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The Supernatural Factor

BY FRANCIS L. PATTON, D. D.

I THOROUGHLY understand that in asking men to read their Bible devoutly, and become familiar with its contents, they are not expected to have a full-grown and full-blown theory of plenary inspiration. I quite readily understand that it would be a mistake to deposit the safety of the Christian religion upon a theory or any theory of inspiration. It is safe without the inspiration; of course it is just that much safer with it. I understand that. When we go nowadays and make the passage to Europe, we are particular about having the ship we sail in one of those built with several compartments, yet I don't think that we would like to have the carpenter make a hole in the side of the ship for the purpose of illustrating how the bulkheads work. Yet that is what a great many people are doing.

"It doesn't make any difference," they say, "what your theory is; you have got this left." So we have. Meanwhile we want all the margin we can have. So men say to us: "We will go back to Christ," and there is a great deal with which I am in the fullest sympathy with regard to the idea of enforcing as the lesson of today the teachings of Jesus. But let me ask you this question: Is it true that the value, that the authoritative value of what Jesus says does not depend upon the question who Jesus was? I think it does. And when you have degraded Jesus to the place of a mere human being, however exalted, you have robbed what He says of any exceptional authority. Men tell me today that the Christianity of the nineteenth century, and more particularly the Christianity of the twentieth century, must be specifically ethical. I have no objection to that. The Christianity of the first century was ethical, and the Christianity of all the nineteenth centuries has been ethical. I venture the assertion that the first epistle of Paul to the Corinthians has done more for the moralization of society than all the ethical treatises of all the pagan writers put together; it has always been ethical. But responsible for what I say and speaking advisedly, I say that Christianity must be more ethical, or it will not be even ethical.

There are but two positions. We are at the point where the roads fork. It is not a question of more creed or less creed; it is not a question of revising this or revising that. Let us not be deceived by raising a false issue. The sharp antithesis is before us, Christianity is either a piece of information supernaturally given with respect to a way of salvation, or else it is simply a phase of a great cosmic process, explicable in terms of a mere naturalistic evolution. That is your issue. If you take the latter view, then there is nothing supernatural—no virgin birth, no resurrection, no atonement, no sin, no need of atonement, no hope for the future—nothing distinctly in your Christianity worth keeping. If you take the former view, then the evangelical Christianity of Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, stands in all its power, and we may say today with as much assurance as the apostle said it: "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation."

Men think that when they have given up the supernatural in the Christian religion they still have a basis for honest trade and for a pure home. The societies of ethical culture have already constituted themselves the executors of

this moribund religion as they suppose it to be, and are already considering the question as to how they shall distribute among themselves the estate. I tell them that when under the influence of a false philosophy that denies the supernatural, they give up Christianity, they can't hold their morality, that the earthquake that pulls down the steeple of the church will not leave one stone upon another of the hall of ethical culture. You think that you have your Ten Commandments whether you have your Christianity or not, and that the old record "Thou shalt not steal," "Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not commit adultery," is still in force. By whose authority in force? By whom? By the authority of the philosophy that speaks to us today, and that tells us in the terms of its leading representatives that the only reason why he should not lie and steal and commit adultery and do other forbidden things is, that if we did it and others followed our example, it would not be more than two or three millions of years before society would go to pieces. Is that sanctioned? Is that going to influence any man to resist the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eye and the pride of life? Human nature being what it is and as you know it to be, you need all the restraining motive of law and sanction and intuitional morality and supernatural religion and law of God and, "Thus saith Jehovah," to keep men back from sin and to hold them straight.

I am a little tired of hearing men tell us that a crisis in religion is coming. I heard a philosopher say the other day that philosophers were not doing very much, and that the theologians were doing less; that there was a great need of the philosophers doing some constructive work in order that the theologians might go on. He said that the philosophers have struck work, and therefore the theologians can't build, and that we are waiting for some great architectural genius to put the two and two together and bring order out of chaos, in order that we may rehabilitate ourselves. I tell you that crisis is here. I tell you that dislocation of philosophy and religion is already come. You may try to put your philosophy in one pocket and your religion in the other and think that, since they are separate, they will not interfere. But that will not work. You may try as philosophers of the lux mundi school are trying, to accept all the results of the higher criticism, and yet at the same time hold on to the traditional doctrine of an unbroken historical testimony. And that will not work. You may try as the Ritschians are trying to let philosophy go and build simply on sympathy and mysticism. And that will not work.

You may think that religion is a sort of illogical thing and you can't reduce it to logic, but that is exactly what Tertullian said so long ago,—"Credo quia impossibile est." You have to bring your theory of the universe and your theory of religion together, and this is the work of this age, this great synthesis of literary criticism and history and philosophy; and it is because we believe that Christianity came down from heaven, from God, God's blessed gift to man for man's salvation, that we are optimistic to the last degree. I believe that sooner or later, if it come only through the simple doctrine of the soul's immortality and our inherent belief in it, that men will assert their birthright, claim their kinship with God, if in their hearts' depths their unreadiness to see Him, and meet with Him, cries out from those depths for some way of being justified with Him, and rests not until it is found in the gospel way. There are but two alternatives. It's back, back to atoning blood, or its on to despair.

Learned and Lived.

Religion may be learned on Sunday, but it is lived in the week-day's work. The torch of religion may be lit in the church, but it does its burning in the shop and on the street. Religion seeks its life in prayer, but it lives its life in deeds. It is planted in the closet, but it does its growth out in the world. It plumes itself for flight in songs of praise, but its actual flights are in the works of love.

It resolves and meditates on faithfulness, and it reads its Christian lesson in the Book of Truth; but "faithful is as faithful does." It puts its armor on in all combats for the right, the noble, and the good in all the activities of practical existence and its battle-ground is the whole broad field of life.—John Dougherty.

My Mother's Prayers.

Once, says a writer, I suddenly opened the door of my mother's room and saw her on her knees beside her chair, and heard her speak my name in prayer. I quickly and quietly withdrew with a feeling of awe and reverence in my heart. Soon I went away from home to school, then to college, then into life's sterner duties. But I never forgot that one glimpse of my mother at prayer, nor the one word—my own name—which I heard her utter. "Well did I know that what I had seen that day was but a glimpse of what was going on every day in that sacred closet of prayer, and the consciousness strengthened me a thousand times in duty, in danger, and in struggle. When death came at last and sealed those lips, the sorest sense of loss I felt was the knowledge that no more would my mother be praying for me.

The Lack of the Age.

The great lack of this age is spiritual vision. It is the absence of ideals. It is the loss of reverence. And yet it is better to be a peasant and reverence a king than to be a king and reverence nothing! All that has been won out of the evolution of the race from the slime of the ocean is the power to look up into the sky and down into the depths and around on human life with reverence! When that is lost, all is lost. This is the great gift of the ages—one to another. It is the lighted torch, that (like the messenger of antiquity) each generation, spent with effort, has handed to the next. Will you extinguish it? Shall it be darkened in your hands? When you pass it to the boys and girls who come after you will you give them a charred coal for a burning flame?—Rev. Frederic Goss, in the Evangelist.

Who Holds the Reins?

It is related that Mr. Henry Drummond was on one occasion asked to use his influence with a man who had become addicted to the use of strong drink. The habit had girded a firm hold. Mr. Drummond began the interview by asking him:

"Suppose your horses ran away, and you lost control of them, and they turned a steep hill, what would you do?"

The man replied that he could do nothing in such a case.

"But, suppose," added Mr. Drummond, "some one sat by your side who was stronger than you, what would you do?"

The man at once said: "I would give him the reins."

This gave Mr. Drummond the opportunity he sought. He was quick to seize it. He pointed out to the man the peril in which his life stood because appetite and passion had gained the mastery, and, reminding him of the nearness and helpful power of Christ, urged him to put the reins in Christ's hand.

There is no surer way in which a man who is being borne away to destruction by ungoverned passion can recover the mastery of himself than by entrusting the rulership of his life to Christ. Give Christ the reins.

The function of true religion is to develop human capacity; to lead men to realize what their privileges are and to embrace them; to make them strong and wise and happy. The idea of religion as a disagreeable medicine for a disease that can not be cured without their taking it would everywhere be superseded by the thought of religion as a call to a better, truer and happier life.