

The Founder of Christianity

FELIX ADLER

Felix Adler, Ph.D. (1851-1933), could have laid claim to one of the most illustrious rabbinic pedigrees to be found in America. His father, Samuel Adler (1809-1891), left Germany in 1857 to become rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in New York City and a leading figure in Reform Judaism both in Germany and in the United States. Felix Adler's grandfather, Isak Adler, had held a rabbinical post at Worms in the Rhineland; another relative, Nathan Adler (1741-1800), had been a celebrated rosh yeshivah (seminary president) in Frankfurt-am-Main; and still another, Nathan Marcus Adler (1803-1890), was chief rabbi of the British empire.

Felix himself, however, found the rabbinate too confining, and in 1876 left the rabbinate to found the Ethical Culture movement and to become, in that capacity, an outstanding American religious and educational leader. In 1877, the newly established Ethical Culture Society published Dr. Adler's Creed and Deed: A Series of Discourses. Discourse IX, which is reprinted below, anticipates in a number of respects the Social Gospel tendencies soon to exercise considerable influence on Protestantism. It was delivered by Dr. Adler on December 31, 1876.

“I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil, for verily I say unto you till heaven and earth pass away one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law till all be fulfilled.” “Resist not evil, . . . bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you.”

In these sayings of Jesus the keynote of early Christianity is struck. It was not a revolt against Judaism; it was but a reiterated assertion of what other and older Prophets of the Hebrews had so often and so fervently preached. The law was to remain intact, but the spiritual law was meant, the deeper law of conscience that



Courtesy, Harry Simonhoff

Felix Adler
Founder of the Ethical Culture Society

underlies the forms of legislation and the symbols of external worship.

There is a rare and gracious quality in the personality of Jesus as described in the Gospels, which has exercised its charm upon the most heterogeneous nations and periods of history wide apart in the order of time and of culture.

To grasp the subtle essence of that charm, and thereby to understand what it was that has given Christianity so powerful a hold upon the affections of mankind, were a task well worthy the attention of thoughtful minds. We desire to approach our subject in the spirit of reverence that befits a theme with which the tenderest fibres of faith are so intimately interwoven; at the same time we shall pay no regard to the dogmatic character with which his later followers have invested Jesus, for we behold his true grandeur in the pure and noble humanity which he illustrated in his life and teachings.

The New Testament presents but scant material for the biography of Jesus, and the authenticity, even of the little that remains to us, has been rendered extremely uncertain by the labors of modern critics. A few leading narratives, however, are doubtless trustworthy, and these will suffice for our purpose. A brief introduction on the character of the people among whom the new prophet arose, the characteristics of the age in which he lived, and the beliefs that obtained in his immediate surroundings will assist us in our task.

The expectation of the Messiah had long been rife among the Jews. Holding themselves to be the elect people of God, they believed the triumph of monotheism to be dependent upon themselves. The prophets of Jehovah had repeatedly assured them that their supremacy would finally be acknowledged. Events, however, had turned out differently. Instead of success they met with constant defeat and disaster; Persia, Egypt, Syria had successively held their land in subjection; the very existence of their religion was threatened, and the heathen world, far from showing signs of approaching conversion, insisted upon its errors with increased obstinacy and assurance. And yet Jehovah had distinctly promised that he would raise up, in his own good time, a new ruler from the ancient line of Israel's kings, a son of David, who should lead the people to victory. To his sceptre all the nations would bow, and in his reign the faith of the Hebrews would be acknowledged as the

universal religion. Every natural means for the fulfilment of these predictions seemed now cut off; nothing remained but to take refuge in the supernatural; it was said that the old order of things must entirely pass away; a new heaven and a new earth be created and what was called the Kingdom of Heaven might then be expected. The "Kingdom of Heaven," a phrase that frequently recurs in the literature of the Jews, is used, not to describe a locality, but to denote a state of affairs on earth, in which the will of heaven would be generally obeyed without the further intervention of human laws and government. The agency of the Messiah was looked to, for the consummation of these happy hopes. To reward those who had perished before his coming, many moreover of those that slept in the dust would awaken, and the general resurrection of the dead would signalize the approach of the millennium.

At the end of the first century B. C. these expectations had created a wild ferment among the population of Palestine. Now if ever, it was fondly urged, they must be fulfilled. The need was at its highest, help then must be nighest. For matters had indeed grown from bad to worse; the political situation was intolerable; after the brief spell of independence in the days of the Maccabees, the Roman yoke had been fastened upon the necks of the people, and the weight of oppression became tenfold more difficult to support from the sweet taste of liberty that had preceded it. The rapacity of the Roman governors knew no bounds. A land impoverished by incessant wars and the frequent failure of the crops was drained of its last resources to satisfy the enormous exactions of a foreign despot, while to all this was added the humiliating consciousness that it was a nation of idolators which was thus permitted to grind the chosen people.

Nor was the condition of religion at all more satisfactory. It is true the splendid rites of the public worship were still maintained at the Temple, and Herod was even then rebuilding the Sanctuary on a scale of unparalleled magnificence. Bright was the sheen and glitter of gold upon its portals, solemn the ceremonies enacted in its halls, and grand and impressive the voices of the Levitic choirs as they sang to the tuneful melody of cymbals and of harps. But the lessons of history teach us that the times in which lavish sums are expended on externals are not usually those in which religion possesses true vitality and power and depth. Here was a brand flick-

ering near extinction; here was a builder who built for destruction; the Temple had ceased to satisfy the needs of the people.

In the cities an attempt to supply the deficiency was made by the party of the Pharisees. They sought to broaden and to spiritualize the meaning of scripture—they laid down new forms of religious observance by means of which every educated man became, so to speak, his own priest. The religion of the Pharisees, however, assumed a not inconsiderable degree of intellectual-ability on the part of its followers. So far as it went, it answered very well for the intelligent middle classes. But out in the country districts it did not answer at all; not for the herdsmen, not for the poor peasants, not for those who had not even the rudiments of learning and who could do nothing with a learned religion. And yet these very men before all others needed something to support them, something to cling to, even because they were so miserably poor and illiterate. They did not get what they wanted—they felt very strongly that the burdens upon them were exceedingly grievous; that while they suffered and starved, religion dwelt in palaces, and had no heart for their misfortunes. They felt that something was wrong and rotten in the then state of affairs, and that a new state must come, and a heaven-sent king, who would lend a voice to their needs, and lift them with strong arms from out their despair and degradation. Nowhere was this feeling more marked than in the district of Galilee. A beautiful land with green, grassy valleys, groves of sycamores, broad blue lakes, and villages nestling picturesquely on the mountain slopes, it nourished an ardent and impulsive population. Their impatience with the existing order of things had already found vent in furious revolt. Judah, their famous leader, had perished; his two sons, James and Simon, had been nailed to the cross; the Messiah was daily and hourly expected; various impostors successively arose and quickly disappeared. When would the hour of deliverance come? When would the true Messiah appear at last?

It was at such a time, and among such a people, that there arose Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee. What was the startling truth he taught? What was the new revelation he preached to the sons of men? An old truth, and an old sermon—righteousness; no more, meaning nothing at all, a mere trite commonplace, on the lips of the time-server and the plausible vendor of moral phrases. Meaning mighty

changes for the better, when invoked with a profounder sense of its sanctity, and a new sacredness in life, and larger impulses for ever and for ever. Righteousness he taught, and the change that was to come by righteousness. Yes, so deep was his conviction, so profoundly had the current conceptions of the day affected him, that he believed the change to be near at hand, that he himself might be its author, himself Messiah.

The novelty of Jesus' work has been sought in various directions. It has been said, for instance, to consist in the overthrow of Phariseism; and it is true that he rebukes the Pharisees in the most severe terms; these reproaches, however, were not directed against the party as a whole, but only against its more extravagant and unworthy members. The Pharisees were certainly not a "race of hypocrites, and a generation of vipers." Let us remember that Jesus himself, in the main, adhered to their principles; that his words often tally strictly with theirs; that even the golden sayings which are collected in the Sermon on the Mount may be found in the contemporaneous Hebrew writings, whose authors were Pharisees. Thirty years before his time, Hillel arose among the Pharisees, renowned for his marvellous erudition, beloved and revered because of the gentleness and kindness of his bearing, the meekness with which he endured persecution, the loving patience with which he overcame malice and hate. When asked to express in brief terms the essence of the law, he to the Pharisee replied, "Do not unto others what thou wouldst not that others do unto thee; this is the essence, all the rest is commentary—go and learn." Jesus fully admits the authority of the Pharisees. "The Pharisees," he says, "sit in Moses' seat; all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do." If we read the gospel of Matthew, we find that he does not attempt to abrogate the Pharisaic commandments, but only insists upon the greater importance of the commandments of the heart. "Woe," he cries, "for ye pay tithe of mint, of anise and cumin, but ye have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith, these ought ye to have done, *and not to leave the other undone*"—and again, "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then *come and offer thy gift*." The leper also whom he cured of his

disease, he advises to bring the gift prescribed by the Jewish ritual. We cannot fully understand the conduct of Jesus in this respect, unless we bear in mind that he believed the millennial time to be near at hand. At that time it was supposed the ancient ceremonial of Judaism would come to an end by its own limitation; until that time arrived, it should be respected. He does not wage war against the religious tenets and practices of his age; only when they interfere with the superior claims of moral rectitude does he bitterly denounce them, and ever insists that righteousness be recognized as the one thing above all others needful.

Nor is the novelty of Jesus' work to be found in the extension of the gospel to the heathen world. It seems, on the contrary, highly probable that he conceived his mission to lie within the sphere of his own people, and devoted his chief care and solicitude to their welfare. "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel," he says; and thus he charges his apostles, "Go ye not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and as ye go, preach, saying the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And yet his exclusive devotion to the interest of the Jews is not at variance with the world-embracing influence attributed to the Messianic character. In common with all his people, he believed that upon the approach of the millennium, the nations of the earth would come, of their own accord, to the holy mount of Israel, accept Israel's religion, and thenceforth live obedient to the Messianic King. The millennium was now believed to be actually in sight. "Verily I say unto you there be some standing here who shall not taste of death until they see the Son of man coming in his Kingdom." From the Jewish standpoint, therefore, which was the one taken by Jesus and the earliest Christians, the mission to the heathen was unnecessary.

And again it has been said that the evangel of Jesus was new, in that it substituted for the stern law of retribution the methods of charity and the law of love; that while the elder prophets had taught the people to consider themselves servants of a taskmaster, he taught them freedom and brotherhood. But is this true? Will any one who has read the Hebrew Prophets with attention venture to assert that they instil a slavish fear into the hearts of men; they whose every line speaks aspiration, whose every word breathes

liberty? It is true their language is often stern when they dwell on duty. And it is right that it should be so, for so also is duty stern and in matters of conscience sentimentalism is out of place, harmful. Simple obedience to the dictates of the moral law is required, imperatively, unconditionally, not for pity's sake, nor for love's sake, but for the right's sake, simply and solely because it is right. But the emotions that are never the sufficient sanctions of conduct may ennoble and glorify right conduct. And how tenderly do the ancient prophets also attune their monitions to the promptings of the richest and purest of human sympathies. "Thy neighbor thou shalt love as thyself," was written by them, and "Have we not all one Father, has not one God created us all?" Thy poor brother too is thy brother, and in secret shalt thou give charity. In the dusk of the evening the poor are to come into the cornfields and gather there, and no man shall know who has given and who has received. The ancient prophets were idealists, preachers of the Spirit as opposed to the form that cramps and belittles. In Jesus we behold a renewal of their order, a living protest against the formalism that had in the interval become encrusted about their teachings, only differing from his predecessors in this, that the hopes which they held out for a distant future seemed to him nigh their fulfilment, and that he believed himself destined to fulfil them.

If we can discover nothing that had not been previously stated in the substance of Jesus' teachings, there is that in the method he pursued which calls for genuine admiration and reverence, the method of rousing against the offender the better nature in himself; of seeming yielding to offence based on an implicit trust in the resilient energy of the good; of conquering others, by the strength of meekness and the might of love. Hillel too was endowed with this strength of meekness, and Buddha had said, long before the days of Jesus: "Hatred is not conquered by hatred at any time, hatred is conquered by love; this is an old rule." But in the story of no other life has this method been applied with such singular sweetness, with such consistent harmony from the beginning to the end. Whether we find him in the intimate circle of his disciples, whether he is instructing the multitude along the sunny shores of Lake Gennesareth, whether he stands before the tribunal of his judges, or in the last dire agonies of death—he is ever the

patient man, the loving teacher, the man of sorrows, who looks beyond men and their crimes to an ideal humanity, and confides in that; who gives largely, and forgives even because he gives so much.

But we shall not touch the true secret of his power until we recall his sympathy with the neglected classes of society; that quality of his nature which caused the poor of Galilee to hail him as their deliverer, which produced so lasting an impression upon his contemporaries, and made the development of his doctrines into a great religion possible. His gospel was preëminently the gospel for the poor; he sat down with despised publicans, he did not shun the contamination of lepers, nay nor of the moral leprosy of sin—he visited the hovels of paupers and taught his disciples to prefer them to the mansions of the fortunate; he applied himself with peculiar fervor to those dumb, illiterate masses of Galilee, who knew not whither they might turn, to what they might cling. He gave them hope, he brought them help. And so it came about that in the early Christian communities which were still fresh from the presence of the master, the appeal to conscience he had made so powerfully resulted in solid helpfulness; so it came about that in those pristine days, the Church was a real instrument of practical good, with few forms, and little parade, but with love feasts and the communion table spread with repasts for the needy. "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, . . . for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

It is from such particulars that there was drawn that fascinating image which has captivated the fancy and attracted the worship of mankind. The image of the pale man with the deep, earnest eyes, who roused men to new exertions for the good, who lifted up the downtrodden, who loved little children and taught the older children in riddles and parables that they might understand, and the brief career of whose life was hallowed all the more in memory, because of the mournful tragedy in which it closed. All the noblest qualities of humanity were put into this picture and made it lovely. It was the humanity, not the dogma of Jesus, by which Christianity triumphed. Like a refreshing shower in the perfumed spring, his glad tidings of a new enthusiasm for the good came upon the arid Roman world, sickening with the dry rot of self-indulgence, and thirsting for some principle to give a purpose to the empty

weariness of existence. Like a message from a sphere of light it spread to the Germanic tribes, tempered the harshness of their manners, taught them a higher law than that of force, and conquered their grim strength with the mild pleadings of the master of meekness in far-off Galilee.

It is the moral element contained in it that alone gives value and dignity to any religion, and only then when its teachings serve to stimulate and purify our aspirations toward the good does it deserve to retain its ascendancy over mankind. Claiming to be of celestial origin, the religions have drawn their secret spell from the human heart itself. There is a principle of reverence inborn in every child of man—this he would utter. He sees the firmament above him, with its untold hosts; he stands in the midst of mighty workings, he is filled with awe; he stretches forth his arms to grasp the Infinite which his soul seeketh, he makes unto himself signs and symbols, saying, let these be tokens of what no words can convey. But a little time elapses, and these symbols themselves seem more than human, they point no more beyond themselves, and man becomes an idolator, not of stone and wood merely. Then it is needful that he remember the divine power with which his soul has been clothed from the beginning, that by the force of some moral impulse he may break through the fetters of the creeds, and cast aside the weight of doctrines that express his best ideals no more. And so we find in history that every great religious reformation has been indebted for its triumphs, not to the doctrines that swam upon the surface, but to the swelling currents of moral energy that stirred it from below; not to the doctrine of the Logos in Jesus' day, but to the tidings of release which he brought to the oppressed; not to "justification by faith," in Luther's time, but to the mighty reaction to which his thunderous protest lent a voice, against the lewdness and the license of a corrupt and cancerous priesthood. The appeal to conscience has ever been the lever that raised mankind to a higher plane of religion.

Conscience, righteousness, what is there new in these—their maxims are as old as the hills? Truly, and as barren often as the rocks. The novelty of righteousness is not in itself, but in its novel application to the particular unrighteousness of a particular age. It was thus that Jesus applied, to the sins and mock sanctities of his day, the ancient truths known to the prophets and to others long before him. It is thus that every new reformer will seek to bring

home to the men of his generation what it is that the ancient standard of right and justice now requires at their hands. That all men are brothers—who did not concede it? But that the enslaved man too is our brother, what a convulsion did that not cause, what vast expenditure of blood and treasure until that was made plain! That we should relieve the necessities of the poor—who will deny it? But that a social system which year by year witnesses the increase of the pauper class, and the increase of their miseries, stands condemned before the tribunal of religion, of justice, how long will it take before that is understood and taken to heart? The facts of righteousness are few and simple, but to apply them, how mighty, how difficult a task! The time is approaching when this stupendous work must be attempted anew, and we, a small phalanx in the army of progress, would aid, with what power in us resides. Let this inspire us that we have the loftiest cause of the age for our own, that we are helping to pave the way for a stronger and freer and happier race. For by so laboring, alone can we feel that our life has a meaning under the sky and the sacred stars.

The year in which we have entered upon our journey is passing away. Tonight when the midnight bells send forth their clamorous voices, we shall greet the new year, and the work it brings. No peaceful task dare we expect, but something of good accomplished may it see.

*Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light,
The year is dying in the night,
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die,
Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow,
The year is going, let him go,
Ring out the false, ring in the true.*