

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE DOCTRINE OF RELIGIOUS EVOLUTION

**D**RIVEN from its first assumption of the late use of writing for literary purposes, the 'higher criticism' has fallen back on the doctrine of evolution. Evolution is the keynote of modern science, both physical and psychological, the magical key with which it hopes to unlock the secrets of the universe. There has been evolution and development in history, as well as in the forms of life, in the systems of the material universe or in the processes of thought. There must have been evolution also in religious and moral ideas, in political conceptions and theological dogmas. If once we could discover its law, we should be able to trace the course it has followed, and know what is first and what is last in the religious systems of the past.

The disciples of the 'higher criticism' have assumed not only that the law is discoverable,

## 116 The Doctrine of Religious Evolution

but also that they have themselves discovered it. They know precisely how religious ideas must have developed in the past, and can consequently determine the relative age of the various forms in which they are presented to us. Certain conceptions of the priesthood or the sanctuary, the 'critic' tells us, are older than others; therefore, if there are books or passages which do not conform to his ruling, they must be forced to do so by an alteration of the traditional dates. What the critic believes to have been the order of evolution is thus made the measure of their age and authenticity.

But it does not follow that what the 'critic' believes must have been the order of evolution was necessarily so. In all probability it was not. The European critic of the twentieth century, writing in his library of printed books, has little in common with the Oriental of the ancient world. The thoughts of the one are not the thoughts of the other; the very world in which they move is not the same.

The 'critical assumption,' in fact, is an inversion of the true method of science. We must first know what was the order of the phenomena before we can discover the law of

evolution which they have followed. It is only when we have ascertained what forms of life or matter have succeeded others that we can trace in them a process of development. We cannot reverse the method, and determine the sequence of the phenomena from a hypothetical law of evolution.

This, however, is just what the 'higher critics' of the Old Testament have attempted to do. They have assumed that what seems to them the natural order in the development of spiritual or moral ideas was the actual order, and they have mutilated and re-dated the literary material in order to support the assumption.

It has seemed to them that the institution of an Aaronic priesthood must have grown out of an earlier Levitical system, and that the codification of the law of Israel must have followed and not preceded the development of prophecy; and, consequently, setting tradition at defiance, they have remodelled the ancient history of Israel, rewritten its sacred books, and forced the evidence into conformity with their historical scheme. What archaeology has to say to their second assumption,

## 118 The Doctrine of Religious Evolution

that of the late date of the codification of the Mosaic Law, we have already seen; when the ritual code of Babylonia is discovered, it is likely that the 'critical' theory of the priority of the Levitical to the Aaronic priesthood will fare no better than the theory that the Law is later than the Prophets.

In fact, the whole application of a supposed law of evolution to the religious and secular history of the ancient Oriental world is founded on what we now know to have been a huge mistake. The Mosaic age, instead of coming at the dawn of ancient Oriental culture, really belongs to the evening of its decay. The Hebrew legislator was surrounded on all sides by the influences of a decadent civilization. Religious systems and ideas had followed one another for centuries; the ideas had been pursued to their logical conclusions, and the systems had been worked out in a variety of forms. In Egypt and Babylonia alike there was degeneracy rather than progress, retrogression rather than development. The actual condition of the Oriental world in the age of Moses, as it has been revealed to us by archaeology, leaves little room for the particular kind

of evolution of which the 'higher criticism' has dreamed.

But in truth the archaeological discoveries of the last half-dozen years in Egypt and Krete have once for all discredited the claim of 'criticism' to apply its theories of development to the settlement of chronological or historical questions. It is not very long since it was assuring us that the civilization of Egypt had little or no existence before the age of the Fourth Dynasty, that no records had been kept or monuments preserved of so 'prehistoric' a period, and that the kings whom tradition assigned to it were but the 'half-fabulous' fictions of later centuries.

And yet these half-fabulous fictions have turned out to have lived in the full blaze of Egyptian culture; their tombs and public works were on a grandiose scale, their art was far advanced, their political organization complete. The art of writing was not only known, but an alphabet had been invented, and a cursive hand formed. A chronological register of time was kept year by year, and the height of each successive Nile minutely recorded. The civilization of Egypt in the reign of Menes was as

## 120 The Doctrine of Religious Evolution

high as it was under the Pharaohs of the Fourth Dynasty. The application of the canons of the 'higher criticism' to the earlier history of Egypt has signally failed.

Nor is it better when we turn to the eastern basin of the Mediterranean, and the islands and coasts which were afterwards Greek. Here, we were told, there was nothing but the darkness of an illiterate barbarism before the beginnings of the classical age. The traditions which had survived of an earlier period were resolved into myths and fabrications, and we were bidden to believe that the pre-Hellenic history of the Ægean could never be recovered, for none had existed. A knowledge of writing, we were assured, was unknown in the age in which the Homeric poems first took shape, and art sprang ready-made, like Athena from the head of Zeus, in the stormy epoch of the Persian wars. Backed by his favourite appeal to the want of evidence, and fortified with his doctrine of development and his assumption of the late introduction of writing, the 'critic' was confident that his negative conclusions could never be gainsaid, and that what had passed for the earlier history of Greek lands had

been dismissed by him for ever to the realm of myth.

The awakening has come with a vengeance. The scepticism of the 'critic' has been proved to have been but the measure of his own ignorance, the want of evidence to have been merely his own ignorance of it. The spade of the excavator in Krete has effected more in three or four years than the labours and canons of the 'critic' in half a century. The whole fabric he had raised has gone down like a house of cards, and with it the theories of development of which he felt so confident.

Not only have we discovered that the traditions of the empire and splendour of Minos were right, that even the stories of the Labyrinth and the Minotaur had a foundation of fact, but we have also learnt that the art of classical Greece was no self-evolved thing, but as much a renaissance as the European renaissance of the fifteenth century. The culture of the lands of Krete in the age of Moses was equal to that of their Egyptian contemporaries; their architectural conceptions were far advanced, their fayence and inlays of the first order, the art of their engraved gems unsurpassed even in

the palmiest days of later Greece. Indeed, in the age of Moses the art of the eastern Mediterranean was already decaying, strange conventional designs and figures had come into existence, and forms which we associate with the art of the Roman empire were already in fashion.

As for illiteracy, there was writing and in plenty. No less than three different scripts—if not four—were in use in Krete alone, and traces of their use have been met with as far north as Bœotia and the Troad. The clay tablets of Babylonia were employed as well as the papyri of Egypt for writing purposes, and the characters of a linear script were inscribed in ink on shreds of pottery. And all this plenitude of literary culture and luxury was being enjoyed by the islands and coastlands of the eastern Mediterranean centuries before Homer told of its departed glories, or Hellenic civilization took up again the broken threads of the past. The development which the 'critic' has imagined—a development out of barbarism, illiteracy, and the rude beginnings of art—is simply a dream and nothing more.

It would be affectation, however, if not dis-



ingenuousness to pretend that the work of the 'critic' has been altogether barren. This is far from being the case. We have only to compare a history of early Greece, as it was written a hundred years ago, with the history of early Greece, as it is being rewritten by archaeology to-day, to see how much there was which needed to be cleared away. We can never return to the point of view of our forefathers in regard either to Greek or to Hebrew history.

But where 'criticism' went wrong was in its belief that, unaided, it could solve all the problems of history. The result was the adoption of a false method, resting, in default of anything better, on assumptions and theories which have been shown to be without foundation, an exaggerated scorn of tradition, and a neglect of those facts of archaeology which are the only scientific criteria we possess for testing the truth of the traditions of the past.

But within the lawful domain of philology the work of the critic has been fruitful. We have learnt much about the text of the Old Testament Scriptures which was hidden from our fathers, and above all we have come to take a truer and more intelligent view both of the text itself and

## 124 The Doctrine of Religious Evolution

of the literature to which it belongs. We have learnt that the Old Testament Scriptures are as truly a literature as the classical productions of Greece or Rome, that they were written by men, not by machines, and that they reflect the individual qualities of those who wrote them, and the colouring of the various ages at which they were composed.

If criticism has effected nothing else, it has obliged us to look more closely into the language and relations of the books with which it deals, not to rest satisfied until we can understand the real meaning of the author and the connexion of his words with the context in which they are found. There was a time when the Christian regarded his Bible as the orthodox Hindu regards his Veda, as a single indivisible and mechanically-inspired book, dictated throughout by the Deity, and from which all human elements are jealously excluded.

But heathen theories of inspiration ought to have no place in the Christian consciousness. Christ was perfect Man as well as perfect God, and in the sacred books of our faith we are similarly called upon to recognize a human element as well as a divine. The doctrine of

verbal inerrancy is Hindu and not Christian, and if we admit it we must, with the Hindu, follow it out to its logical conclusion, that the inerrant words cannot be translated into another tongue or even committed to writing.

Nevertheless, between the recognition of the human element in the Old Testament, and the 'critical' contention that the Hebrew Scriptures are filled with myths and historical blunders, pious frauds and ante-dated documents, the distance is great. Beyond a certain point the conclusions of 'criticism' come into conflict with the articles of the Christian faith. The New Testament not only presupposes, but also rests upon the Old Testament, and, in addition to this, the method and principles which have resolved the narratives of the Old Testament into myths, or the illusions of credulous Orientals, must have the same result when applied to the New Testament. From a 'critical' point of view the miraculous birth of our Lord rests upon no better evidence than the story of the exodus out of Egypt.

'Criticism' professes not to deal with the abstract question of the possibility of miracles. But it does so indirectly by undermining the

## 126 The Doctrine of Religious Evolution

credit of the narratives in which the miraculous is involved. In fact, the presence of a miracle is of itself accounted a sufficient reason for 'suspecting' the truth of a story, or at all events the credibility of its witnesses. If there was no record of miracles in the Old and New Testaments, it may be questioned whether so much zeal would have been displayed in endeavouring to throw doubt on the authenticity of their contents. We find no such display of 'critical' energy in the case of the Mohammedan Koran.

But putting the question of miracles aside, there is one point on which we have a right to demand a clear answer from the advocates of the 'higher criticism' who still maintain their adherence to the historical faith of Christendom. It was to the Old Testament that Christ and the early Church appealed in proof of His divinity. 'Search the Scriptures,' said our Lord, for 'they are they which testify of Me.' It was in them that the life and death, the resurrection and the work of Christ were foreshadowed and predicted (Luke xxiv. 25-27), and upon this fact He based His claim to be believed.

Was our Lord right, or must we rather

hearken to the modern 'critic' when he tells us that the endeavour to find Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, in the sense in which Christ and His Church understood the phrase, is an illusion of the past? We cannot serve two masters; either we must believe that in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah we have a real portraiture of Christ, or else that Christ was mistaken, and that the portraiture was only read into the chapter in later days. The words of Canon Liddon in reference to the critical theory of the origin of the Pentateuch still hold good: 'How is such a supposition reconcilable with the authority of Him who has so solemnly commended to us the Books of Moses, and whom Christians believe to be too wise to be Himself deceived, and too good to deceive His creatures?'