
SANTAYANA'S INTERPRETATION OF THE TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY

EUGENE S. TANNER
University of Tulsa, Tulsa

Christianity won out over the various indigenous and exotic religions of the Mediterranean world. The question why has been persistently asked and diversely answered by historians of early Christianity from Eusebius to Klausner and Durant. The discussion of this question is carried on repeatedly and often incidentally through the whole range of the writings of Santayana. His comments are so memorable and stimulating as to merit attention even from those whose approach to this question is more prosaic and objective.

Santayana's fullest discussion of early Christianity is found in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*. In this early book (1900) he sets forth a thesis which is frequently restated and sometimes slightly reinterpreted in his later writings. This thesis is that poetry and religion are both works of the imagination and as such essentially identical. The corollary is that religious doctrines do not deal with the realm of fact but rather with the realm of ideals. This thesis and its corollary are illustrated by the Homeric Hymns. The mythology of the Hymns abounds in superb creations of the imagination which have no counterpart in the realm of fact but which nevertheless richly inspire the frail human as he attempts to grapple with reality. For example, Demeter's loss of her child, her sorrowful search for it, and her joyous recovery of it touch the very depths of human experience.

Santayana comes to the subject of Christian dogma with the question: Why did not Neo-Platonism win the ancient world? He answers that it was too abstract. As far as Neo-Platonism is concerned his answer is probably correct. Most historians today would prefer to substitute the following question: Why did not one of the mystery religions win the ancient world? If Santayana had thus stated his question he could scarcely have dismissed the mystery religions as abstractions. In fact, a thorough probing

into this more adequately stated question might well have stimulated him to a more nearly correct answer to the obverse of his original question, namely: Why did Christianity triumph?

In answering this form of the question Santayana states that Christianity owed its triumph in part to the fact that it was rooted in the historic Hebraic heritage. The values of this heritage were highly dramatized and concentrated in the life and teachings of Jesus. However, if Christianity had not been something more than the Hebraic heritage with Jesus included it would have failed. Santayana's deep conviction on this point rests on his view, repeatedly stated in his writings, that Hebrew religion suffered from serious liabilities. In art and mythology, two great realms of the imagination, it was poverty stricken. More practically speaking it was bound down by nationalism and worldliness.

With the stage thus set Santayana is prepared to give the decisive and final answer to his question. Christianity supplemented its meager and prosaic Hebraic heritage with a rich tapestry of pagan myth. This paganizing of the religion which grew up about Jesus gave imagination the freest play in all realms of art and mythology. The result was that Christians soon found themselves devoted to an incarnate savior God, interpreted in terms of the wide range of myths and philosophical speculations current in the Mediterranean world. Paganism also contributed universalism, which was an indispensable necessity for a conquering religion. Moreover, pagan piety so influenced Christianity that it developed richer worship than had characterized Hebraic religion. In fine, Christianity's conquering dynamic was a distinctly pagan contribution. This was true not only in the ancient world. If we moderns should discard this pagan mythology Christianity would pass and all that would remain would be a mixture of Hebrew and Teutonic religion without drive and utterly impotent.

Santayana's emphases in this matter are characteristic of wider aspects of his thinking. We read book after book of his with increasing wonder as to what he thinks of the pressing immediate problems in social ethics that confront and concern most of us. We learn something, but not much, until we look into his recently published autobiographical volumes which have appeared under the general title *Persons and Places*. Here it is implied that down-to-earth concern for the development of a higher material basis for life is one more disgusting example of a serious defect common to Anglo-Saxons and Jews. Santayana's adverse discussion of his Jewish friend Looser is an eloquent commentary on his failure to understand and appreciate the religio-ethical dynamic of Judaism. Incidentally, in this discussion he evaluated Jews in general on the basis of his impressions of one Jew who evidently did have his bad points. In committing this most elementary of anti-Semitic fallacies he comes out with conclusions as to the extreme worldliness of Judaism which are false to the facts. If further evidence of Santayana's aloofness on the subject of social ethics is needed, notice should be taken of his refusal to express anything more than a mild preference for the Toryism of England and the conservatism of Spain as over against democracy, communism and anarchy. It is evident that this bias against concern with social ethics has caused him seriously to underestimate the values of the Hebraic heritage and to overestimate the values of the pagan heritage.

The writer, in vigorous opposition to Santayana, is convinced that the Hebraic religio-ethical heritage gave Christianity its dynamic. If the pagan elements in Christianity furnished the winning margin then certainly one of the mystery religions should have triumphed because all of them with the possible exception of the Eleusinian had everything and more than Santayana enumerates as pagan contributions to Christianity.

In stating that the dynamic of Christianity is to be found in its Hebraic heritage the writer does not deny that some aspects of this heritage were defective. Christianity in breaking with the nationalistic side of Judaism

— a break, however, for which there was much precedence in the Hebraic heritage itself — did take a decisive step in the direction of becoming a world religion. Nor can it be denied that the framing of the Hebraic heritage in a pagan Greek mythology facilitated the spread of Christianity in the Mediterranean world. Indeed, we are willing to grant that certain of the pagan mythological features of Christianity are still quite meaningful to most of us and probably will remain so for generations to come. In other words, the writer does not advocate a puritan crusade to rid Christianity of all pagan elements.

He does, however, protest both the theory and practice of thrusting these pagan elements to the center and the Hebraic elements to the periphery. He is convinced that this pervasive tendency is subversive of the values which Christianity may have in helping men to a more abundant spiritual and material existence. Santayana, of course, has his eyes wide open to the fact that the pagan mythology in Christianity is a construction of the imagination. Unfortunately an increasing number of theologians seem to be becoming blind to this fact. Like Santayana's sister Susana they fall under the delusion that in dealing with this mythology they are handling something every bit as existential as the geography of the Fiji islands. Nevertheless, there is a great deal in common between the conservative theologians of all schools — fundamentalists, neo-Calvinists or neo-Thomists — and Santayana. With the theologians perhaps unconsciously or subconsciously and with Santayana consciously there is a greater liking for myth than for an honest grappling with the problems of men's relations to one another and to God in terms of the revelations of nature and human history. The writer would have much greater confidence in the future of Christianity if he saw more evidences of concern with its this-worldly naturalistic and historical basis in Hebrew religion and less concern for a forced revival of the myths which it borrowed from the ancient pagan philosophies and religions.
