
Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Problem of Christianity* by Josiah Royce

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REVIEWS AND ABSTRACTS OF LITERATURE

The Problem of Christianity: Lectures delivered at the Lowell Institute in Boston, and at Manchester College, Oxford. JOSIAH ROYCE. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1913. 2 Vols. Pp. xlvi + 425; 442.

Some years ago the present writer chanced to be in Cambridge at the time when Professor Royce was delivering his lectures on the "Essence of Christianity" which were subsequently published in the *Harvard Theological Review* under the title, "What is Vital in Christianity." The lectures were delivered upon the invitation of the Students' Christian Association which, if my memory is not at fault, suggested the topic. Chancing to meet Professor Royce at the time, I expressed my satisfaction that we were to have the benefit of his thought upon so practical a theme. Royce shook his head. "I did it," he said, "because I promised, but I will never take such a subject again; it is too concrete for my taste."

Readers of the two substantial volumes in which Professor Royce has embodied his views upon the problem of Christianity must rejoice that his excursion into the realm of the concrete has not proved so isolated an experience as he anticipated. We are all the richer for sharing his thought on a theme which has proved of perennial interest to humanity, and we feel safe in assuming that he himself has found the hours spent in studying the origins of Christianity, and thinking over again the questions which its existence raises, an enlarging and rewarding experience. Those who, like the present writer, have made it their life-work to study the problems of Christian theology welcome the entrance into this well-cultivated field of an independent thinker who brings the virility of mind, the broad outlook, and at the same time the earnest religious spirit which characterize the distinguished philosopher who so ably carries on the tradition of idealism in the oldest of our American universities.

Yet it must be confessed that the spirit which uttered itself in the remark which was quoted in our opening paragraph is still in evidence in the volumes under review. Like Hegel, whom Professor Royce follows in his attempt to give a philosophic interpretation of the essence of Christianity, the American idealist believes that absolute truth is revealed in history, but he is equally sure that you must not identify it with any particular historical phenomenon, even if that phenomenon be one so august and sacred as the Christian religion itself. To the man who has the insight to see it, truth is present everywhere and always as the inner meaning of that which, looked at from the outside, appears simply as a series of brute facts. What is needed above all things is the formula, and this it is the business of the philosopher to furnish us. How it is to be applied, what bearing it will have upon the special problems of the individual life, he leaves to others as no part of his professional concern.

Yet it would be a great mistake to confuse Royce's conception of the essence of Christianity with Hegel's. In spite of superficial similarities there is a real difference. Between Hegel and Royce there lies a mass of critical research devoted to the investigation of the facts of the Christian

religion. Professor Royce disclaims any right to speak at first hand of the questions under controversy in this criticism; yet he writes as an intelligent layman who has studied what the critics have to say and comes to his own problem with an independent understanding of their results. You feel, in reading his pages, that the religion with which he deals is really the Christian religion, not some independent construction of his own brain. Some Christians may feel—many will doubtless feel—that there are aspects of the Christian religion—and these fundamental aspects—which find no place in Royce's book, but what he gives they will recognize as a part at least of the religion they know, and they will feel in him, therefore, a kindred spirit. To take but a single illustration,—it would be difficult to find a more illuminating piece of analysis than the comparison which the author draws between Buddhism and Christianity in the seventh chapter of his first volume, a comparison equally just in its estimate of similarity as in its recognition of difference.

The book falls into two parts, independent yet complementary. The first, entitled the "Christian Doctrine of Life," is a study of the essence of Christianity considered as an objective historical phenomenon. The second, which the author entitles "The Real World and the Christian Ideas," asks the question how far the Christian solution of the problem of life can maintain itself at the bar of metaphysical inquiry. Thus the two parts of Royce's book cover substantially the ground which is discussed by contemporary German apologetics under the titles "Das Wesen" and "Die Wahrheit des Christentums."

The plan has advantages and disadvantages. Its advantage consists in its clear recognition of the fact that the problem of Christianity is one of definition as well as of proof. Before we can tell what Christianity signifies we must know what it is, but this is in dispute not only among non-Christians, but among Christians. It is methodically correct, therefore, to isolate this question for independent discussion as Royce does.

On the other hand, the method has disadvantages, in that it separates matters that belong together. The definition of Christianity involves among other things a description of the beliefs of Christians about ultimate realities, notably about the nature of God. But this question, fundamental for the understanding of every religion, Royce passes over with only incidental reference,¹ reserving his discussion, so far as he gives one, for the second part of his treatise. The result is a description of Christianity which omits altogether what most Christians would regard as the heart of their religion. Royce himself admits this and defends his method on the ground that Christians have believed many things in the past which we all recognize to-day have been outgrown. But whether this can apply to a conception so fundamental as that of God is a question which requires fuller discussion than our author has given it.

To begin with the first problem, that of the essence of Christianity, it may be premised at the outset that Professor Royce believes that the quest of such an essence is legitimate and important. If the world has a meaning, if history is more than a mere succession of events without inner

¹ *E. g.*, Vol. I., pages 202, 205.

relation and spiritual significance, then a great historical phenomenon like Christianity must have some significance which can be discovered by the sympathetic and reverent student. History, as Royce conceives it, is more than a science. It is a philosophy, a search for the inner unity which connects events and makes them luminous and meaningful to the instructed observer.

There are, however, two possible methods of interpreting an historical phenomenon like Christianity, each of which has its advocates. You may find your essence revealed at some particular point of time, identifying it either with the teaching of the founder, the content of the Bible, or the dogma of the church, as the case may be. Or you may find it in some spirit which runs through the whole course of history and whose full secret is only gradually apprehended. You may say of Christianity, It is the religion of Christ, meaning the religion that Christ taught, or you may say, It is the religion of Christians, meaning that it is the experience into which Christians have progressively entered as they have tried to understand and interpret Christ. Royce's view is of the latter kind. Like Schleiermacher and Ritschl he takes his stand within the consciousness of the Christian community, which he regards as the real creator of Christianity. He does not think it possible to press back of this consciousness and to recover some more primitive form of faith which, when recovered, must henceforth be our test of true religion, nor indeed is he greatly interested in the attempt. The church rather than Christ is the constitutive idea of Christianity, and the church is only another name for the ideal community, which is the unifying principle of philosophy and religion alike.

Holding this view, it is not strange to find Professor Royce indifferent to the results of recent critical study of the life of Jesus. Of the founder of Christianity he speaks with great respect and of many of his reported teachings he gives a sympathetic and in many respects an illuminating interpretation (*e. g.*, Jesus's teaching concerning love), but as to his own place in the religion that bears his name he professes himself agnostic. It is not simply that he feels the difficulties raised by modern criticism,—that we could well understand,—but that the picture of Jesus as presented in the Gospels, the picture of a particular individual embodying a definite ideal of service and brotherhood and love, finds no natural place in his philosophy. In contrast to Hegel, who insists that the ideal personality who incarnates the principles of his philosophy must at some definite time appear, Royce does not expect “any human and visible triumph of the ideal in history” (Vol II., page 430). All that we can hope for is an approximation toward that ideal, the assurance that somewhere and somehow (not here and now) it is realized in the eternal.

Passing from method to result, we find that our author discovers the essence of Christianity in three controlling ideas: the idea of the church, or the universal community through loyalty to which alone the individual realizes his destiny; the idea of sin, or the moral contradiction in which the individual finds himself necessarily involved because of the conflict between his own will and that of the community, and the idea of atone-

ment, or the saving deed of the community or its chosen representative through which this disharmony is overcome and the individual restored to his true place in the communal life. The ideas which underlie the discussion have already been anticipated in earlier works, notably in "The Philosophy of Loyalty," and "The Sources of Religious Insight." But the treatment forms a unity and can be followed without reference to any of the author's previous works.

Fundamental for Royce's thought is the conception of the community as an independent entity having a unity of its own as definite and as empirically verifiable as that of an individual personality. This conception to which Royce had come on independent grounds in his "Philosophy of Loyalty" he holds to be the central reality for the Christian consciousness. The Pauline church, or, as he paraphrases it, the beloved community, is in fact the community of the loyal. This is the body of Christ, the sphere in which his spirit expresses itself, the end in devotion to which every individual finds his true self fulfilled.

This view of the church explains Royce's view of the second of the great Christian conceptions, that of sin. The supreme sin, according to our author, is disloyalty, treachery to the cause of the community. But this he finds to be the inevitable result of the conflict between the individual's wants and desires and the claim of the community of which he is a part. The more highly developed the individual, the more conscious he is of capacities and desires that are inherently worthy, the more he rebels against the restraints which the community puts upon him, the more his experience approximates that of Paul in the seventh chapter of Romans. What is the remedy for this situation? It is the remedy which Paul discovered, namely, the existence of a new and higher social order, in loyalty to which the individual can find his highest desires fulfilled. Such a community is the church of Christ. Through loyalty to it alone salvation is possible. But what of those who have proved false to this new and higher allegiance? Such would seem to have committed the unpardonable sin, a sin for which even if others could forgive, they could never forgive themselves. What has religion to offer to those who have been disloyal to the cause of loyalty? This brings us to the third of the ruling ideas of Christianity which Royce discovers, namely, that of atonement.

Professor Royce finds in the Christian emphasis upon the atonement one of its chief claims to our acceptance. "The human aspect of the Christian idea of atonement," he tells us, "is based upon such motives that if there were no Christianity and no Christians in the world the idea of atonement would have to be invented before the higher levels of our moral existence could be fairly understood (Vol. I., page 271). It is quite true that the particular theories of atonement which meet us in the official theology of Christianity are unsatisfactory. But this is because the problem has been conceived in too superficial and external a way. Either, like the penal theory, the deed has been isolated from its consequences and atonement found in some form of legal substitution; or like the moral theories, a moral transformation of character in the individual has been considered sufficient. But what is needed is something more profound

than either, such a dealing with the tragedy of sin that the world shall be the better for the fact that it has happened. What if it should appear that the traitor's deed of disloyalty prove the occasion for some corresponding deed of love so wise, so gracious, so winning in the beauty of its unselfish adaptation to the tragic situation that not only others, but even the traitor himself who is responsible for the evil that called it forth must recognize that the world is the better for its having been done. Such a deed, could it be done, would fulfil the conditions of a real atonement, and such, in the opinion of our author, is the remedy which Christianity proposes for the tragedy of sin.

In spite of the abstract form in which it is cast, one must recognize in the analysis a true insight into the genius of historical Christianity. It is the more to be regretted that the author should have passed so lightly over other ideas to which most Christians would attribute equal if not superior importance, namely, that of God, the ultimate object of Christian faith, and Jesus Christ, the historic mediator of his revelation.

Of the reason for the first omission I have already spoken. The explanation of the second appears in the second and metaphysical part of the book. It is here made clear that the reason why Royce gives no independent doctrine of God is that he identifies God with the community, which from a different point of view is only another name for the living Christ or the Holy Spirit of historic Christian theology. This identification is possible because the community which is the object of Christian loyalty is not the empirical society we call the church in any one of its many conflicting forms, but a noumenal reality which as completely transcends present (and for that matter all future possible) experience as the God of Kant himself.

Royce's justification for his identification of the ultimate reality, or God, with the ideal society, has two parts. The first develops the idea of the community as the ultimate metaphysical reality; the second gives reasons for the belief that such a reality actually exists. The former occupies chapters nine and ten, which deal with the Community and the Time Process and the Body and its Members; the latter is discussed in chapters eleven to fourteen, which treat of the significance of interpretation for our knowledge of reality. Two concluding chapters draw certain practical conclusions.

Of the first point I can speak briefly. Royce makes use of Wundt's "Studies in Social Psychology" to defend the thesis that the community is a true unit in that it has a common past and a common future. It has a common past because the same historical event may enter into the consciousness of each of its members who, through this common inheritance, become what Royce calls a community of memory. It has a common future because each of its members may work for the same ideal, and this common purpose constitutes them a community of expectation.

We have no criticism to make of this interesting discussion other than to remark that it opens the way for an interpretation of history far more concrete and vital than that which Royce has given. If the possession of a common past is essential to the existence of a community in the sense in

which Royce defines it, then it would seem that the specific historic facts which constitute that past must bulk more largely than they do for our author, and the Christian's backward look to Jesus as the founder of the Christian community can not be dismissed in the summary manner in which he dismisses it.

More interesting, because more original, is Royce's use of the theory of interpretation as a justification of his metaphysical position. For this theory he confesses his indebtedness to Mr. Charles Pierce, that fruitful source of suggestion to American philosophers. But the use which Royce makes of it is his own. According to this view there are not two methods of knowledge as ordinarily supposed, perception and conception, but three, perception, conception, and interpretation. Perception is concerned with that which is immediately given in experience; conception with general ideas reached by a process of abstraction; but interpretation is the process by which we share what we have experienced with other persons for purposes of common action. Both perception and conception admit of being stated in individual terms, but interpretation is essentially social. It takes for granted the existence of a society of persons and would be meaningless without it.

Here again there is much that is interesting in Professor Royce's discussion, over which it would be a pleasure to linger. But we are concerned here primarily with its bearing upon his argument as a whole. If we understand him aright, what he gives us is a new variety of the ontological argument. We must assume, so the argument runs, that the reality which is implied in the very processes of our knowledge has objective existence. As used in the older forms of the ontological argument this reasoning, even if its validity were admitted, could give us at most a highly abstract result such as Kant's "Ens Realissimum." But as used by Royce in the light of his doctrine of interpretation it gives us the most concrete of all results, namely, the beloved community itself. If all our knowledge involves the process of interpretation, and interpretation is meaningless without the existence of the community with whose members insight is shared, then we must believe that the nature of ultimate reality is social, which is the thesis which is to be proved.

A corollary of the doctrine of interpretation is the doctrine of signs. A sign is any object which admits of interpretation, *e. g.*, "a word, a clock-face, a weather vane, or a gesture" (p. 283). Not only art and literature, but science and common sense, are constantly making use of signs. Experience itself may be defined as "a realm of signs" (p. 289), and history is constantly presenting us with objects which through interpretation give us insight into the nature of reality. What we all recognize as valid in particular instances Royce would extend to the world as a whole. "The world is the community. The world contains its own interpreter. Its processes are infinite in their temporal varieties; but their interpreter, the spirit of this universal community,—never absorbing varieties or permitting them to blend,—compares and through a real life interprets them all" (p. 324).

One must regret that Professor Royce has not followed this clue

further and given us a classification of signs with special reference to the signs of which religion makes use, and especially the particular religion which he is studying. This would enable us to test the correctness of his previous analysis and discover why he omits from his catalogue so many of the ideas which have played so large a rôle in historic Christianity. But this would take him back into the realm of the concrete, from which he has so happily escaped. As it is, we must be content with the general principle without application in detail.

In one of his closing chapters Professor Royce, by a use of the creative imagination, not uncommon among philosophers, calls back from the grave a Pauline Christian and, transporting him across the lapse of years into the new world of modern science, presents him with a copy of "The Problem of Christianity," in order to discover how far he will recognize in it the essence of his own religion. As could hardly be otherwise under the circumstances, the test is successful and the position of the author triumphantly vindicated. For a moment, to be sure, our convert hesitates, but being at heart a gentleman as well as a philosopher, he recognizes in Professor Royce a kindred spirit and soon finds himself at home in his new environment.

If the reviewer might venture upon a like liberty he would suggest a repetition of the experiment. There were more types of Christians in the Pauline community than one, and it may be that a second visitor would look at the matter from a somewhat different angle. He might address this new interpreter of Christianity as follows: "This religion that you call Christianity has much that attracts me. I recognize my own experience in your description of sin and of salvation. I respond with enthusiasm to your plea for loyalty, but there is one thing I miss, and that is a personality fitted to call forth my loyalty. Such a personality I knew in Jesus Christ, the founder of the church to which I gave my allegiance. But in this sublimated community, which I am not at liberty to identify with any existing society, I look in vain for my Master and my Lord. What I need is not the divine in general, but the divine as revealed in the human, and such a revelation I find in the person of Jesus. I rejoice in your protest against reducing Christianity to a mere ethical system. I welcome your re-emphasis upon the universal and metaphysical elements in my faith, but why need the emphasis of the one involve the sacrifice of the other? Christianity, to be sure, is religion, not ethics; but it is ethical religion, and the reason why Christ must ever hold the central place in Christian faith is the fact that he embodies to the imagination of men in the picture of a human life principles universally applicable. He is the sign by which we interpret the universe and discover the nature of the social order after which we are to strive. Put back Christ into Christianity and I shall find myself at home in the beloved community whose ideals you have so fascinatingly sketched."

Whether our resuscitated Pauline Christian would speak thus I do not know, but I am sure this is a sentiment which will find an echo in the heart of many a modern Christian as he lays down Professor Royce's book.

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