

CHRIST vs. SOCRATES

A Remonstrance for Christmas



EDITOR'S NOTE: December 25 approximates the winter solstice, when the sun ceases its northward motion and begins to descend again to the Equator—presaging spring. For this reason both pre- and post-Christian pagan peoples set aside this particular day: the Mithraists celebrated the birth of the “Sun of Philocalus” on December 25, and the Angli of Britain their “mother’s night.” For Americans the ritual aspects of the day seem to have been swallowed up in gift-giving and -getting, expressions of the good-will which Jesus taught. Nonetheless, for Christians the point of the day must be that it is the birthday of Christ. To emphasize the unique place of Christmas *SR* has asked Reinhold Niebuhr of the Union Theological Seminary, world-renowned Protestant theologian and critic, to discuss Jesus Christ as Founder of the Faith.

By REINHOLD NIEBUHR

THE discussion in a group of enlightened moderns centered on comparison of the outstanding moral exemplars in world history. Inevitably, as in college days of by-gone years, Socrates and Christ were presented as outstanding exemplars of virtue. That was not surprising. In purely moral terms there was little to choose between the “martyrdom” of the two: Socrates drinking the cup of hemlock and Jesus on the Cross. (It is significant that a martyr’s death is regarded as the

supreme act of goodness in an age which implicitly defines the end of life as “the pursuit of happiness.” But perhaps this observation is beside the point.) The point of the discussion was that the champions of Socrates were quite convinced that Christ would have a far better chance with our generation if Christians did not insist on confusing the issue by making absurd claims for His divinity. These claims, it was felt, were unfair and prejudiced His example.

This debate illustrates the profound misunderstanding between a so-called “secular” and idealistic cul-

ture and the character of the Christian faith. The idea that Christians are unenlightened people who insist on incredible divinities in human life is very widespread. It obscures the real debate between a “Socratic” and a Christian view of man and the mystery of existence. And this second debate is centered on different issues from the relative merits of Jesus and Socrates as moral exemplars.

We may define as “Socratic” any view which shares Socrates’s conviction that men “would do the good if they only knew it.” This conviction makes virtue the consequence of reason and naturally assumes that the only prerequisite of good conduct is the right formula and exemplar of good conduct. In contrast to this Socratic view, which has been accepted by most moderns since the Renaissance, and which seemed to have triumphed completely over Christianity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we can put the simple Pauline confession: “The good that I would do I do not do and the evil that I would not, that I do.” According to the Christian interpretation every man is at variance with himself and ultimately with God because there is a “law in his members which wars against the law that is

in his mind." The acceptance of the highest ideals of conduct is no guarantee against the force of self-regard, expressed either individually or collectively. Much evil is undoubtedly done in sheer stupidity, but the basic human problem is the constant expression of the self's pride, will-to-power, and avarice. Bertrand Russell defines the basic human inclination as the desire for "power and glory." That is probably as good a definition of sin as any.

But what has this analysis of the human situation—which any thoughtful observer must recognize as being more illuminating about man, particularly man in the contemporary setting, than all the Socratic interpretations which try to derive virtue from intelligence—what has this to do with the worship of Christ as a revelation of God?

In answering that question we must recognize that interpretations of the self and of the ultimate mystery of existence are closely related. The conception of the self's freedom to defy the laws of its own existence is part and parcel of the Christian conception of the self's radical freedom, particularly its freedom over its own mind. In short, the self has a mystery which cannot be equated with its reason. The self uses its reason but it is not reason. The self has the freedom to transcend nature and reason to survey all the world's coherences and rational intelligibilities and to inquire after the source and end of the meaning of its existence. This freedom either proves the existentialists right in their insistence that the

self has no law but its freedom; or it points to the validity of the Biblical faith that there is a deeper and higher source of meaning than the coherences discovered by science and philosophy. The Biblical faith, in short, does not equate God with cosmic reason any more than it equates the self with its own reason. It declares that the mystery of the divine is related to the mystery of creation, and that creation is not identical with the causal sequences which science can chart. The worship of God is thus in the first instance the worship of "God, the Almighty maker of heaven and earth," the mysterious power transcending the causal sequences and coherences of the world. It must be noted that only on the presupposition of such a God does the self have "headroom" for the unique freedom which gives it a vantage point above natural and rational coherences. This divine source and end of all things is a mystery beyond every rational intelligibility, though it is the capstone of every system of meaning.

PERHAPS the reader will impatiently insist that faith in a mysterious creator-God and the knowledge of the radical character of human freedom still leave us far from any knowledge of faith in Christ as the revelation of God. In an effort to draw nearer it may be relevant to observe that the modern "Socratic" culture has not stated the questions for which such a faith is the answer, even if it acknowledged the reality and the "dignity" of human selfhood. It did not do so because it prided itself on the

"dignity" of man but never came to terms with the "misery" of man. Briefly, that "misery" is man's inclination to use his freedom not as the instrument of virtue, but as a tool of self-glorification, and consequently as an instrument of social strife and injustice. There has been a strain of uneasy conscience in human life, to which the Babylonian penitential Psalms and the Pyramid texts of Egypt first gave eloquent expression. It expressed itself before and outside of the Biblical faith. It has only been in this post-Christian era of Western civilization that men have tried to obscure the guilt, in which all men are involved, and to pretend that the problem of being "good" could be solved if only men had the proper moral exemplars. Ironically enough, it is this age which has involved us in the collective guilt of possible atomic warfare and has initiated even the "pure" scientists into the problem of guilt, as they found themselves unwittingly becoming the weapon-manufacturers of an atomic age.

Through all ages men have wondered about the divine mystery which hovered over the strange drama of human history and was obviously more than the mystery of creation. They felt that the meaning in the mystery obviously spelled judgment upon evil, but they wondered how mercy and forgiveness were related to the judgment.

It was to these questions that the revelation in Christ offered the definitive answer. The Church was founded on the faith that this revelation was final and definitive. The drama of Christ's life was seen by faith to be more than a drama in history, and therefore Jesus was more than a revered historical martyr. This drama furnished the clue to the ultimate mystery. Through it faith was able to discern that the power of God and the love of God are one; and that the love of God contains both the severity of his justice and the kindness of his mercy to those who contritely acknowledge their sins and cease to pretend that men are virtuous and possess a "dignity" which is not contaminated by the false and idolatrous use they make of their freedom. The Christian doctrine of the "Atonement" asserts that judgment and forgiveness are contradictory, yet two facets of the same divine love. Those who recognize this clue to the mystery will stop pretending they are more righteous than they are; and will, with broken spirit and contrite heart, be enabled to live charitably with their neighbors.

Humility is the basis of charity. This age, which has extolled "human-
(Continued on page 37)



Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

ADOPTED AND ASSUMED



Occasionally fictional characters have been placed by authors in positions where it was necessary, expedient, or advisable for them to use adopted names. Fannie Gross, of Asheville, North Carolina, asks you to match ten such aliases listed on the left to the characters' original names on the right. Allowing ten points for striking a perfect match, a score of sixty is a spark, seventy a flame, and eighty or better a bonfire. Answers on page 37.

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| 1. Ganymede | () Sir William Thornhill |
| 2. Father Madeleine | () Lucas Burch |
| 3. Jack Stapleton | () Gilbert Cannister |
| 4. Joe Brown | () Edward Leeford |
| 5. Monks | () Mademoiselle de Maupin |
| 6. Oliver Erwenter | () David Owen |
| 7. Julian Dulcimer | () Rosalind |
| 8. Jaffa Codling | () Wilfred Tasbinder |
| 9. Mr. Burchell | () Rodger Baskerville |
| 10. Théodore de Sérannes | () Jean Valjean |