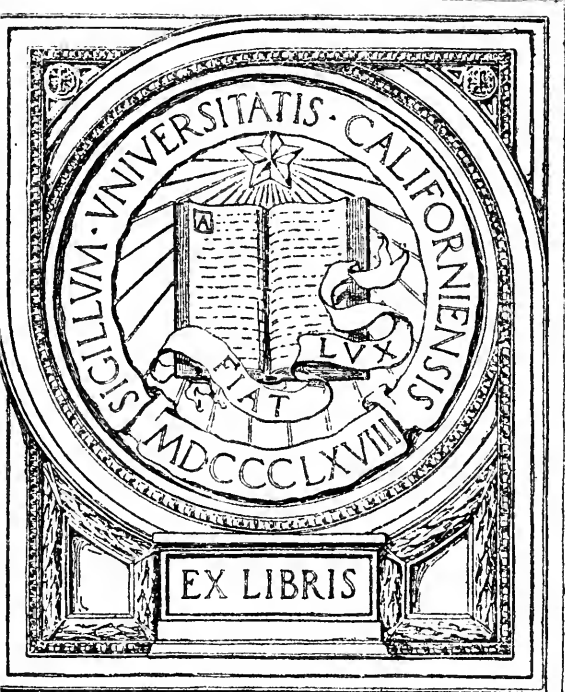


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A THEOSOPHICAL VIEW

BY

JAMES H. COUSINS

Author of

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Etc.

LONDON

THEOSOPHICAL PUBLISHING SOCIETY

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1914

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WE stand to-day in the shadow of the most stupendous conflict that has ever engaged the powers of destruction wherewith mankind has been entrusted. Millions of men in the prime of life are face to face for the single purpose of killing one another. Thousands have already died at the hands of their fellows. Miles of fertile land have been turned into barren wastes. Towns have been destroyed; ancient and beautiful monuments of human genius and labour have been razed to the ground; the sanctities of

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civilisation have been outraged; and already, in a few weeks, millions of pounds of money, gathered from the labour of many years, have been thrown away: everywhere there is suffering in mind, body, and estate.

Thus the era which we have been wont to call "the age of the Prince of Peace" ends in almost universal war; and the question is asked by many, either of themselves in the lonely sorrow of disappointed faith, or of others in the subdued triumph of apparently justified unbelief in God and goodness, "Is Christianity a failure?" Whatever the individual answer may be, there is a widespread feeling that Christian doctrine and practice in Europe are on trial; and indeed it will become more and more apparent as time goes on, that underneath the coming economical and national adjustments, the most profound influence of the war now

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upon us will be in the realm of religion, and in its future application to conduct.

Were war an end in itself, and our vision limited by what the eye sees, we might indeed well despair of human advancement, and hold ourselves to be in the grip of a malevolent power. Fortunately for the safety of the race, there remains an ineradicable faith that there is some soul of goodness in things evil; and fortunately also, whatever changes may be made in the presentation of Christian dogma in Europe, there remains through all fluctuations a fundamental religious teaching that is based, not on texts in an ancient book that may be given a Teutonic or Anglo-Saxon interpretation, but on spiritual laws that are based in the nature of things, and are verified in reason and experience.

I propose, therefore, not to examine

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Christianity from the point of view of the war—the war will do that itself—but to examine the war from the point of view of the ancient (and modern) wisdom-religion known as Theosophy.

Looked at first in the broadest way, Theosophy sees one Absolute Unity in which all things inhere, but from which there emanates a process that calls into operation powers apparently opposed, but essentially in affinity. Such powers are recognised in science under the names energy and substance. Energy cannot be manifested unless there is substance against which it can exert itself. Substance will remain inchoate unless energy shape and vitalise it.

Between these powers there is a vast co-operation, seen in the whole as a process of development; seen in detail as a struggle,

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the one power making for fixity, the other breaking the form for always higher reformings. Sometimes the process is gradual. Sometimes the genius of substance prevails: crystallisation takes place, things settle down for so long that new-comers to the world conclude that they must remain so. Then a crash comes. The urge of the spirit finds the weak spot in things as they are, and breaks through it. A new order appears—but never absolutely new; for in the apparent struggle between opposites there is an inevitable give and take; and in that give and take we see the sign of a deeper unity towards which the struggle is tending.

This process, thus vaguely outlined, requires for its operation certain vehicles and instruments. Nothing can happen of itself. When the Empire of the Cæsars spread itself from West to East, and success

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crystallised into luxury and debauchery, the few souls with vision that were in the world must have prayed for an earthquake to shake the world from its evil. Then the wild Germanic tribes broke from the North, and a new era dawned. To the Roman, the Hun was an enemy, a demon of destruction and death. To the eye of history he was an instrument in the cosmic hand for making new ways for the soul of humanity. Now, in the process of time, the power that was put into the hand of the instrument has to be wrested from it. New instruments are ready for the work; and perhaps never before was there seen on earth such a linking up of nation with nation in a common cause as to-day; never such a move towards a deeper unity.

We see the unifying process of struggle plainly marked in history if we compare the

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map, say, of Europe to-day with that of any preceding century. From tribal rivalries resulting in absorption, the units of the struggle became larger and larger. Dukedom warred on dukedom; and later kingdom warred on kingdom. A short time ago, as history reckons things, this country was the battle-ground of rival leaders. William the Conqueror devastated Yorkshire in order to put an impassable area between himself and his enemies in Scotland. It is only, as it were, the day before yesterday that the constantly warring states in Northern Europe were federated as the German Empire; and only yesterday that Austria became a Kingdom and Empire. Now we have the amazing spectacle of the two empires of Germanic type united as the apostles of the doctrine of **Might is Right**; and against them the tenacity and solidity of the Anglo-Saxon

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race, blended with the fire and effervescence of Celtic France, and backed up by the vast unknown quantity of the Slav. And from the ends of the earth the races of the British Empire are fired with one common emotion.

We had not to wait long for the evidence of the unifying progress within the nations themselves. A generation of propaganda in certain aspects of reform had produced little more than bitterness and academic advance. For years the anarchic exploitation of one group of human beings in England by another has split the nation. In a few hours from the declaration of war much of the system of unbridled competition was swept aside in the face of a common danger: the railways were centralised, mills taken over by Government, and the panic of selfish hoarding of foods and inflation of prices

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stamped out with the enthusiastic approval of those who, a month before, would have denounced such proceedings as an unwarrantable interference with the sacred freedom of the individual. Think of Russia—Russia that we visualised as the land of the serf, barbarous, unchristian, drunken. In the twinkling of an eye the whole trade in spirituous liquors was closed down by the very authority that made millions of pounds of profit from it per annum; and before two months had passed, the Government that had shut down the vodka shops temporarily upon the people was compelled by the wish of the people to declare them closed for ever.

We cannot regard these things as mere accidental goodnesses struck out of something essentially and entirely evil. They are signals to us that within the apparently

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evil there is a spring of good; that, indeed, if we have a sufficiently wide view of things, the good that is in evil is predominant, and will be seen so in due time. Hard as it is to realise this now, with horror piled on horror in our newspapers, it is nevertheless true, and will be seen so when this gigantic discord is resolved by time to a gigantic harmony. Seen in the perspective of history and in the light of Theosophy, war is not a fatal opposition between contending forces, but a vital co-operation between affinities in the vast process of human evolution. "War is hell," a warrior has declared; but we remember that another warrior, who had the poet's vision, sang, "If I make my bed in hell, behold Thou art there," Thou the eternal goodness; and of another it is written that "He descended into hell," in order that he might rise again from the dead; and who

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knows but that the shells that tumbled to the ground the towers of the shrine of an officially dead creed in France, will have stung into new activity the religious aspiration that belongs to the Celtic race, and that is as living to-day as ever it was in the heart of the French people: who knows, moreover, but that the present struggle between purely masculine powers may see the complete emergence of the feminine regenerative influence in national and international life, since the avowed objective of the allies is the abolition of force as the final argument in human affairs, and the elevation of ideals of justice and mutuality that must apply to all phases of thought and action.

So much, then, for this broad view. To come to more definite considerations: it is taught by Theosophy that the cosmic process,

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of which I have spoken, works along the line of causation, each step being conditioned by all previous steps. In Indian philosophy this law is called Karma, and it is realised as operating not only in the units of consciousness called human beings, but in the congeries of units called nations.

Its simplest form is that of reward for good and punishment for evil, not in future and eternal states, but either in this life or another as part of the process of evolution towards spiritual consciousness. There is an instinctive belief, I think, in most people that nations, like persons, must in some way come under the law of sowing and reaping; but whether we hold that an evil done can only be expiated by an evil borne, or that the evil done can be counterbalanced by a good done, it is not, I think, straining the matter too much to see the tribulation of

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Belgium as an ultimately regenerative sequel to the appalling atrocities in the Belgian Congo; not to mention the blatant immorality of the cities of Belgium, as reflected in the most degraded poetical literature that ever came from the press. Maeterlinck recently wrote in *The Daily Mail* an article demanding the settlement now, in the heat of passion, of the total destruction of Germany for her ruin of Belgium; but it was Maeterlinck the philosopher who, in the illumination of dispassion, once wrote that we attract our destiny to us.

In contemplating these things in the light of a teaching that sees law and purpose—beneficent purpose—in all activities of life, we are not abating one jot our sorrow for those who are suffering, but rather are approaching an understanding that will

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help us more effectively to grapple with the immediate needs of want and pain and loneliness; and what is in the end more important—to touch the causes of these things. In the blood of the world, so to speak, the germs of ignorance, the acids of selfishness, are floating. They are there; and there can be no true health until they are expelled. But humanity is as yet so lacking in imagination, and in the power of realising abstract truth, that it is satisfied to get along with as little trouble as possible, and acts on the lazy maxim, “Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you.” It could, if it chose, get rid of the germs of ignorance and selfishness without violence. It could reverse the lazy maxim into the more human one, “Always trouble trouble when you see it troubling anyone else.” It could banish the causes of tyranny

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that are in our midst : it could secure health without surgical measures ; but it does not choose, because the appeal of crude sense is stronger than the appeal of reason. To eliminate the germs of disease normally would apparently take incalculable ages. But there comes a breath out of the mysterious region just beyond life ; the fundamental disease of ignorance and selfishness is localised—in France before 1789 as aristocratic arrogance, in Germany before 1914 as militarist presumption. A surgical operation becomes necessary, and in the theatre of the cosmos is always successful. When disease is manifested, it is on its way to dissipation. When things called evil are thrown to the surface, they are ordained for destruction. When they are dragged or pushed into the light they have already ceased to be operative.

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But however we may philosophise as to the place of war in the cosmic evolution, however clearly we may realise its beneficence in the ultimate outcome of the struggle between the large entities called nations, in which human life is counted as a mere factor, differing only from cannon and rifle in possessing automobility, we cannot ignore the plain facts of physical and mental suffering, and violent premature death, which are the inevitable accompaniment of the process as it affects the human units involved. Our hearts are stirred to exaltation by the amazing pluck of men in face of death. They are stirred also to unutterable pity for the agonised on the field, and the desolate at home. We would give much to mitigate the suffering that is abroad.

It is well, however, to remember one or two facts that will to an extent mitigate our

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own sufferings as spectators. We are apt to throw our imagination from our own immediate surroundings into the crude circumstances of warfare. We do not always remember that those who are fighting have reached the point of actual combat through a long series of preparatory stages. They carry into war an atmosphere of warfare, and letters from soldiers show us that we who observe without atmosphere are apt to overlook the anæsthetic power of excitement or concentration. So, also, in our sympathetic reaction towards the sufferings of the combatants, and those whom the fortune of war has left homeless or friendless, we are apt to allow our feelings to be submerged through piling grief on the top of grief in our thought; and to forget that often to a sufferer the fact that another is also suffering takes the mind away from self

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and diminishes pain. We also forget that no sufferer can exceed his or her own capacity for suffering, so that there is really only one sufferer in the world; and we have no right to multiply what cannot be multiplied, and to reduce our own effectiveness in dealing with actual things by clouding our vision and emotion by imaginary things.

But apart from these considerations, which are implied in Theosophical teaching by reason of its wise inclusion of the whole range of human experience, there are certain explicit teachings of Theosophy which are calculated, if received, to bring solace and ease to all who participate in warfare in any degree.

I think the prevailing attitude of orthodox Protestant Christians can be fairly summed up as follows: "How sad it is to think that so many young men are cut off in the prime

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of life, and without a chance of making peace with God and so escaping hell, and without even the consolation of sharing in the good which their labour will bring in victory!"

It is here that the testing of Christianity—of which I spoke at the beginning—will take place. Something primal in the soul of humanity revolts at the crudity and injustice of such a creed. But while the instinctive revolt is in the right direction, the general brain is not sufficiently advanced to see that the wrong thing is not in the essence of the creed, but in its materialistic presentation. Religion stands to be scouted, and the race to be impoverished to the extent that it loses the uplift of the religious spirit.

But Theosophy steps in with the consolation, not of a creed that is shaken by an inexplicable fact, but of a system of thought

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and conduct that is rooted in long and universal experience, and makes the fact plain.

According to the wisdom-religion, life is one and indestructible. It is not given. It cannot be taken away. It *is*. Life is life—you cannot kill life. Death has no power over it, for death is a process of life. This may sound highly metaphysical; and as many people take fright at metaphysics, I shall reduce the matter to a plain statement of Theosophical knowledge and teaching: that conscious human life does not begin with birth, and does not enter on a fixed state at death. This interval that we call life is but one episode in a long series of similar episodes—a series of experiments, so to speak, in physical science, for the purpose of expanding spiritual science. The life of to-day was conditioned and given its funda-

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mental character by the necessities of the immortal ego within. The life of to-day added to the ego will condition and characterise the next life. In all this there is progress: the earthly vehicle for the embodiment of the evolving soul may be lower or higher, as men count low and high, in the next life on earth; but all experience can only add to the inner consciousness. From the Theosophical point of view we regard life as a passage from darkness to light, from ignorance to conscious knowledge, from evil to good—but we do not regard these terms as infinite opposites. We use the phrase “pairs of opposites,” but we really mean pairs of complementaries. The stable things of the universe are good, light, consciousness: their so-called opposites are only limitations that the whole inevitable trend of things is breaking down. We cannot, therefore,

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regard with the same gloom as others the “cutting off” of men or women “in the prime of life.” If there is any cutting off from life, it is by birth, not death; and early death in discharge of an ennobling duty, and in circumstances of exalted emotion, is probably a much more valuable experience to the soul than a long life of dull commonplaceness.

Further than this, Theosophy teaches that, so far as human consciousness is concerned, the utmost extent of its radiation from its centre is into physical form, that is, into this life in the flesh. That radiation is not a casual, purposeless “accident of birth”: it is a deliberate process, initiated from the centre of being, but conditioned by the laws of cause and effect summed up in the word Karma. At the centre of our being we are one with the Universal Spirit: we are rooted

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in the Divinity which Christian dogma teaches as being Omnipresent, but which Christian thought, or rather want of thought, consigns to a region beyond the Milky Way. There is no God to make peace with in the sense of a separate Deity whose every word is a prohibition; but there is the Central Divinity of our own nature with whom this *persona* must be harmonised, and *is* being harmonised by experience in and out of the body. Thus the whole of human life is seen by Theosophy, not as fixed, but as in a state of perpetual flux in one general direction, and this flux sweeps also that dim region of the mediæval imagination, invented by the poet Dante—hell. Within the soul and mind of humanity there are places of dark agony; but they are all by-roads parallel with the broad way that leads to spiritual freedom; they are never culs-de-sac.

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Such is the Theosophical view; but it is more than a view: it is the expression of the scientifically demonstrated fact that the human consciousness after death does not enter a fixed state either of torture or sensuous delight, but simply continues its great work of liberation from the bonds of limitation. From its place behind our curtain it can participate consciously in the phases of earth life with which it is in greatest affinity; and in its own time it will reincarnate, and so enjoy the fruits of both victory and defeat.

What a message of consolation is here for those who are grieving in the goodness of their heart, and the ignorance of their head, for lost lives; and what a solace for the bereaved if it could but be taken to them!

We mourn with those who mourn; and whether or not the sharp agony of separa-

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tion comes to any of us personally, we feel the new, strange universal calling forth of sympathy and love. It is true, as the late poet-laureate sang, that sorrow draws us together, while joy puts us apart; but it is only fully true when the vision is limited, and the emotion localised. When the vision is deepened to see, in the things that bring sorrow, the loving hand of the spirit disentangling us from the bonds of life, and urging us to seek only the things of the soul; breaking our habit of building ourselves in with objects of enslavement; then indeed sorrow will be seen to be the joy of the spirit inverted in the mirror of life; then will we be saved, not from feeling with others, but from being overwhelmed by emotion that hurts our usefulness; then will we provide suitable instruments for the expression of the stable and constructive

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things in the midst of instability and destruction. We may not have the passing intensity that comes from personal passion in grief or hatred; but we shall enjoy the lasting enrichment of spiritual emotion that realises all things as part of the divine operation for the purification and liberation of the soul of humanity.

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