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HELLENISM AND CHRISTIANITY

HELLENISM AND CHRISTIANITY

BY

EDWYN BEVAN

HONORARY FELLOW OF NEW COLLEGE, OXFORD



LONDON: GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD.
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PREFACE

THE essays composing this book were written at different times for different occasions. Yet I venture to believe that, put together in a single volume, they will present a mental unity—a single body of interests, observations, and ideas, which is one individual's reaction to the spectacle of the universe. In the history of mankind, during these last few thousand years, in which mankind has begun to have what may be called in the more special sense a history, the two predominant factors appear to be, (1) the rise of rationalist culture, first in the ancient Greek world and then again in modern European civilization, and (2) the entrance of the Christian life into the world process. In the first essay I have tried to show the significance of rationalist culture in its relation to Eastern forms of civilization, and correct what I believe to be some common misapprehensions. Perhaps some explanation is required why this essay in describing the civilization of the West says nothing about Christianity. This is not because I think Christianity an unimportant element in the life of mankind; it is because the modern West seems to me still for a large part to require conversion to Christianity. Such genuine Christianity as has existed in the West has no doubt exerted an incalculable influence in different

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degrees over the whole field, but when men contrast our modern Western civilization with Eastern civilizations, when they lay stress upon our standards of political life, our intellectual emancipation, our science, our mastery over the forces of Nature, they are pointing rather to the Hellenic, rationalist, factor in our civilization than to the Christian. It is that which constitutes, if I may so express it, the "Westernness of the West." I once heard a living politician, speaking on a platform, claim for Christianity, amongst other things, credit for the invention of lyddite shells. That seems to me a confusion.

The two following essays deal with the ancient Hellenism. Bacchylides raises the problem why rationalist culture in its first Hellenic embodiment met with an arrest. In the Greek Anthology, of which the third essay treats, there is brought before us an image of the Greek mind in its later literary activities, and we are left listening to the ancient voice calling out of the perished centuries its ever-recurrent burden, "Let us eat and drink and follow our light loves, for to-morrow we die."

In the next two essays we look at the first entrance of the Christian life into this world which fears death, the distinctive Christian idea of the Redeemer. Then we pass to the time when the old paganism is on the point of extinction and the new world of medieval Christianity about to be born, to the great typical figure of Augustine on the threshold of the two ages. In the eighth and ninth essays some questions of moral value connected with the Christian view of life are discussed. If the essays hitherto have looked backwards along the human track through time and tried to discover the significance of

Preface

Christianity by glancing at some of the things that went before it, or that have accompanied it up to the present, the tenth and eleventh essays consider the question whither the whole process is tending, since our idea of the significance of any factor in the world movement must be determined as much by our forecast of what it is leading to as by our view of its antecedents. Since the essay on Human Progress was written two notable contributions have been made to the discussion of this question, Professor Bury's book on "The Idea of Progress" and the Romanes Lecture given in 1920 by the Dean of St. Paul's. My more discursive treatment of the subject in this essay, however, trenches so little upon theirs, that what I wrote some years ago may still contribute something of an individual character. The last two essays have to do with the relations between Christianity and the rationalist element in our culture and try to determine what the truth is with regard to the conflict supposed to exist between them and the position of Christianity to-day after four centuries of growing rationalism have shaken and sifted the thoughts of men.

The essay entitled "The Religion of Cheerfulness," the essay on "Human Progress," and that on "The Problem of Eschatology," are published now for the first time. "The First Contact of Christianity and Paganism" appeared in the *Quarterly Review*, the first and last essays in the *Nineteenth Century and After*, "Dirt" in the *Contemporary Review*, "The Gnostic Redeemer" in the *Hibbert Journal*, "Between Two Worlds" and "Reason and Dogma" in *The Quest*, "Bacchylides," "The Greek Anthology" and "The

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Prophet of Personality " in the Literary Supplement of *The Times*. Grateful acknowledgement is due to the editors and publishers of these several periodicals who have given permission for the essays enumerated to be republished as constituents of this book.

September, 1921.

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Hellenism and Christianity

I

THE EAST AND THE WEST

EVEN people who have given little thought to a Philosophy of History are attracted by those large generalizations that promise to bring some consistency and meaning into the strange multifarious drama unrolling itself upon this planet, since the creature known to naturalists as *Homo Sapiens* became a fact of the universe. There are few men but in a dim way and at odd moments are curious to understand something of the vaster forces and currents on which they find themselves carried, and all the men of their generation carried, into unknown gulfs of time. Behind the individual lives which flicker and vanish, there seem to be greater permanent entities engaged in secular conflict—races, types, ideas, through all the pains and passions of men working out their transcendent destinies. That is one of the reasons why such phrases as that which sets the East against the West, or Asia against Europe, have such enormous popular appeal. They have but to be uttered, and immediately the modern Englishman, involved in such problematic relations to-day with the

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peoples of Asia, feels himself the representative of an eternal principle. Yes, he sees it all. Behind him, and all other Englishmen, there is a great Something, an abiding character, something which he calls the "West"; behind all the congeries of alien peoples there is another great Something, the "East." These two have been enacting their mutual rôles all through the ages. The present situation between them is merely a moment in that unending interplay.

The instinct which makes us desire such large generalizations, key-words to bring light and order into the bewildering complexity of the world, is no doubt a sound one. That the desire satisfies itself in an extraordinarily haphazard and indiscriminating fashion is, unfortunately, also true. About "the East" and "the West," for instance, one must recognize that a dreadful amount of nonsense has been talked and written. You may make almost any statement you like about the "Oriental mind," and be sure of producing your effect.

To begin with, it has always appeared to me an unfortunate usage, which describes the contrast before us by the points of the compass, as East and West, or by continents, as Asia and Europe. It is true, of course, that the type of civilization which is denoted by the term "Western" or "European" is characteristic of Europe *to-day*, and that the Asiatic peoples, except in so far as they have assimilated elements from the West, agree in the negative quality of not possessing the peculiar marks of our modern civilization. That is undeniable. Why the terms appear to me unfortunate and misleading is that the contrast we see to-day is not merely between peoples of different blood and habitation, but between