

THE PART OF RELIGION IN HUMAN EVOLUTION.

A MEMOIR was contributed three or four years ago by Lady Welby to the Anthropological Institute, entitled "An Apparent Paradox in Mental Evolution." Her main question was plain and definite in substance, and to this effect. In barbaric times all men were superstitious; now, considering the importance of rational action to success in life, how was it that the least superstitious tribes did not prevail over the others, with the result of eliminating a natural bent towards superstition from the minds of men, by the long continued survival of the fittest? This is, as I then thought, and still think to be, a very pertinent question requiring for its answer a fuller discussion from historical data than, so far as I know, it has yet received. My own provisional ideas were that, notwithstanding the obvious disadvantages in practical life of a superstitious tendency, the advantages that accompanied it in barbaric times may have been greater, and in this way. Many influences that bind barbarians are illusions, such as totems, tutelar deities, and much else, but, for all that, they supply sufficient cohesive force to unite them into organized bodies. Whenever a struggle arose between a compact tribe and an equal number of separate individuals, the former would win, however their compactness may have grown into existence. Or again, between two barbaric nations, the one that was the more superstitious of the two would generally be the more united, and therefore the more powerful. Such I imagine to be the explanation of Lady Welby's paradox, but, as already said, it deserves historical investigation before it can be answered with confidence.

A paradox of a somewhat similar kind is the subject of Mr. Kidd's recent work on *Social Evolution*. He has the high distinction of having compelled many readers to give serious consideration to his arguments by submitting them with a remarkable earnestness, wealth of apposite phrases, and happy turns of expression. Let the ultimate verdict be what it may on the net value of his conclusions, his readers will have had the feeling which is rare to most of us, of being forced to travel for awhile out of their habitual lines of thought

and to follow new ones. This is no ordinary achievement, and deserves to be praised ungrudgingly.

The problem which presents itself to Mr. Kidd is this. Human evolution has been brought about solely by the blind action of natural selection, a strenuous struggle for existence taking place unceasingly; the feeble perishing, the strong surviving, and leaving their breed to form the next generation. On the other hand, this struggle is pitiless to the individual, and therefore repugnant to him. His reason protests against submission to such a state of things, saying, Why should we living men care to strive for the good of unborn descendants? Is not the well-being of our precious selves of the first importance to us? Let us be socialists, eliminate the holders of capital and divide the produce, live contentedly, and leave the future to take care of itself. Thus Mr. Kidd's paradox arises, that reason, which is so necessary an end of man's evolution, teaches him to withstand the salutary law of the survival of the fittest, and consequently tends to throw him backwards into degradation. The solution of the paradox Mr. Kidd considers to lie in the interposition of the altruistic sentiments, that is in the preference of the welfare of others to our own. As to the origin and extent of these, he seems to me much too vague, being apparently content to ascribe them wholly to the influence of the "Religious" spirit, using "Religioⁿ" in the following sense, which is an abbreviation of his own definition:— . . .

"Religion is a form of belief providing an *ultra-rational* sanction for conduct by which the interests of the individual are subordinated to those of the evolution of his race."

It is evident that we must be cautious in our phraseology if we pursue the discussion along his lines, because different persons attach different meanings to the words Religion, Reason, and Ultra-rational. Religion, according to Mr. Kidd's definition, is necessarily ultra-rational because it is not a rational act to concern ourselves with unselfish ends, but I for one demur to this distinction between what is rational and not. A large portion of the altruistic feelings are natural, and, therefore, in one sense, selfish. The love of a cat for her young kittens is altruistic in its main aspect, though, perhaps, selfish in another; anyhow, it cannot be ascribed to the effects of a religion. It is, however, justly pointed out by Mr. Kidd that the meanings are very various in which authors of high repute use that word. He has collected fifteen definitions, of which only three concern us much; they will be distinguished as A, B, and C.

A is that of J. S. Mill: "The essence of Religion is the direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal object, recognized as rightly paramount over all selfish objects of desire." B is that of Kant: "Religion consists in our recognizing all

our duties as Divine commands." C is that of Gruppe, namely: "A belief in a State or a Being which, properly speaking, lies outside the sphere of human striving and attainment, but which can be brought into this sphere in a particular way, namely, by sacrifices, ceremonies, prayer, penances, and self-denial."

It will be seen that A is more generalized than B, and B than C. Now, Mr. Kidd would certainly refuse to accept A as sufficient, and would insist on the conditions contained in B or C. The paradox that his book is written to explain depends on the supposition that those conditions are necessary. For my part, I think otherwise, and am content with A; so, in my view, there is no paradox at all.

Even if the case were, as Mr. Kidd's optimistic views would have it, that under the influence of a religious sentiment men are becoming increasingly sensitive to the well-being of their fellows, sacrificing privileges that they have the power to maintain, to a prevalent sentiment of doing equal kindness and giving equal opportunities to all, I cannot see how it could conduce to a successful form of human evolution. By his own theory, the further opening of the careers would make the struggle for place more strenuous than it is even now, which would, as he asserts, further the evolution of man. On other aspects of the case he is silent. My view is very different, believing that over-severe competition degrades. The fir trees near the upper limit of vegetation, that are only just able to hold their own against the inclemency of the weather, are stunted specimens of their race. The over-worked man or woman is feeble and neurotic. Then again, as to the terrible question of over-population, the social condition that Mr. Kidd thinks so favourable to humanity would not check it in the least, but would seriously intensify it.

According to my own views of the main question, any guiding idea that takes passionate possession of the mind of a person or of a people, is an adequate adversary to purely selfish considerations, without being a "religion" in the B or C senses at all. Many of the ordinary emotions which influence conduct admit of being excited to so high a pitch that the merely self-regarding feelings do not attempt to withstand them, but yield themselves unresistingly to be sacrificed to the furtherance of a cause. That the emotions can be so excited, whether in a party or in a nation, easily and often irrationally, is one of the common teachings of history. No ultra-rational sentiment in Mr. Kidd's sense is necessary to this end. Take for example the passionate patriotism among that large part of the French nation, who, however easily carried away by an idea, cannot be called religious in the sense B or C. It supported them through the German War, and it supported the Commune. Glory and victory and the ideas that inspired the song of the Marseillaise were those that animated the earlier armies

of the first French Republic, and were as a religion to them. Loyalty to a chief as that of the Italian revolutionists to Garibaldi, or of the French to the first Napoleon, or of Jacobites in Scotland to the Stuarts, have all of them been sufficiently passionate to subordinate the merely selfish feelings. Of course, a religious enthusiasm in the B and C senses may give a vast help to all this, but I cannot think it indispensable. The ambitions, loves, jealousies, and hates of nations, families, and persons, seem fully strong enough to force men who are under their influence, to disregard what is commonly understood by the phrase of selfish desires.

It seems then, from abundant experience, that we are perfectly justified in interchanging parts of the definitions of Mill and Kidd, and then, by inverting their order, to say as follows:—

“The direction of the emotions and desires towards the furtherance of human evolution, recognized as rightly paramount over all objects of selfish desire, justly merits the name of a religion.”

It is under a conviction of the truth of this affirmation that the following remarks are made.

Mr. Kidd complains, and from his point of view the fact is deplorable, that many scientific writers should greatly occupy themselves in destroying the fabric of religions in the B and C senses, while they do not replace them by other fabrics of similar efficacy. It may fairly be answered that the destructive task is a necessary though painful preliminary, because until obstructions are thoroughly cleared away, and the view is quite open, the character and exigencies of the vacant space cannot be rightly understood, nor can a judgment be formed as to how far and in what way rebuilding is needful. It is also pardonable enough that the work of destruction should be over zealously indulged in by some who have long chafed under what they consider to be the irrationality of one or other of the many conflicting creeds.

All earnest inquirers recognize the awful mysteries that surround human life, but they are angered by theosophies that attempt to solve part of its problems by means of hypotheses that are improbable in themselves, while they introduce gratuitous complications. For instance, if we strip from Milton's fable and from the *dramatis personæ* of *Paradise Lost* all the glamour thrown over them by his superb diction, a grotesquely absurd framework remains behind. His high undertaking to justify the ways of God to man becomes ludicrously inadequate. The same spirit under another guise that moved our ancestors in the days of the Reformation to shatter the authority of Rome, is abroad again but is now directed against the dogmas of the time. The spirit is that of a determination to face and view the grand and terrible prob-

lem of life in the clear light of day, and not through artificial mediums that partly hide, partly colour, and partly refract it. It is not an easy matter to pass from theory to practice, the difficulty being great in taking wisely the earlier steps. It is comparatively simple to dig out tares; but very difficult not to destroy the wheat among which they grow. The social system of every nation, including its religion, whatever that may be, has adjusted itself into a position of stability which is dangerous to disturb. Deep sentiments and prejudices, habits and customs, all more or less entwined with the established religion of each nation, are elements of primary importance to its social fabric. It is true that vast changes become obvious in the social system of every progressive people, whenever its habits and customs at one period are compared with those of another long after, but, as a rule, the changes are piecemeal. Each change is primarily confined to a single part, the remainder adapting itself to the new condition with a comparatively small shift of the position of the centre. Common-sense teaches how much can be thus done with safety at any given time. Great and sudden changes in religion are hardly to be attempted except when the stability of the existing system is tottering and on the point of falling.

For the sake of better understanding the large part that a religion of the purely A kind might play in human evolution, let us suppose a nation whose established B or C religion, whatever it may be, has become discredited by the majority of its people, including most of those who were trusted as leaders of opinion. Further, let us suppose the nation to be suffering in a still more acute form than our own, from poverty, toil, and an unduly large contingent of the weakly, the inefficient, and the born-criminal classes, and that the existing social arrangements are acknowledged to be failures. Further, again, I will make the reasonable supposition that socialistic experiments on various scales and in various ways had been largely tried and confessedly found ineffective owing to the moral and intellectual incompetence of the average citizen. There would then be a widely-felt sense of despair; there would be ominous signs of approaching anarchy and of ruin impending over the nation, while a bitter cry would arise for light and leading. A state of things like this is by no means impossible in the near future, even here in England, and, therefore, it deserves some consideration as being something more than a merely academic question. In the imagined event, preachers of all sorts of nostrums would abound, mostly fanatics who could see only one side of a question, and on that account they would be all the more earnest in their opinions and persuasive to the multitude. I will endeavour to present in a clear light what one of these, a professed

agnostic, might say. It will be put in a very brief form, in order to bring out, as vividly as I can, one possible line of argument with which I have much sympathy, but to which I would by no means commit myself without first insisting on serious reservations. These have nothing to do with the present supposed case, and, if introduced now, would merely distract the argument. So I do not speak further about them. It must be clearly understood that my object is only to show how a religion, in the A sense, might grow up and effectively deal with serious evolutionary difficulties which existing religions, in the B or C sense, seem incapable of meeting. Of course, however, some totally new interpretations of the B and C sanctions might be put forward which should serve equally well, or some new religion of the B or C kind might arise.

The supposed agnostic and somewhat fanatic preacher might express himself as follows. The mystery is unfathomed as to whence the life of each man came, whether it pre-existed in any form or not. The mystery is equally great as to what will become of his life after the death of the body; whether it will be perpetuated in a detached form as some creeds say, whether it will be absorbed into an unlimited sea of existence, as other creeds assert, or whether it will cease entirely. As regards this life, there are also mysteries. Every act may or may not have been determined by previous conditions, but man has the sense of being free and responsible: he is accustomed to do and to be done by as if he were so, therefore we may provisionally believe that he is free and should act on that supposition. There is a further mystery as regards the cosmic conditions under which we live, for no assurance can as yet be obtained of any supernatural guidance, the facts alleged in evidence of its existence being more than counterbalanced by those that point the other way. We cannot, in consequence, tell with certainty whether human life is subject to an autocracy, or whether, at least for practical purposes, it exists as an isolated republic; but the latter appears at present to be the more probable, and should, therefore, guide our conduct. Each man's destiny during his life may then be viewed with propriety as depending entirely on his own physiological peculiarities and on his surroundings. He has, consequently, to conduct himself as a member of a free executive committee during his brief life, guiding his actions by whatever he can learn of the tendencies of the cosmos, in order to co-operate intelligently with what he cannot in the long-run resist.

The sense of responsibility that is imposed by this view would sober, brace, and strengthen the character, just as that of dependence on an autocratic power effeminates and enfeebles it. As was

said by J. S. Mill, and quoted by Kidd, but in both cases for a different purpose to that of its present application, "a people who look habitually to their Government to command and prompt them in all matters of self-concern, who expect everything to be done for them, except what can be made an affair of mere habit and routine, have their faculties only half developed; their education is defective in one of its most important branches."

On the foregoing basis our agnostic might say, Let us consider what is peculiarly profitable and proper for man to attempt. One of the most prominent conditions to which life has been hitherto subject, is the newly discovered law of the survival of the fittest, whose blind action results in the progressive production of more and more vigorous animals. Any action that causes the breed or nature of man to become more vigorous than it was in former generations is therefore accordant with the *process* of the cosmos, or, if we cling to teleological ideas, we should say with its *purpose*.

It has now become a serious necessity to better the breed of the human race. The average citizen is too base for the every day work of modern civilization. Civilized man has become possessed of vaster powers than in old times for good or ill, but has made no corresponding advance in wits and goodness to enable him to direct his conduct rightly. It would not require much to raise the natural qualities of the nation high enough to render some few Utopian schemes feasible that are necessary failures now. Conceive, for sake of argument, the nation to be divided in the imagination into three equal groups L, M, N, in order of their natural civic capacities. At present the production of the forthcoming generation is chiefly effected by L and M, the lowest and the middle; if it were hereafter effected by M and N, the middle and the highest, a distinct gain would be achieved in the lifetime of many of those who initiated the reform, for it is probable that the inefficient multitude of weaklings in brain, character, and physique would be sensibly diminished in thirty years.

Our agnostic preacher might go on to say that this terrible question of over-population and of the birth of children who will necessarily (in a statistical sense) grow into feeble and worse than useless citizens must be summarily stopped, cost what it may. The nation is starved and crowded out of the conditions needed for healthy life by the pressure of a huge contingent of born weaklings and criminals. We of the living generation are dispensers of the natural gifts of our successors, and we should rise to the level of our high opportunities.

The course of nature is exceedingly wasteful in every way. It is careless of germs, tens of thousands of pollen grains perishing of which none have had the chance of effecting fertilization, by

being transported to the proper spot at the proper moment, by the blind agency of an insect ferreting among the flowers for food. It is equally careless of the microbes whose part in the animal world is analogous to the pollen of flowers; they are produced in myriads, though only one is needed for fertilization. It is no exaggeration to say that the number of them which is produced each year by an average male of any of the larger animals, would suffice to fertilize a million of females, if every one of them were utilized. The course of nature is also indifferent and ruthless towards our own lives, but reason can teach us to effect with pity, intelligence, and speed many objects that nature would otherwise effect remorselessly, unintelligently, and tediously. By its action, suffering may be minimized and waste diminished. Wherever intelligence chooses to intervene, the struggle for existence ceases, that struggle being by no means so absolute a necessity in evolution as Mr. Kidd assumes it to be. It hardly affects monogamous pigeons, whose breeding is somewhat controlled; it does not at all affect our polygamous cattle, for who ever heard of foals being slaughtered because they were feeble, or of an overwhelming productiveness of horses which it was impossible to check, and which threatened to increase in excess of the means of subsistence? Horses are bred in the number and of the stamp required, within the limits of excellence that experience has taught to be possible. A general high level of the qualities that make a good horse has been attained without any aid from natural selection, artificial selection having superseded it.

Before, however, as even a fanatic must allow, any form of artificial selection could be applied to the human race, other than such moderate, yet not ineffective, reforms as might produce the results mentioned a little way back, much is needed. Accurate knowledge has to be obtained on numerous details connected with productiveness, of which we are now curiously ignorant and careless to study, while national customs would have to be profoundly modified. The fanatic might, however, fairly urge that in considering what is feasible, and what not, the three following canons ought to be freely accepted:—

“1. The customs of every nation are liable to change to an extent that is barely credible to those who do not bear history in mind; therefore the existing customs of any nation may be lightly regarded while discussing future possibilities.

“2. No custom can be considered seriously repugnant to human feelings that has ever prevailed extensively in a contented nation, whether barbarous or civilized.

“3. Any custom established by a powerful authority soon becomes looked upon as a duty, and, before long, as an axiom of conduct which is rarely questioned.”

Fortified by these three canons, an anthropologist who is necessarily familiar with the customs of many nations will find abun-

dant elbow-room for his wildest speculations. There is hardly any proposition, however monstrous it may seem to us now, that is thereby precluded from consideration.

Thus much for the arguments of the supposed agnostic and fanatic.

So much of my own opinion as I shall offer is purely general, and as follows. It is quite credible that a nation whose old religious notions and social practices, whatever they were, have avowedly failed; who have been aroused to the knowledge that man possesses vast and hitherto unused powers over the very nature of unborn generations, who have learnt to realize the dilatoriness, ruthlessness, and pain that accompany the evolution of man, when it is left as now to cosmic influences, and who have satisfied themselves that the present low state of their race might be materially improved by concerted national action, should seize with irresistible ardour upon the idea of utilizing their power.

That is to say, the nation might devote its best energies to the self-imposed duty of carrying out, in its manifold details, the following general programme:—(1) Of steadily raising the natural level of successive generations, morally, physically, and intellectually, by every reasonable means that could be suggested; (2) of keeping its numbers within appropriate limits; (3) of developing the health and vigour of the people. In short, to make every individual efficient, both through nature and by nurture.

A passionate aspiration to improve the heritable powers of man to their utmost, seems to have all the requirements needed for the furtherance of human evolution, and to suffice as the basis of a national religion, in the sense of that word as defined by J. S. Mill, for, though it be without any ultra-rational sanction, it would serve to "direct the emotions and desires of a nation towards an ideal object, recognized as rightly paramount over all selfish objects of desire."

FRANCIS GALTON.

A NOTE ON MR. GALTON'S VIEW.

THE Editor of *The National Review* has been good enough to ask me, as the author of *Social Evolution*, to reply to the foregoing article by Mr. Galton, on "The Part of Religion in Human Evolution." I am fully sensible of the honour done me by the request.

I would most willingly do so but for one reason: I feel that I have nothing to say in reply which I have not already said, and said as well as I am able, in that book. The argument developed therein can only be understood and dealt with as a whole, and I have not been able, so far, to see my way to amend it or modify it in any important particular. But if it is not out of place, I should much like to express the satisfaction with which I have read Mr. Galton's article. Although I hold it as firmly as an intellectual conviction can be held that the strict application of the principles of evolutionary science to society must eventually lead us to see that even the new religion proposed by Mr. Galton—noble and worthy though its aim—is a scientific impossibility, and that there can be no form of belief capable of exercising the functions of a religion in the development of society which does not provide ultra-rational sanctions for conduct, I nevertheless feel it to be a matter of some significance that Mr. Galton has been able to go so far with me as he has done. The work of the past generation in the department of social science has a distinctive character of its own. It has been, on the whole, work, epoch-making in its results; but it has been, as Mr. Galton justly recognizes, necessarily destructive. And it must apparently, for this reason, be also necessarily preliminary. It is the writer's conception of the work before the rising generation that it will be constructive, and it is in such belief that he has addressed himself to that generation in *Social Evolution*. It is not that we can hope to be wiser than the great leaders of thought who have made the middle decades of the nineteenth century for ever memorable in the history of the human mind. It is merely that we have come after those leaders, and, not having had to take part in the great struggle in which they have been engaged, shall probably be able to view the whole field and their own labours therein with a juster sense of proportion. Every generation has its own work to do, which it must do as best it can and in its own manner. Meanwhile, scarcely any greater satisfaction can come to a humble and more recent worker in the same field than to hear from one of the masters at whose feet he has learned that the efforts of the disciple have led him "to travel for awhile out of habitual lines of thought and to follow new ones."

Only in one particular do I think Mr. Galton has misunderstood me. He speaks of my conception of the rivalry of life becoming ever more effective as a cause of progress as if it involved the idea "over-severe competition" which tends to increase. He will not, I think, find anything in *Social Evolution* to justify this view. The conception of the rivalry of life developed in that book is that that rivalry has been ever becoming *more efficient* as a cause of progress. But this, in itself, involves the idea of its

becoming more and more moral, regulated, and humanized. It is in the over-severe, unregulated, and degrading competition (most erroneously known at present in the literature of economics as "free-competition") that we have now a great proportion of the population engaged. The significance of the next stage in our social development, in which the influence of the State will be gradually extended to departments of life now held to be quite outside the sphere of its interference, will consist simply in the fact that by the gradually-increasing regulation and control of the rivalry of life, this rivalry will be rendered more effective and efficient as a cause of progress than it could ever possibly become under existing conditions.

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