

# PROF. G. A. VAN DEN BERGH VAN EYSINGA

BY

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*Author of The Neo-Platonists:  
A Study in the History of Hellenism*

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As a philosophical student interested in the broad results rather than in the minute details of Biblical research, I cannot claim to give an adequate account of the scientific work of Prof. van den Bergh van Eysinga; but I may be allowed to state in outline the kind of impression which that work has made on me.

In a review of his excellent treatise *De Wereld van het Nieuwe Testament*, I said that the distinctive merit of the Dutch theological criticism is its realism in the heat sense of the term; and that in Prof. van den Bergh's work that merit is especially marked. When there is not from time to time a critical return on the things actually known from the records, plausible hypotheses tend to stand in place of

the facts and to be made the foundations of later deductions, till at last new romances become a kind of substituted orthodoxy. This was to some extent the case with the famous "Tübingen school". The Epistle to the Galatians, being assumed to proceed directly from the Apostle Paul, could be made (as it has been put) a "battering ram" to discredit the account of Paul in Acts; and from a passage or two in the romances known as the "Clementines", the story could be evolved that in the early Church Paul was systematically caricatured as Simon Magus -All this came to bear the stamp of "advanced thought", and to be treated as in unquestionable result of "science"; and to anyone who wished to raise new questions the usual comment, whether from the point of view of the "higher criticism" or of the old orthodoxy, was, "You deny things admitted even by the Tübingen school".

Critical independence, however, could not be repressed; and, after various precursors, Van Manen turned round on the new system of hypotheses and asked what reason there was for the undoubted acceptance of Paul as a known writer who must at least have written something ascribed

to him by the ecclesiastical canon in contrast with Peter, James, John and Jude, whose texts come to us with apparently no worse credentials, but are treated as merely theological compositions written in their names. As Tertullian, whose rhetorical fanaticism was not unaccompanied by a good deal of shrewdness, said

to the Gnostics, when they deprecated the story of Paul's life in comparison with his Epistles: "Apart froth Acts, how do you know that your Paul ever existed?"

In the case of parallel literary phenomena in classical antiquity, the answer would on the whole be easy, though there are a few residual questions still disputed; but Van Manen has shown that the Pauline literature is much more easily explicable as the work of a group or school than as proceeding from a single anomalous man of genius. It is true that, in carrying forward the revised criticism, Prof. van den Bergh has had to modify some of Van Manen's positions. I have found myself under the same necessity. Van Manen placed Gnosticism as affecting Christianity too late; and so one of his arguments for the "pseudepigraphic" character of the Pauline Epistles falls to the ground. The other arguments, however, remain; such as the presupposition that there were organised Christian communities before they could be possible in accordance with the orthodox dating. And, in common also with Prof. van den Bergh, I have found no evidence for Van Manen's postulate that an actual Crucifixion of some individual claimant to be the Messiah promised to Israel was the beginning of Christianity. The real sources of the new religion were not empirical details about a particular Jewish family; but ancient cults and myths that came to be attached to the crisis, at once political and religious, of the fall of the Temple at Jerusalem. After ages of latent popular survival on Palestinian soil, these could spread abroad through coalescence with myths and cults of what we call "pagan" origin. Thus at length came final divergence from the Jewish orthodoxy called "Pharisaism", which stiffened against the crisis instead of modifying itself in response.

Prof. van den Bergh's view, then, as I interpret it, is evolutionary. For every apparent catastrophe, pre-existing causes slowly prepared are to be discovered by close examination. The Gospel did not present itself suddenly to the world as a new phenomenon, but as a doctrine that had issued from the society, not yet completely organised but existing in outline, called the Church. It was fundamentally the cult-legend of the Christian community. The massacre of the children by King Herod is comparable to sagas like those of Krishna and Oedipus, Perseus and Siegfried. The census of Quirinius, ten years later than the death of Herod, is brought into the narrative of the nativity in an impossible way; so that we can neither reconcile Luke (who brings it in) with Matthew (who has the story about Herod and the Magi) nor substitute his account as less legendary. We know, from the Talmud, what was the process of a Jewish trial during the time of the Roman government. In view of this knowledge, the Gospel account of the trial of Jesus is an impossible one. The Pontius Pilate of Philo and Josephus is not in the least like the Pontius Pilate of the Gospel. That after the fall of the Temple all Jewry became Pharisee makes conspicuous the unfairness of the philippics against Pharisaism in the Gospel. All Pharisees are treated as bad Pharisees; whereas both Judaism and Hellenism were converging on something like the Gospel in its moral aspect.

What we call Christian ethics is explicable from the general moral culture of the "Hellenistic" period. Its virtues are those that came to be stressed in the

Graeco-Roman world after the establishment of the imperial monarchy. Sayings even of actual Roman Emperors are taken up into the Gospels. At that late period of civilisation there was no need of a philosopher or moral enthusiast to declare that he who is chief trust serve the rest. Emperors like Augustus and Tiberius could and did describe themselves as public servants: But, above all, the peculiar influence of the growing reaction towards the institution of monarchy, now returning from the East, is to be seen in the resemblance between the titles of Jesus Christ and those given to deified kings regarded as gods incarnate. Here, Prof. van den Bergh notes, a latent rivalry might be observed between the God of the Christians and "Caesar". If, as he hints, the antithesis was likely to appear provocative to the State, we may see in the New Testament the mediaeval conflict between Church and Empire already foreshadowed.

The popular aspiration to peace under a Prince as God and Saviour, he shows, had its sources both in the near and in the remote past. Of social reform, however, Christianity had no idea. Slavery was not condemned by Christian teachers as it was by the later Roman law, which had undergone the Stoic influence. Though the jurists did not, any more than the Christians, call for its immediate abolition, they declared it contrary to natural justice. The Epistle to Philemon is a romantic construction, perhaps with appropriation of a hint from Pliny, and was intended to show how the institution should be regulated as between Christian masters and slaves. That all men are brothers is wrongly held to be a specifically Christian conception: it was completely Stoic. The speech of Paul at Athens is Stoic in content. The narrative in the Acts of the Apostles is written precisely as an educated Greek would write it.

Divergence, indeed, appears when the Resurrection comes in. Yet, with Seneca and Plutarch too, Prof. van den Bergh points out, there is a certain relaxation in strenuousness as contrasted with earlier antiquity: philosophic thought is no longer felt to be sufficient for the conduct of life. There was in the end a hearing for a "setter forth of strange gods".

As he remarks, it is only by getting back into the supernaturalist atmosphere of the time that we can understand the fascination exercised by the various new sects - not solely Christianity. Astrology at first brought, in its own manner, the idea of cosmic law. Manilius finds a certain consolation in this such as Lucretius found in the Epicurean philosophy. The popular effect, however, was different. The planetary gods, with their supposed malign influence over human destiny, later became dreaded tyrants. Their dominance was to be overcome by magic or by prayers to a higher god. Thus the conflict of the Christians is said to be "not against flesh and blood, but against the principedoms, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spirits of evil in the celestial spaces" (Eph. VI. 12). For the anti-Jewish gnosis the God of the Jews was the God of necessity. When Christianity is set against the oppressiveness of the Jewish law, the thought is Hellenistic. Yet there were curious intermediate types that led the way to the "catholicised" gnosis; such as the "Jewish-heathen" sect of the worshippers of Sabazius - the Lord of Sabaoth of the Septuagint combined

with the Phrygian-Thracian Dionysus. Many representations in the catacombs that have been taken for Christian belong to these intermediate types. The coming in of specifically Christian imagery dates from the end of the second to the beginning of the third century. Motives of the Dionysus-cult made their way into Christianity through eclectic Alexandrian Judaism.

The Isis-cult appealed especially to the desire to be freed from the might of necessity. Orphism aimed at deliverance from the circle of births - (compare τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως, James III. 6); Mithraism at redemption from the daemonic oppression of the stars. The Mithraic cult was the most dangerous rival of Christianity. It offered a reconciliation of popular religion with philosophy. The Christian Church found it necessary to appropriate its mysteries; and in the end won, not by refusing all compromise, but by taking over the Jewish sacred books, with which Mithraism could not compete (since it had not a sacred literature of its own); and by humanising and historicising its Redeemer, who, in contrast with the early gnostic "docetism", was held to be of actual flesh and blood. On the many it was the sacramental, magical and occult side of Christianity that exercised a peculiar attraction. The accounts, in the New Testament, of the introduction of the communion are "aetiological cult-stories" - legendary explanations of usages already practised in the communities.

I have selected from Prof. van den Bergh's studies of the "psychological climate" of the New Testament some "radical" positions which will seem startling to many. What "truths of belief", some will ask, remain behind when historical criticism has done its work? For myself, I confess that I have only philosophical convictions. Prof. van den Bergh, I think, would maintain that there are some truths which, dissociated from actual history, can still be least inadequately expressed in terms derived from historic religion. In any case, it seems to me that his investigations give an account of the origins of the creed far more worthy of a great religion than their supposed tracing to local events in the records of a Palestinian sect propagating itself by stories of miracles. To the "psychological climate" of the modern time, these must become more and more incredible; and I perceive signs that instructed theologians are finding in methods of explanation by myth and symbolism a more hopeful way to preserve the ethical and metaphysical truths which they value than in the impossible concrete story ostensibly held by traditional faith.