus may be chipped away the crust of ignorance that hinders the shining forth of the Light within them, and thus their responsiveness to the Ideal will increase. Yet in this process, let us frankly admit it, we are not making them truly virtuous, but are only destroying the ignorance which prevents the growth of virtue. Not till the longing for the Right for its own fair sake rises within them, can the step in virtue be made. For to do even the right act from desire to gain happiness or to avoid pain is not virtue, but merely enlightened and calculating selfishness; *right* action [Page 19] must spring from right thought, and not from selfish hopes or fears.

Apart from these considerations, it may be well argued that the fear of hell has directly worked for evil, and that it has proved to be a corrupting and degrading influence. On this, after quoting some descriptions of hell from Christian preachers, Canon Farrar has remarked:

There is overwhelming evidence to show that the outcome of such delineations taken alone — were they not rejected as they are by the instinctive faith of man — could only be hysteria, terror, and religious madness in the weak: indignant infidelity or incredulous abhorrence in the strong. "From the fear of hell", says the Rev. Rudolph Suffield, after twenty years' experience as confessor to thousands while working as "Apostolic Missionary" in most of the large towns of England, in many portions of Ireland, in part of Scotland, and also in France — we never expected virtue or high motives or a noble life; but we practically found it useless as a deterrent. It always influenced the wrong people and in a wrong way. It caused infidelity to some, temptation to others, and misery without virtue to most. It appealed to the lowest motives and the lowest characters; not, however, to deter from vice, but to make them the willing subjects of sad and often puerile superstitions. [*Eternal Hope*. Preface pp li, lii]

The effect caused by descriptions of eternal torture by Christian preachers can only be kept up by ever adding and adding to the horrors of the pictures — as the doses of a drug must be increased for confirmed eaters thereof — until at last we come to the hideous vilenesses of Father Furniss and Father Pinamonti. [*A Sight of Hell, and Hell Opened to Christians*] It is good to know that in the [Page 20] Christian Churches many are waking up to a recognition of the evil wrought by such teachings, and they see that the other-world hell is an excrescence, that has grown on the tree of their faith, fed by the poisoned sap of human malice and hatred, that it is a travesty of the great truth that disregard of law is ever followed by suffering, suffering that in its turn brings wisdom and obedience in its train.

Just as the Esoteric Philosophy opposes the doctrine of hell, so must it needs oppose the exoteric presentments of the doctrines of vicarious atonements, imputed righteousness, and divine grace. For these strike at the root of human effort, and transfer to an external source that which comes from the God

in man. To teach, as Christian teachers have taught, that Jesus Christ can make atonement for the sins of men, that His righteousness can be imputed to them, His grace give them salvation, is to remove man from the sway of law, to divorce effort from improvement, and to introduce the artificial methods of human legislation into the natural realm of inviolable order. As the incarnation of the Ego in animal man is the esoteric truth underlying all legends of divine incarnations, so the work of that Ego with its human tabernacle is the esoteric truth underlying the doctrines of atonement, imputed righteousness and divine grace. The Ego, uniting with itself the lower nature, gradually purifies it, makes it at one with itself, and constantly pours its own strength into the human [Page 21] personality, inspiring it, guiding it, lifting it, glorifying it. The Christ is built from within by this slow process through countless incarnations, every step being made by the joint efforts of the higher and lower natures which, from being twain, are gradually welded into one. Thus is taught a magnificent self-reliance, thus is built up by ever-renewed effort a strong and perfect man; thus only can the soul gain its independent conscious existence, acquiring

Individuality, first by natural impulse, and then by self-induced and self-devised efforts (checked by its Karma), thus ascending through all the degrees of intelligence, from the lowest to the highest Manas, from mineral and plant up to the holiest archangel (Dhyani-Buddha). The pivotal doctrine of the Esoteric Philosophy admits no privileges or special gifts in man, save those won by his own Ego through personal effort and merit throughout a long series of metempsychoses and reincarnations. [*The Secret Doctrine*, volume1, page 17]

Here, perhaps, is the strongest point of contrast between the Esoteric Philosophy and popular Christianity, and as this touches conduct and the spirit of our life, it is of the highest importance. Is man to rely on a force external to himself, or is he to seek strength in himself? On his answer to that question depends his future.

One great service that may be done by Theosophy to all religions is the softening of religious animosities by the revealing of the basis common to all. It cannot be that for ever the brotherhood [Page 22] preached by all religions shall be denied in practice, and Theosophy will deserve well of the world, if it can substitute knowledge for ignorance and peace for strife.