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## The Christ of the Gospel.

### No. I.—THE PRE-EXISTENT CHRIST.

“Begotten of His Father before all worlds. . . . Being of one substance with the Father; by Whom all things were made.”

[NOTE.—Although only the first of the three clauses printed above has been definitely assigned to the writer of this opening paper, it is clearly impossible to separate the three or to omit entirely any one. The subject is, in effect, “the Christian conception of Christ before His Incarnation,” and all the elements which go to make up this conception have their bearing on the five subjects to follow. At the same time, it is obvious that a single paper could not hope to deal adequately with the whole of such a theme, even if the writer were not the least qualified of the six contributors to make the attempt, and the subject the vastest and (in the true sense) most “incomprehensible” of the series. The whole doctrine of the Blessed Trinity is involved and implied in any attempt to discuss the metaphysical relation of the Son to the Father, which is what lies before us. And though the writer, for one, is profoundly impressed with the really practical and illuminative quality of that doctrine—which to so many, even among believers, seems only an incubus which religion has been obliged to take over from philosophy—he feels he can claim the sympathy of any others whose thought has tried to find its way in the same regions when he says that here, if anywhere, one learns the meaning of the “darkness” which is due to “excess of light.”]

#### I.

ANY theological discussion is surely entitled to claim as its starting-point that first and greatest fact of both life and theology—the instinctive human craving for God. The very instincts which make a man say to God, “Depart from me,” which urge the fool to say in his heart, “There is no God,” are, in the last analysis, so much more evidence for the intimate, inevitable relation that exists between God and human life. Where the thirst does not take a moral or spiritual form, it asserts itself in a passion of thought. Man, when he allows himself to be himself, is somehow unable to let God alone; and when he goes after Him, by whatever avenue, he finds himself cumulatively assured that he is on a real progress towards a real Goal.

And if this is true of man in general, how much more clearly is it true of man in his religious aspects and moments! There

is a void in his nature, in his universe ; and, at the heart of him, he knows that nothing can fill it but God. The filling of that void is his "salvation" ; and ultimately nothing can save him but a real getting hold of God. The alternative is, quite frankly, pessimism—the admission that this "God" he thinks and speaks of is a non-existent abstraction, while the void it was meant to fill remains painfully real and unalterable by argument. The result is a *reductio ad absurdum* of all life that can be called "human" ; and consequently (on Euclid's principle) the sane man clings to the contrary hypothesis, and bases life on faith. (*Cf.* Heb. xi. 6.)

But this "salvation," which ultimately consists in "getting hold of God," is capable of analysis. It includes, for instance, forgiveness of sin, and moral empowering, and the gift of an endless life. All these are, in their true nature, at once conditions and consequences of the getting hold of God. Thus freedom from sin is the condition of any contact with God, and, at the same time, can only be produced by contact with God—in forgiveness and sanctification. Or, again, immortality is the result of having "gotten hold of God" (*cf.* John xvii. 3 and 1 John v. 12) ; while it is also the condition of ever being able to "comprehend" the Infinite and Eternal, for nothing short of an eternity of learning will bring us within reach of really "knowing God."

And here, in this process of analysis, we come upon trouble. For whereas the one object of Religion is the apprehension of God, the practical mechanics of any religious system are largely concerned with compassing the various secondary ends which such apprehension includes ; and so the door is opened to that great kinsman-enemy of true Religion, which (however it may disguise itself) is really Magic. While Religion concerns itself with the ultimate end—that apprehension of God which is to quench the instinctive human thirst for Him—and with the other, secondary ends in strict relation to it, Magic is concerned only with these secondary ends, regardless of what may lie beyond them.

For instance, Prayer is, for Religion, a means of getting hold of God; including, of course, the obtaining of all such things, both temporal and spiritual, as may be needful to that end. For Magic, Prayer is a way of getting what one wants out of God—imposing for the moment one's own will on God—without regard to the effect of this on the ultimate relation between us and Him. Or again, Forgiveness is, from the religious point of view, a necessity to enable true and vital relationship with God; the peace of mind produced is not an end in itself, but a means to that higher end. From what I mean by the magical point of view, the sense of relief is itself the end, regardless of whether it results in a closer bond between Forgiver and forgiven. Or again, in relation to Immortality, in such a phrase as *φάρμακον ἀθανασίας*—“the medicine which gives immortality”—used for the Holy Communion in quite early times, we can see the encroachment of the magical upon the religious conception. And a little reflection will suggest that, even in our own day, a good deal of what passes as “Religion” ought rather to be classed under “Magic,” dealing as it does with intermediate spiritual ends rather than with the one ultimate end, the bringing of God and man into one.

This apparently pointless excursus has been necessary because the subject before us can only be satisfactorily approached from the side of soteriology, from the question, “What do I mean by ‘salvation,’ and what, under the Christian system, is the condition and substance of being ‘saved’?”

If we can agree that it must, in the end, be nothing less than the filling of the void which only God can fill—the quenching of the thirst which is thirst “for God, even for the living God,” and not merely for certain subsidiary advantages, like forgiveness and escape from death, which are necessary parts, but only parts, in that final satisfaction—then the ground is cleared for us to this extent, that any valid scheme of salvation must make provision for a true coming of God into man, as man's complement, the Head and Spring of his highest life, which thus emerges as God's life in him, and therefore as eternal.

And, it follows, the theology on which such a scheme of salvation is based must be one which allows of a God Who *can* do this, and yet remain One, unique, and morally unapproachable.

If, however, we have not got to make provision for a real personal unity of God and man—the thing which the human heart seems to crave;—if our relationships with other persons are the highest thing of the kind we can know, and do not point on by their limitations to a more perfect counterpart in the soul's relation to God; or if the religious instinct is to be taken as satisfied when, somehow or other, God has provided a medicine for each ill of man out of His medicine-chest (as it were) instead of from the resources of His own nature—then we need not worry much about our theology; psychology can largely take its place, as in fact it has lately been doing. The Arian, or the Unitarian, doctrine of Christ will do as well as any other. “The deliverance” (as Gwatkin puts it, speaking of the system of Marcellus<sup>1</sup>) “becomes a mere intervention from without, not also the planting of a power of life within”; there is “no true mediation,” “the Lord is our Redeemer, and the conqueror of death and Satan, but there is no room for a second Adam, the organic Head of a regenerate mankind.”

Such is, in effect, the result of any system which, consciously or unconsciously, yields to the Greek philosophic bias which really accounts for all such efforts as that of Arius—the desire to isolate God, as pure “Being,” unchangeable and passionless, from the world of “becoming” and emotion and change. But though this may seem to be a gain, because a simplification, philosophically, it immediately sterilizes the conception of God for purposes of religion. It contradicts the strange universal yearning of humanity for a *real* relationship—which, for persons, means a *personal* relationship, a relationship of heart with heart—between God and man, and in effect credits the creature with a higher conception of religion than the Creator Himself. (*Cf.* the argument of Browning's “Saul.”)

<sup>1</sup> “Arianism,” p. 86.

## II.

But Christianity, in its orthodox form, undoubtedly starts from this very thought of a personal relation between God and man. Regardless of philosophic consequences, it presents God to man in personal form, as a Personal Being in the fullest sense, and so, as it were, "continuous with" human nature, able to be linked on to it without self-violation, and ready to provide its needed salvation by just such "linking on" of Himself, instead of by any mere intervention from outside. Experience justified the bold theory, which also met the truest instincts of the human heart, "athirst for God, yea, even for the living God"; and philosophy had to follow, though reluctantly, performing her true function of explaining experience instead of regulating or denying it. Hence from the experiences of the first century the Church was driven, by logical necessity, to the formularies of the fourth; and the doctrine of the Trinity emerged to meet and to safeguard three irreducible results of past experience and thought—the unity of God, the mysterious influence of the Christian Church, and the human thirst for direct communion with the Highest.

But the doctrine, though historically derived *a posteriori* from certain facts of experience, is also essentially involved in any true and full conception of personal relationship with God—with a God, that is, Who really is God, One, unique, and absolute.

Nothing in Christianity more offended the first pagan thinkers who came across it than its assertion of a God Who was *παθητός*—liable to "suffering" in the wide Greek sense, which covers any form of undergoing an influence (regarded as external) and being modified by it. A Being liable to such modification *ab extra* can clearly not be absolute, and therefore (on the normal Greek hypothesis) cannot be *God*. And yet any real personal relationship between God and man must involve a real power of mutual modification, of give and take on both sides. That there can be self-adaptation on our side

towards God, that we can "respond" to Him, is the postulate on which all religion and morality depend. But we might as well have determinism straight away, if changes in our attitude and feelings towards God cannot be met by any sort of reaction in Him, but must remain as causes without effects. If in any sense the moral choice is put before us by God, and what we call "morality" (in the widest sense) is part of His plan, it cannot be a matter of indifference to Him which way we choose. If He is, in any real way, involved in His universe, then the mere fact that our choice has real (and often predictable) "consequences" shows that it does somehow make itself felt *in God*. By it God is, somehow, "modified." Above all, if we mean anything by saying that God is Love—and here, again, the argument of Browning's "Saul" is useful—we mean that, in some mysterious way, we, as the objects of His love, have His happiness in our keeping. To be loved by someone is to have him largely at your mercy; and so we can, in the profoundest of ways, modify the existence of God.

Thus, quite apart from the revelation of God loving, and therefore suffering, in Jesus Christ, we are driven to believe in a God who is genuinely *παθητός*, merely as a consequence of admitting the possibility of true personal relationship between God and man. Equally fundamental data of experience and reason, however, compel us to believe in Him as One and absolute—"without parts or passions." And the Christian doctrine of the Blessed Trinity is the Church's attempt to express, in some sort of human terms, the fact that God is *both at once*—a fact clearly inexpressible in terms which keep inside the range of human experience or have the sanction of human reason.

Thus, as St. Augustine puts it, the term "Three Persons" is used, not because it is exactly what we want to say, but because otherwise we should be reduced to saying nothing. For us the standard unit (so to speak) in the region of personality is the individual person; therefore, so long as the second "Law of Thought" holds good—viz., "A cannot be both B

and not B at the same time"—we cannot speak of God as "a Person" in this unitary sense. "A person" cannot be both passionless and liable to passion at the same time; but God apparently, must be conceived of as both. And yet, if we cannot regard Him as truly "Personal," we can put no real meaning to the word God, while the "personality" which is our own highest attribute becomes inexplicable. All we can do, therefore, is to try and find some way of expressing our necessary belief that He is at once personal and more than "a person"—that personality in Him at once includes and transcends what we call personality in ourselves. And so we speak of "Three Persons in One God."<sup>1</sup>

### III.

We thus find ourselves confronted with a "Trinity of Persons"—three forms and founts of existence in one eternal substance, which is essentially personal, but also super-personal

<sup>1</sup> The question here arises, "Why three rather than two?" This opens a large field, including the whole doctrine of the Holy Spirit, which is beyond our present purview. Briefly, if there are two in one, a third is implied as the relation between them; so we speak of the Father and the Son living and reigning "in the unity of the same Spirit," of the Son "through the Eternal Spirit" offering Himself to the Father, and of believers having access to the Father through the Son "in one Spirit." Further, it should be remembered that the word "person," as used in this connection, connoted originally much less than it does now, whether we have regard to the Greek word *ὑπόστασις* or the Latin *persona*. Thus belief in the "personality" of the Holy Spirit does not commit us to belief in a separate *personal identity*, comparable to that of Jesus Christ but distinct from it; this is to import our modern conception of a person (*i.e.*, in effect, an individual) too markedly into the doctrine, and, if at all pressed, leads to Tri-theism. The Holy Spirit in Scripture does not seem to be spoken of, as the Son is, as an object of human apprehension, but rather as the *apprehending subject*; not, that is, as "God made intelligible," but as "God enabling man to understand His own expression of Himself." Christ is God over against us, the object of our regard; the Holy Spirit is God within us, looking at Himself (so to speak) through our eyes, and so enabling them to see Him as God. (Cf. John xvi. 13-15; also 1 Cor. ii. 11 and xii. 3.)

All this may help to give some meaning to the description of the Holy Spirit as "the relation between" the Father and the Son. At the same time, such a "relating efficacy" must be regarded as, in some sense, "personal," because (a) what brings persons into relation must partake of personality, and (b) the Unity of God demands that His *whole* Being should thus partake of personality. (We cannot conceive of Him, any more than of ourselves, as "partly impersonal.") In any case, the Holy Spirit represents a distinct form, and fount, of activity in God, and so precisely corresponds to the ideas underlying *persona* and *ὑπόστασις* respectively.



—as our conception of God, whether we argue *a priori* from the instinctive demands of the human heart and human reason, or *a posteriori* from the historic facts which make up the Christian revelation. And among these last we must include the experiences of the earliest Christians, which at once shaped and corroborated the interpretation which the Church put on the life and death of Jesus Christ.

It remains to try, in the small space available, to suggest what are the internal relations of the Father and the Son, within this Trinity, as defined in the clauses of the Nicene Creed which are actually before us.

The controversy lying behind the words, "Being of one substance with the Father," has already been implied in much that was said by way of introduction. Briefly, what is at stake is the real *nexus* between personality as we know it in ourselves (and we know it as something persistently demanding a super-human completion, in what we therefore call a "personal relationship" with God) and personality as (for this reason) necessarily existing in God. Such a *nexus* exists potentially between a Plato or a Shakespeare and the lowest savage, between the man Christ Jesus and the most abandoned of sinners; for in either case the lower *can* eventually, under given conditions, be raised to the level of real personal relationship with the higher, just because there is a common human nature uniting them. Such a *nexus* does not, however, exist between the lowest men and the highest of the beasts. A man may love, and do a great deal for, his horse or his dog, but all his service to them is (as it were) *ab extra*, an intervention from another sphere, and he cannot raise them to his own level. Which is the state of affairs as between us and God? Arianism, and all the many quasi-Arian systems, assimilate the divine salvation of man to the service which a man may do to his dog. Orthodox Christianity, by asserting oneness of substance between the Father and the Son, leaves it possible to conceive of salvation in the other and higher way, which alone really satisfies the cravings of man's heart. "He Himself," says Athanasius of

the Son, "became Man in order that we may *be made God*."<sup>1</sup> And the central point of his whole argument always is, that "no creature, but only God, can unite us with God."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, as Harnack himself admits, "With Arius the Son belongs to the world side, while, with Athanasius, He, as belonging to God, stands over against the world."<sup>3</sup> By no amount of self-identification with the Arian Christ—a creature, though unique among creatures—could man feel that he had really identified himself with or gotten hold of God, which is the thing he is seeking as the goal of religion. On the other hand, if the Saviour of the race is "continuous with" God by unity of substance, as well as with man by full and true incarnation, the gulf fixed has been bridged by an act of God, and the way is open for redeemed, regenerate, and inspired human personality to advance, by the natural operation of the very laws of personality, towards complete assimilation to the Divine Personality with which "in Christ" it is continuous, "until we all come to a Perfect Man, to the measure of the stature of the fulfilment of Christ"—until, that is, the prayer of Christ is fulfilled, "that they may be a Unity even as We are a Unity, I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected into One."

It was the conviction that nothing less could save for the world the conception of God revealed in Jesus Christ and in the Christian experience of Him, which upheld Athanasius in his long fight for the unpopular word *ὁμοούσιον*, over which the superficial have loved to make merry. In a day when much of the effort of theology seems bent again to a "simplification" of doctrine by explaining Our Lord as far as possible in purely human terms, as One Who "understood" or "reflected" the mind of God in a unique degree, but by revelation, and not through ultimate identity of nature, it may not be amiss to quote, before passing on, the indignant cry of Athanasius: "How can they call themselves Christians, who say that the Logos descended upon a holy man, as upon one of the prophets, and was

<sup>1</sup> "De Inc.," p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Orr, "Progress of Dogma," p. 112.

<sup>3</sup> "Hist. of Dogma," iv. 29 (quoted by Orr, *ibid.*, p. 113 n.).

not made very Man and took flesh of Mary?"<sup>1</sup> And with it one may set the admission (surely very significant) of Harnack, that Athanasius saved "the faith that in Christ God Himself has redeemed man . . . against a doctrine which did not understand the inner nature of religion generally, which sought in religion only teaching, and ultimately found its satisfaction in an empty dialectic."<sup>2</sup>

#### IV.

Even more summary treatment is all that can be given to the remaining two clauses—the one defining the relation of the Son to the Father as original and eternal (Origen's "eternal generation" of the Son of God), the other stating that the Son is the agent, or medium, in all the creative activity of God.

The assertion that the Son is "eternally begotten" of the Father means that the relations within the Godhead, which the plurality of Persons implies, are essential and eternal relations; part of the Being of God from all eternity, and not the result of an act of will on His part before time began. If God *is* a "personal" Being, and did not merely *become* such, He must have been in a position to enjoy what we mean by "personal relationship" from the beginning; for capacity for such is the distinguishing mark of a personal being, and persons only realize themselves in relationship with other persons. If, especially, we are to cling to the faith that God is Love (*cf. supra*, p. 12), without stultifying it by adding that God acquired, or discovered in Himself, the capacity for loving only after He had *created* objects for His affection, then the object of the Divine Love must be from eternity like the Love itself; that is, must be *in the Godhead* originally and eternally. (*Cf.* John i. 18, especially in the Greek, *μονογενῆς θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς*, and xvii. 5, 24.)

At the same time, though the two Persons have coexisted eternally, and are coequal, it is quite "real," and significant, to

<sup>1</sup> "Ad Epict.," i. 721.

<sup>2</sup> "Grundriss," i. 141 (quoted by Orr, *op. cit.*, p. 110).

speak of One as Father and the Other as Son ; their relation is not (for instance) that of brothers, which was an Arian suggestion. There is an "eternal mutuality," but it is as between an originative Giver and a responsive Receiver. There are no "grades" of deity ; but while the Son (in Basil's phrase) is "per Se Deus," the Father is also "a Se Deus," and in this sense "My Father is greater than I," *not* "more truly divine." The kind of relationship suggested by the terms "Father" and "Son" may perhaps be faintly suggested by that which, in our own thinking about ourselves, we recognize between the thinking subject ("I") and the object of thought ("me"). Neither is more truly "myself" than the other, yet the subject has a kind of inherent precedence.

#### V.

To much that has been said here, however, it may be objected that these internal relations within the One God are artificial and unreal ; as, *e.g.*, when we speak of the eternal generation of the Son as necessary to provide for a co-eternal object of the Father's love. With us, we think, love is felt not for self, or part of it, but for that which is other than self.

But in the first place, even on the human level, love has somehow the effect of planting its object within us, as no longer something extraneous, but a real part of ourselves. In fact, love in the true sense is probably never directed to any object which does not (through this process) appear as now annexed and engrafted into the "ego," and not merely as a fragment of the surrounding "non-ego." It is only as thus incorporated into ourselves that the object of love ministers to the expansion of our personality and helps us on towards the goal of self-realization ; and it is only by loving that we can thus "incorporate," and so grow. Who, however, shall say which comes first—the love or the incorporation ? Why should it not be that we feel the love because the object which excites it is *already* (though we are only now discovering it) part of ourselves—our natural and needed complement ? The phenomena

of love support this view at least as much as the other ; and if we try to think in terms of the fuller self we are growing to, and not of the actual self which is growing, it becomes the more natural view of the two. We love what we find fits in, rather than fit in what we love.

If there is anything in this, then the conception of a relation of love within the One Godhead begins to look less "unreal," especially as here at last we are dealing with perfect Self-hood, absolutely realized Personality. If it is true of ourselves, in Goethe's words, that

" Never yet  
Hath mortal drunk a draught restorative  
That welled not from the depths of his own soul,"

may we not imagine something analogous as taking place in God ?

And then there is another line of approach. We do not account our relations with other persons less real, but the reverse, as they come nearer to the ideal. But the ideal relationship—which, as between human persons, we can only dream of and hope for in heaven—is precisely such as we have to regard as actually existing in the Blessed Trinity—viz., a personal union transcending and abolishing the barriers of individuality. To be able to think our friend's thoughts, and have him thinking ours—both of us being such that neither, so doing, would find in the other's mind anything to puzzle or offend him—that surely represents the ideal relationship. Why, then, if realized, should it be thought to become *unreal* ? What the doctrine of the Trinity suggests is that, where there is perfected Personality, there also is the ideal personal relationship. Each is, in fact, the condition of the other.

## VI.

It is in the thought, here emerging, of the essential compositeness, or comprehensiveness, of personality as fully realized—the thought that perhaps, after all, personality only exists once, and belongs to the God "*in* Whom we live and move and

have our being," and not to us except in fragments—it is here that we touch the chief practical thought lying behind the remaining clause before us. "By Whom all things were made" is but a briefer formula for "by Whom also He made the worlds" in Heb. i. 2; and the thought is most fully developed in Col. i. 16-20 and in the parallel passages in Ephesians. Christ was from all ages the self-expression of God; and the self-expression of the One God could not be other than ultimately One. Therefore we speak of Him as at once the agent, the medium, and the sum-total of creation, which is the self-expression of God. And from this follow the doctrines of the *πλήρωμα*—the "fulfilment" of God—and of the Church as "the body of Christ."

This, however, is only touched on to indicate how much more should come under the title "The Pre-existent Christ" than either has been or could be brought within the limit of this paper. The one thing which it may be hoped that even such brief treatment has served to make clearer is the way in which the Christian Doctrine of God directly underlies every part of the vast and ramified structure of Christianity, and is also the only conception of the Divine Nature which at all gives the human heart, and the human reason, what the two together claim that their God shall be.

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