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# THE REVIEW AND EXPOSITOR

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## THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE GOSPEL ETHIC.

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The subject of this article, "The Sufficiency of the Gospel Ethic as Furnishing the Principle of the Moral Life", might be put as a question, "Does the Gospel Ethic need to be supplemented?" Why should such a question be asked? What objections can be raised to the Gospel Ethic? Four objections suggest themselves. Its sufficiency has been challenged, for one thing, on the score that it bases morality on religion, finds the call to righteousness in the will of God. For another, it is objected to as too exclusively individualistic and as affording no sufficient guidance as to social ethics. Again, it has been challenged for ignoring what are called the Tentic virtues. In other words, it is too tame for healthy animal natures. And once more, it is said to be drafted on a false view of life, with a false perspective of the end of the world. In other words the Christian Ethic has been attacked, on the one hand, from the side of a purely materialistic view of the universe in which man is treated as simply the creature of heredity and environment. It has also been attacked, on the other hand, from what has been supposed to be the necessary result of certain views of New Testament interpretation and a theory of the Person of Christ based thereon, all under the

spell of the recrudescent militarism of our day. I propose in this paper first to criticise these impeachments, and then look at abiding reasons for believing in the sufficiency of the Gospel Ethic.

1. First of all as to the objection that Christianity bases ethics on religion.

The most popular form in which that objection is stated is in a book entitled, "Not Guilty: a Defense of the Bottom Dog", by Robert Blatchford, the editor of the "Clarion," a recognized leader of the more aggressive Anti-Christian Socialists in Great Britain. It is simply a popularisation of the kind of objection raised by Haeckel and those of his school. But no apology is needed for looking at it under this popular form. The book came into the hands of the writer from a man who had fallen under its spell and who thought it unanswerable. The book is to be found lying in the rooms of young working men living in lodgings. It is in its popular form that such an argument requires answer. The argument is of the crudest description, but is set forth with all the arrogance, finality and cock-sureness which an appearance of severe logicity imparts. There is a plausible directness and simplicity about the style, which tells that it is written with all the skill of a practiced journalist. And let it be frankly admitted, the author is an earnest man. The line of attack is very much this. As man is entirely the creature of heredity and environment, it is unreasonable to hold him responsible for any of his actions. Hence to talk of a duty of obedience to a law of God is to talk of that which cannot be. Man is what he is, and he can be no other. To speak of retribution for abuse of his life, for disobedience to God's law, is to proclaim the injustice of God, because again man is what he is, and he can be no other. "Therefore the Christian religion is untrue, and man is not responsible to God for his nature nor for his acts." "All laws, human or divine, which punish him for his acts are unjust laws." "There is no such thing as sin." These three sentences are quotations.

When a man arrives at results like these as the outcome of his theory of ethics he ought to see it is not simply the re-

ligious basis of ethics that he has swept away, but ethics itself. He has indeed succeeded in his defense of "the Bottom Dog", as he calls the habitual criminal. But he has also destroyed every reason for criticising that type of life, or for the putting forth of any effort on the part of either the man himself or any one else to effect any change in him. It is not so much that the environment cannot be changed, but why should it be changed? Why should the Bottom Dog theory and method of life not be accepted as equally desirable with that of the Top Dog? Or if ethics still survive, and there be one life more conducive to the public good than another—for that is what ethics is resolved into—how has this differentiation come about? By what evolution from savage ancestors and debasing surroundings have any elevating influences begun to operate? Every dog is justified in his own position, and there is no reason or right why anyone should seek to shift him to another. The author of the "Defense of the Bottom Dog" should deal severely with the author of "Merrie England" (another of Mr. Blatchford's books). Nobody is to blame for the wealth and tyranny of the wealthy any more than for the sloth and slavery of the rest. Men are as they are, and nobody is responsible. Heredity and environment have played their game and the pieces are where they have placed them. The truth is that in exploiting heredity and environment to get rid of religion and moral responsibility, Mr. Blatchford has left the man himself out of account. The inborn sense of moral distinctions and the sense of moral responsibility, the whole apparatus of conscience, is too strong for the reasoner's logic. Here are self-assertive elements that reappear, and the relation between them and religion assumed in the Gospel Ethic is not invalidated by a criticism which really drops them both. What passes for ethics and its sanction in this system of Mr. Blatchford reminds me of what is called Right Reason in "Bushido", the Ethic of Japan. And Professor Nitobe's criticism of it seems apposite here: "It is a secondary power in ethics; for as a motive it is infinitely inferior to the Christian doctrine of love. I deem it a product of the conditions of an artificial society . . . and it

has often stooped to casuistry." Japanese experience of an ethic on a non-religious basis does not seem to commend the substitution of this new for the old.

2. Another challenge of the Christian Ethic is on the score that it is too individualistic. Now on the surface it looks as if there were something in that. Neither our Saviour nor the writers of the Epistles enter at all fully into the laws which ought to regulate such a complicated social system as exists among us today. And that is not to be wondered at. For one thing the social conditions of those days were nothing like so complicated as ours are. But the criticism means more than this. It means that the Gospel Ethic never seems to look at the mutual relations of bodies of men towards one another — companies towards trades unions, say, or the state toward other states, or towards syndicates, co-operative companies, or native races. And in one way this is true. And yet broadly, has any one any doubts as to whether a particular policy on any one of these matters will bear the test of the application of Christian principle to it or not? State the case fully. Submit it to disinterested Christian men of the most diverse ecclesiastical types. Let them answer without prejudice; and I venture to say there will be very little divergence between them. The Gospel Ethic is equal to the task.

But there are these two considerations which carry us further and lead us to modify the admission made at first. For one thing, it is very apt to be forgotten that the Gospel Ethic includes a purified and refined, a deepened and spiritualised Old Testament Ethic. There many of the problems for whose solution we look in vain in the New Testament itself are fully treated and God's will on them adequately expressed. The books of the Law, the historical books, above all the teachings of the prophets abound in ethical teaching on intricate questions of the social life. We know from the Sermon on the Mount how to adjust these to the atmosphere of Christ. There is room for a "but I say unto you" in reference to many of them. But read in the light of the Spirit of Christ, they become unmistakable landmarks on the right way of the Gospel

Ethic on many matters not directly dealt with in the New Testament. Besides, it will not do to forget that Christ's fundamental conception of mankind is a constituted kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven. He had social relations clearly in His range of view. And when the character of that Kingdom is properly understood, as certainly having a locus in the world though neither confined to one spot nor yet of the world, it is wilful blindness to stamp the Gospel Ethic as having regard to the individual at the expense of the social side of things.

3. Two other sets of objections to the sufficiency of the Gospel Ethic have been stated by Mr. H. W. Garrod, a Fellow of Mertoun College, Oxford, in a book, published not long ago, called the "Religion of All Good Men". After perusal one is tempted to think a fitter title would be, "What Passes for Religion with Many Bad Men". The one set of his objections is that the Gospel Ethic ignores the Teutonic virtues. In a chapter called "Christian, Greek, or Goth", he contends that neither Christian nor Greek has done justice to the virtues of chivalry and honor. These had come to their own among the Teutonic nations before they came in contact with Christianity or Hellenism. So when these peoples became Christian, they carried these virtues with them, and in spite of the Christian glorification of humility and meekness, they clung to these manly graces as possessions too good to be surrendered even for all the boons which Christianity could bestow. But what a purblind view of things this involves! What Mr. Garrod really gives us here is the snarl of the animal nature in us when Christianity refuses to bow the knee in adoration of bullying self-assertion and brute force. True chivalry, true honor, true patriotism have only come to their own, when the spirit of Christianity has been poured upon them. What are we to think of chivalry and honor as understood and applauded by this author, when he can say this of them? "Chivalry and honor are two great principles which it is to the interest of mankind to keep always alive at whatever cost." And then he tells us how great is the price he would be willing to pay. "Though I should see those two principles, employing as their

instruments lust and bloodshed, destroy a whole nation of men, I could none the less say, 'let us go forward; that is the price we must expect to pay for these two precious things' ". Is this sense or raving lunacy? How can true chivalry and honor ever use lust or bloodshed as instruments? When men give way to lust and bloodshed, chivalry and honor are left behind. Or, rather, this is not progress; this is degeneracy. They are left behind, but those who have left them have turned their back upon the light and are in full march back to the night of savagery.

Of course, it is not difficult to understand why talk of this sort should appear in the present day. It is the resource of a blatant militarism that finds it difficult to reconcile itself with the precepts of Christianity. It is the outburst of the natural man showing that the offence of the cross is not ceased. But Christianity is not seriously affected by such an attack. And perhaps the most apposite exposure of this sort of thing was provided in anticipation by Coleridge long ago in his criticism of the Spanish Don Juan play. Of one scene in it he says: "It is susceptible of a sound moral; of a moral that has more than common claims on the notice of a far too numerous class, who are ready to receive the qualities of gentlemanly courage and scrupulous honor (in all the recognized laws of honor) as the substitutes of virtue instead of its ornaments. This indeed is the moral value of the play at large, and that which places it at a world's distance from the spirit of modern jacobinism. The latter introduces to us clumsy copies of these showy instrumental qualities in order to reconcile us to vice and want of principle; while the 'Atheista Fulminato' (the old Spanish Don Juan play) presents an exquisite portraiture of the same qualities, in all their gloss and glow, but presents them for the sole purpose of displaying their hollowness, and in order to put us on our guard by demonstrating their utter indifference to vice and virtue, whenever these and the like accomplishments are contemplated for themselves alone." The same may be said of Mr. Garrod's plea for the Teutonic virtues as conceived by him. It is suspiciously like an excuse for loose living, so long as it

is combined with hauteur and daring. I freely admit that the Gospel Ethic would require considerable readjustment to comport with that. But if such adjustments were made, it would less than ever furnish the principle of the moral life.

4. Mr. Garrod's other objection is that the Gospel Ethic does need modification in view of the fact that modern criticism of the New Testament has made it plain that Jesus formulated His theory of life under the conviction that the end of the world was immediately to ensue. This belief he regards as determining His teaching as to the kind of principles and lines on which men should regulate their lives, principles which he maintains, though quite appropriate under such conditions, are not equally binding or equally appropriate when there is a wider horizon and a more distant vista.

Now there are three distinct assumptions here, none of which is necessarily to be granted. There is the assumption that our Lord was mistaken as to what was to be the interval between His lifetime and the end of the world. I for one am not prepared to admit that this is a necessary result of the acceptance of the most extreme views on the literary criticism of the Gospels, and still less that these views are themselves well established or entitled to recognition. I do not stop to argue the question on the literary side. It would take us too far afield and there is the less need to do so, because a second assumption implied here, namely that the supposed mistaken outlook into the future attributed to our Lord necessarily involves a modification of His ethical teaching, is itself repudiated by some of the most advanced members of the critical school referred to. Here is what Professor Schmiedel says in his introduction to Neumann's "Jesus": "There is one point in which Dr. Neumann has not associated himself with the particular form of eschatological thought which is so largely represented in Germany at the present day. Proceeding on the indubitably correct observation that Jesus regarded the end of the world as quite near, it is often taken for granted that this thought was a regulative one in all His utterances, and gave them a onesided character which made them no longer capable



of practical application to our present, with its outlook upon an illimitable future of fruitful activities for the human race. Dr. Neumann has perceived—rightly as it seems to us—that this is true only in a limited degree, and that Jesus would have given to most of His religious and moral teachings substantially the form in which they now run in the Gospels even had He never had any thought of the end of the world. This is the side of the activity of Jesus, accordingly, in which He discerns with greatest clearness His enduring importance for every age.” That paragraph, from such a source, seems a sufficient answer to this second assumption.

But there is a third assumption lurking in the background and that is that the elimination of the thought of an impending future and its bearing on our conduct here, and the concentration of our attention on the present, will modify substantially the principles by which we order our life. Probably this is true, and for the individual the substitution of a long vista of unfolding ages for the speedy coming of the day of the Lord is practically the concentration of his attention on the present to the neglect of the future. And what is the moral effect of that? It is dwarfing, crippling, the very reverse of what we are asked to suppose. It is a reversion to the earth-limited view of life that is so frequent in the Old Testament, the chief offset and counteractive to which was the prospect of a future of earthly glory for Israel as chief at last among the nations. That, however, did comparatively little for the individual, whose interests seem so often as though they were bounded by the grave. It is noteworthy that our Saviour says comparatively little about death or the grave, and the moral effect they may produce. Instead you have His eschatology, and near or far it is chiefly an insistence on the certainty and the impendingness for the individual of the coming of the kingdom. But the kingdom is no earthly world monarchy but a great spiritual inheritance to which he must bend all his endeavors to make good his claim by living as a member of it now. Christ brings the spell of the future into the present, and while parables like the leaven and the tares show that He

was under no mistake as to the gradualness of the progress of things He has certainly succeeded in pressing the spur of urgency into the flagging sides of human endeavor. That is the true significance of our Lord's attitude towards the future, and its real bearing on the character of the Gospel Ethic.

So much for the criticisms which I mentioned at the outset. Let me now state briefly four positive considerations that point towards the sufficiency of the Gospel Ethic.

The first of these is the very assertion for which its sufficiency was challenged. It recognizes the intimate, indissoluble connection of morality and religion. No theory of humanity that deliberately ignores any of the spontaneous instincts of human nature or that tries elaborately to explain them away will be permanent. And just as little will any theory that tries to keep these apart in watertight compartments. From many of the most diverse type there is concurrence on this point. Stopford Brook, for instance, criticising those who are censorious in their judgment of the failures of others, exclaims sympathetically, "There is no morality without love, and none which is not founded on the forgiveness of sins." But when he has said that, he has passed beyond the narrower limits of morality into a wider sphere. Richard Le Gallienne, a litterateur, in his "Religion of a Literary Man", which is very much an exposition in tasteful language and under a play of imagination of the religion of the man in the street, says quite firmly, "Moral teaching without spiritual significance is of little force." And Professor William James in his own breezy way says this: "In a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal stimulating power. Life, to be sure, is even in such a world a genuinely ethical symphony; but it is played in the compass of a couple of poor octaves, and the infinite scale of values fails to open up. Many of us indeed—like Sir James Stephen in those eloquent 'Essays of a Barrister',—would openly laugh at the very idea of the strenuous mood being awakened in us by those claims of remote posterity which constitute the last appeal of the religion of humanity. We do not love these men of the

future keenly enough, and we love them perhaps the less the more we hear of their evolutionized perfection, their high average longevity and education. . . . relative immunity from. . . . zymotic disease, etc. This is all too finite, we say; we see too well the vacuum beyond. It lacks the note of infinitude and mystery, and may be dealt with in the 'Don't care' mood. No need of agonizing ourselves or making others agonize for these good creatures at present. When, however, we believe that a God is there, and that He is one of the claimants, the infinite perspective opens out. The scale of the symphony is incalculably prolonged. The more imperative ideals now begin to speak with an altogether new objectivity and significance, and to utter the penetrating, shattering, tragically challenging note of appeal. They ring out like the call of Victor Hugo's mountain eagle, "*qui parle precipice, et que le gouffre entend*", and the strenuous mood awakens at the sound. . . . cruelty to the lesser claims so far from being a deterrent element, does but add to the stern joy with which it leaps to answer to the greater. All through history in the periodical conflicts of Puritanism with the 'don't care' temper, we see the antagonism of the strenuous and genial moods and the contrast between the ethics of infinite and mysterious obligation from on high and those of prudence and a satisfaction of merely finite need." It is true that in the present day, there is an apparent strenuousness about the advocates of the latter which seems to contradict the view expressed in the quotation towards its close. But the strenuousness is more apparent than real, and save in a few enthusiasts is more in word than in deed. For the rest, Professor James rings true. The higher the religion, the stronger the moral life.

A second consideration is that the very idealism of the Gospel Ethic is a plea for its sufficiency. There is a tendency to resolve the essence of Christianity into the Sermon on the Mount, label it "perfection", and then put it on the shelf of the utopian. A late interesting series of papers in the "British Weekly" from Professors Dods and Denney and Dr. Moffatt supply a fair answer to that mode of treatment. But the truth

is that the very excellence of the Gospel Ethic is that it is not embodied in cut and dried maxims and laws of conduct, but presented in parable and paradox, and in living practice by Christ among men. Christ Himself is the commentary on, and illustration of, His Ethic, showing that the ideal is, not the desirable but impossible, but the supremely desirable and possible to him that believeth.

Then, again, the sufficiency of the Gospel Ethic seems established in the fact that it has discovered an adequate unifying principle namely, Love. Under the guidance of Christ and His apostles men have learned to say, "Love worketh no ill to his neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." But Christianity has done more than find the principle. It has interpreted it. Love was in the world, in the hearts of men, before its far-reaching power was laid bare by Christ. But what love really was had been woefully obscured by many a meretricious counterfeit, and its power prostituted and despised. Christianity has given us a corrective the great exhibition of the Fatherly love of God in Jesus Christ. It has led men to the gracious ways of God, and has said, "This is Love." God is Love. Love in its patience, perseverance, and potency is seen in its full grandeur. This love in practice is seen to be the power which binds society together, and is at the same time the great dissolvent which can remove the jealousies, divisions, rivalries, and antagonisms that hold peoples asunder. Once the significance of this unifying principle is understood and accorded free play, it seems beside the mark to quibble as to whether Christian Ethic has emphasised the individual at the expense of the social. This is a principle which is essentially social in its aims, knows no limitation to its range, and it is simply the task of Christian intelligence to discover how it should apply as between groups of men as well as between man and man.

But Christianity has done more than find the principle that brings all morality to a bearing. The Gospel Ethic has found a moral dynamic, a motive power, strong enough to set this principle in operation. And that is the crowning claim which

it has to be regarded as sufficient. The late Principal Shairp rendered a permanent service to Christian Ethics when he brought to the front as its superlative excellence this, that it supplies a moral motive power. That is the most original, the unique thing in the Gospel Ethic. Other systems were aiming at the idea of love, or something like it, as the fundamental relationship that should subsist between man and man. But where all came short was in their inability to secure that men should not be content to know, but that they should pass from knowing to doing. It was very easy to say, love, but how impart its spirit, how engender it? Christ did that by His cross and His resurrection, and the last word in praise of Christian Ethics is that this is true of it, "the love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if one died for all then were all dead, and that He died for all that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him who died for them and rose again." And it explains in what way they are to live unto Him: "In as much as ye do it unto one of the least of these, ye do it unto me."