

Fact and Idea

THE ENIGMA OF JESUS

By Professor Gilbert Murray

GIBBON in a celebrated passage comments on the "supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophic world to the numerous and surprising miracles which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses." For example: "Under the reign of Tiberius the whole earth, or at least a celebrated province of the Roman empire, was involved in a preternatural darkness of three hours." But the miraculous event passed entirely without notice. "It happened during the lifetime of Seneca and the Elder Pliny, who must have experienced the immediate effects or received the earliest intelligence of the prodigy. Each of these philosophers, in a laborious work, has recorded all the great phenomena of Nature, earthquakes, meteors, comets, and eclipses, which his indefatigable curiosity could collect. Both the one and the other have omitted to mention" this, the most extraordinary of all.

What Gibbon pointed out with regard to the miracles is hardly less true of the whole story of the New Testament. There is practically no knowledge of it outside the four esoteric books of the Christians themselves. Josephus, a learned and prolix Jew, writing the history of Judaea during the very years in which the New Testament story is placed, says not a word about it. The Christians later on were troubled at this and interpolated his text.

According to Dr. Burkitt, Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, the only information about the life and career of Jesus of Nazareth that has come down to us independently of Christian tradition is one contemptuous sentence in Tacitus (Annals XV., 44): "... those who, hated for their infamy, were vulgarly called Christiani. The originator of the name, one Chrestus, had been executed in the reign of Tiberius by order of the administrator Pontius Pilate." One might possibly add a phrase from Suetonius's Life of Claudius: "As the Jews, at the instigation of Chrestus, were continually raising riots, he drove them out of Rome." "Chrestus," "good," was a common name, especially for slaves; it seems to have been confused with "Christus," "Anointed," which was the Greek translation of "Messiah."

And how much definite historical information is there in the Gospels themselves? Very little indeed. Dr. Burkitt in his book on the Earliest Sources for the Life of Christ explains how the early Christians were indifferent to history, and took no pains to keep records of the past. Their minds were all set at rest on the immediate future which was to bring the end of the world. The Gospels contain many miracles, many beautiful sayings, a number of alleged fulfillments of prophecies in the Old Testament, a great symbolic story, beyond that what?

Let Leisy answer: "There is no actual consistency in the Gospel story save the crucifixion of Jesus, condemned by Pontius Pilate as a Messianic agitator." He can accept literally "not a single incident save that Jesus had been crucified under Pontius Pilate." And even as to this: "The Gospels do not relate the death of Jesus. They relate the myth of salvation realised by his death. The Christian myth is without doubt related to other salvation myths. It is by no chance that the resurrection on the third day coincides with the ritual of Adonis." The magnificent imaginative structure reared by St. Paul in his epistles is built on the crucified and re-risen Christ, not on Jesus as he was in the flesh; it rests on the Salvation Myth, not on any historical record. It sets forth to use the expression of a Greek philosopher defining the word Myth, "that which happened never but always is."

It is the old problem of the kernel and the husk; but so much of what was once believed to be ker-

nel has now proved to be husk, that it is difficult to say what kernel is left. The old salvation myth required that the Son of God, the Anointed One, should be shamefully slain by men, thereby to atone for the sin of the world and to raise mankind with him into glory. The myth, as we see it in certain Hellenistic writers before St. Paul, or independent of him, is already there, ready to burst into a great flame in men's hearts and meet the needs of a bewildered and suffering population; it needs only a match to set it alight. It so happened that a Jewish agitator called Chrestus was crucified, and his name taken as being "Christus," "The Anointed One," crucified by Pontius Pilate; what more was wanted to give the myth reality and to set all aflame?

Dr. Couchoud narrates his conversation with a Buddhist priest in a monastery at Kyoto, comparing the two splendid religions that have converted so many millions of men, produced their lines of saints, and sages and brought comfort to unnumbered mourners. "What is Buddha?" A title, a myth, an idea, and savants discuss whether or no that historical prince who according to the legend became Buddha ever really existed. "What is Christ?" It is the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Saviour, another title or myth or idea; and Dr. Couchoud wonders whether there was any historical person at all who gave rise to the myth; or whether the myth, as we find it for instance in the pre-Christian Gnostics, in early Babylonian hymns, and to some extent in the Hebrew prophets, grew and spread by its own vitality; or whether again it was suddenly given a semblance of flesh and blood by some accidental coincidence. Every myth, after all, is grounded in experience and constantly confirmed by experience, or else it dies.

I doubt if the historical question is soluble. It is a case of Not Proven. But the thing that matters is not an historical fact, it is an idea. The Christian faith, the Christian life, the spirit that finds the secret of the world to be best explained by saying that the Son of God gave himself to suffer and die for man's sins and thereby brings man's salvation is an idea far older than the Christian era, and will last quite independently of any result which historical research may establish about the man Jesus of Nazareth. Throughout a vast region of human life it is not the thing which happened but the thing which is believed that matters; and not even the mere fact or fiction that is believed, but the psychological quality of the belief itself.

Belief is a great force in the world. And this particular belief has shown itself to be a living faith, a passion, an inspiration that makes saints and heroes and persecutors and maniacs, an optical glass that transforms the physical universe. And it matters not at all, except as a point of interest to historical students, whether the faith accords with history or no. In some regions of life a belief comes up against facts and is confirmed or disproved by those facts; "things are what they are, and their results will be what they will be."

But in the field of religion beliefs can seldom be put to any effective test, and beliefs about very remote past history never can. The belief lives or dies by its own power of survival or attraction, and by the credulous or incredulous, barbarous or rational, temper of the society in which its seed is sown. It is never killed by meeting a fact; for there are no facts. The belief that it rained in London on Good Friday, 1924, can be proved or disproved; but the belief that on the first Good Friday there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour and the veil of the temple was rent in twain, can never be proved or disproved. It will live or cease to live for quite other reasons.

Dr. Couchoud's little book touches only the fringe of the subject, but it is written with understanding and sympathy, and deserves to be widely read.

Damning the Labor Leaders

THERE is nothing so common amongst certain comrades as that popular amusement of denunciation. It is so darned easy to pick out an outstanding figure in a union and slam him good and plenty if he is of a reactionary trend.

But is it not a case of not seeing the forest, on account of the trees?

To take an instance: no-one thinks of saying that England or the States are benighted places because they have rulers like Coolidge, Dawes, Baldwin or Churchill. Anyone knows that their policies are approved of by the masses of the people. That the people wish for and vote for what they get, no matter how that particular and peculiar state of mind is brought about.

But, try and apply the same reasoning to the situation in the unions, and how many are there who will look squarely at facts and see that the same situation exists there as in national affairs? The personality and policy of a Gompers or Green may be cursed from New York to Frisco, but what earthly use is it? The policies of labor leaders are a reflection of the economic situation of the crafts that elect them. When Socialists look into the reasons for the election, it is easy to see that the mass of voters are self satisfied and quite indifferent as to the need of social changes of a revolutionary nature, even though they may vote a labor party ticket! So, all that can be done on that field is continue educational efforts amongst the mass. There is nought else to do.

Humans feel their way through life, they do not think it out. They are animals, anarenistic too, absorbed in their individual pleasures or, when in need, their necessities. Their viewpoint is decidedly limited. When they are hungry and out of work what do they want to hear about from speakers who come lecturing, advising, sympathizing, etc.?

How to attain Socialism?

Not so you'd notice it!

The reasons for unemployment? Nix.—They want to know where to get the eats or jobs!

So it can be seen that logic is not the factor in bringing about a revolution, unless it be the logic of events; dire necessity will be the compelling factor in social changes. Well, apply the same reasoning to the union question!

What unions are most successful? The ones with special skill, able to command more wages than the average workers. Those are the unions that are strongest and the bulwark of the union movement. A craft union is really an attempt at monopoly. It sells to the capitalists its commodities of labor power for various special occupations at the highest rate obtainable, which is greater than an individual packet of labor power could acquire. Their business agents are their salesmen, seeking orders under good conditions for their union brand. The Federation of Labor, is analogous to the M. and M. Association or Chamber of Commerce. A combine for joint consideration of their mutual interests.

It is true enough that labor produces far more than it receives as its price for the use of its power, but how many members of a union know that, or care, as long as their standard of living is comfortable? Their leaders reflect their views. They are in business, living in a whirl of competition, muddle

(Continued on page 8)

ECONOMIC CAUSES OF WAR

By PETER T. LEOKIE

NOW READY

Preface by the author.

132 PAGES.

Per Copy, 25 Cents.

Ten copies up, 20 cents each.

Post Paid.

* The Enigma of Jesus. By Dr. P. L. Couchoud, with Introduction by Sir J. G. Frazer. Translated by Mrs. George Whale. (Watts and Co. 3s. 6d.).