

Did Jesus ever live?

The Christ Myth, by Arthur Drews, Ph. D., Professor of Philosophy at Karlsruhe. Translated from the third revised German edition by C. Desmond Burns, M.A. 304 pp. 7s. 6d., net. T. Fisher Unwin, London and Leipzig.

To the Socialist the question whether there existed an historical Jesus of the Gospels is hardly a burning question. Whether the Christ legends had an historical nucleus or not does not affect the antagonism between religion, as such, and scientific knowledge. There is nothing inherently improbable in the collection of ancient myths round an historical personage and the attribution to him of the magic commonly believed in at the time. The Socialist, however, unlike the average professor, does not consider the work concluded when a belief has been traced to a myth! The myth clamours just as loudly for explanation.

Considerable work has been done, particularly on the Continent, in the direction of tracing ancient legends to their material basis, and showing their connection with definite phases of social life; but immensely more remains. The present book does not greatly increase our knowledge in this respect, and is to that extent unsatisfactory. A reference is, however, made to a rite which exists in the Vedic Agni cult, and which, according to the author, reaches back into the very origins of all human civilisation, and preserves the memory of the discovery of fire in the midst of the "horrors of the Stone Age". And the author gets near to a recognition of the social basis of early Christianity in the following passage:

"Christianity is a syncretic religion. It belongs to those movements which at the commencement of our era were struggling with one another for the mastery. Setting out from the Apocalyptic idea and the expectation of the Messiah among the Jewish sects, it was borne on the tide of a mighty social agitation, which found its centre and its point of departure in the religious sects and Mystery communities. Its adherents conceived the Messiah not merely as the Saviour of souls, but as deliverer from slavery, from the lot of the poor and the oppressed, and as the bearer of a new justice."

But it is, perhaps, hardly fair to condemn Professor Drews' book on the score that it does not explain the beliefs and myths with which it deals, for, in view of the frantic attempts of professor of Protestant theology to base their religion on an "historic" Jesus, it is certainly useful to show how unsupported such a base is.

In spite of occasional emphasis, however, the negative, as might be expected, is far from being proved. The non-historicity of Christ remains in the realms of the "may have been", the "probable" and the "perhaps", the professor's scholarship notwithstanding. The innumerable comparisons with pre-Christian religions of all sorts nevertheless demonstrate, at least, the great antiquity of practically the whole of the rites popularly connected with the name of Jesus.

In essence, the author's work in comparative religion (or, rather, in comparative mythology) simply carries the so-called Higher Criticism to its full conclusion, without seeking any sounder basis. He will have nothing to say to materialistic monism, and therefore never reaches bed rock; but his investigations within their idealistic limits have their value, and it may be useful to give Professor Drews' chief conclusions.

At the birth of Christianity men not only longed for a new structure of society, for peace, justice, and happiness on earth, but they trembled at the expectation of the early occurrence of world-wide catastrophe which would put a terrible end to all existence. And, says the professor:

"Seldom in the history of mankind has the need for religion been so strongly felt as in the last century before and the first century after Christ. But it was not from the old hereditary national religions that deliverance was expected. It was from the unrestrained commingling and unification of all existing religions, a religious syncretism, which was specially furthered by acquaintance with the strange, but on that account more attractive, religions of the East. Already Rome had become a Pantheon of almost all religions in which one could believe".

Christ is derived from a cult god of the Jewish sects, and etymological variations of the name Jesus are shown to be but older words for the Messiah, the mediator, the god of healing, and the redeemer; each with distinct characteristics. The supposed place-name, Nazareth, is a geographical fiction: the word really meant a guardian or protector. Further, the infliction of death upon a gibbet or cross as a human sacrifice was, as is, indeed, generally known, an extremely ancient religion practice. The crucifixion story had a direct connection with weather gods and the Roman Saturnalia.

Professor Drews, in common with most modern critics, attributes systematic Christianity to Paul, who possibly existed. "It is evident", he says, "that in reality it was merely a new setting to the old conception of the representative self-sacrifice of God". Moreover: "No historical personality who should, so to say, have lived as an example of the God-man, was in any way necessary to produce that Pauline development of the religion of Jesus . . . Christ is, for Paul, only a comprehensive expression for the totality of men, which is therein represented as an individual personal being". In other words, according to our author, Paul did not actually conceive of an historical Jesus. "The Pauline religion was only one form of the many syncretising efforts to satisfy humanity's need of redemption by a fusion of religious conceptions derived from different sources". But the connection with ancient religion is even closer.

"The place of the bloody expiatory sacrifices of the believers in Attis, wherein they underwent 'baptism by blood' in their yearly March festival, and wherein they obtained the forgiveness of their sins and were 'born again' to a new life, was in Rome the Hill of the Vatican. In fact the very spot on which in Christian times the Church of St. Peter grew above the so-called grave of the Apostle. It was at bottom merely an alteration of the name, not of the matter, when the High Priest of Attis blended his rôle with that of the High Priest of Christ, and the Christ-cult spread itself from this new point far over the other parts of the Roman Empire".

Apart from Professor Drews' statements, however, we know that the Christian search for an historical Jesus is quite a modern thing, and is really a sign of the dissolution of Christianity, of the weakening of faith, and of the growing scientific habit.

It is the accompaniment, also, of personal individualist religion rather than of the communal faith of the original Church. As a god, Christ appeared to his worshippers to no more need historic support than did the Godhead. But to-day faith has gone, and the attempt to find an historical nucleus for the Christ of the Gospels is the last despairing effort of what once was faith to justify itself by the light of reason.

Moreover, as Kalthoff says: "In default of any historical certainty the name of Jesus has become for Protestant theology an empty vessel into which that theology pours the contents of its own meditations.

It is truly all things to all men. But behind all its many forms it retains one constant care. It is true that Christians are being compelled to abandon the supernatural and to attempt to take refuge in an unfindable Christ-man, but they only throw overboard their grosser superstitions in order to save the essential superstition of Idealism as a bulwark against Materialism.

Professor Drews sees farther than the Protestants. He wishes to save religion by abandoning Christ altogether. "There must be", he says, "an idealistic monism in opposition to the naturalistic monism of Haeckel, which is prevalent even to-day. This monism must not exclude but include God's existence; and its present unfruitful negation of all religion must deepen into a positive and religiously valuable view of the world".

In practice an "idealistic monism" is not monism, but dualism; but that need not concern us here. At bottom the professor's attitude is typically bourgeois in its unctuous sophistry. Rather jettison all the gods there be than risk being overwhelmed by materialistic monism. At all costs keep the gaze of the masses fixed upon the sky, the ideal world where they cannot see how they are robbed and oppressed; do not let them investigate the material world, where they would soon find the way to material salvation! Such is the useful rôle of all religion to every ruling class. And Professor Drews would help it make its last desperate stand, sans Christ, sans Bible, but not sans its essential pernicious superstition. Truly, one must say of religion in all its multifarious forms, what our French friends say of government: "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose!"

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