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LITTLE-KNOWN FACTS ABOUT GREAT HUMANITARIANS

7.—Pythagoras

RELIGIONISTS who do not actively oppose the idea of a harmless diet on the grounds that God gave the animals to man as food—despite the scientific fact that the “diet” was provided millions of years before the intended “consumer” appeared on the globe—are apt to excuse their Church for not demanding what they admit to be a progressive step by saying that most of their co-religionists are not yet ready for it. In so doing they are, whether they know it or not, making out a good case for the argument that philosophy is of greater help to the evolution of man than religion; for centuries before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, Pythagoras of Samos was teaching a way of life that maintained harmlessness as a moral absolute, his non-violent community at Crotona being the pride and wonder of the Western world. As well it might be, for the intelligent vegetarian-humanitarian exponents of the Pythagorean philosophy were precisely the sort of people that the original Gospel of Jesus Christ was intended to produce, but has not done so after 2000 years of its profession, although until the age of Constantine, the Christian community was pacifist.

The fact is that this early Christian policy was an inheritance from Pythagoreanism, via the Essenes who were greatly influenced by it and whose re-discovered library, or scrolls, have proved that Jesus taught many of the doctrines of this Order. Unfortunately the Pythagorean-Essenic features of Christianity were almost completely abandoned, first in the reign of Constantine when, in return for their Faith being made the State religion, the Christian Bishops no longer forbade their congregations to bear arms in defence of the Roman Empire, and secondly, and even more thoroughly, after A.D. 529 when Justinian closed the Athenian Schools of Philosophy in which the teachings of Pythagoras, embodied

in those of Plato and Plotinus, had been, until then, preserved, an act which impeded the further evolution of mankind along humane grounds, for hundreds of years, and which accounts for the fact that 2500 years after the establishment of the School of Crotona, men are still acting as beasts of prey at meal-times, and are themselves suffering from the insensitivity and violence that makes such a diet possible.

Pythagoras was a great eclectic, for he was a devotee of Minerva, the Goddess of Wisdom, and worshipped this deity wherever she was found, whether in Greece, India or Egypt. In his book, *The Message of Plato*, E. J. Urwick points out that “every one of the doctrines which we know formed the gospel of Pythagoras and the Pythagorean brotherhood of Crotona, was an almost exact reproduction of the cardinal doctrines of the Indian Vidya and the Indian Yoga... So much so that the Indian Vedantins to-day do not hesitate to claim Pythagoras as one of themselves, one of their great expounders whose very name was only the Greek form of the Indian title *Pitta Guru*, or Father-Teacher.”

The well-known fact that the Brahmins abstained from flesh-eating seems greatly to have annoyed Clement of Alexandria, and other theologians of the Early Church who may subconsciously have resented a higher ethic than their own, for in Strom. Ch. IX: 60, he wrote: “Those who from a hatred of the flesh ungratefully long to have nothing to do with the marriage union and the eating of reasonable food, are both blockheads and atheists, and exercise an irrational chastity like the other heathen. For example, the Brahmins neither eat animal flesh nor drink wine.”

But Pythagoras himself acknowledged his chief indebtedness to the priests of Isis with

whom he sojourned for a considerable time imbibing the wisdom of the Goddess. Philostratus, writing in the reign of Lucius Septimus Severus, says of him in his *Life of Apollonius*:

"They who admire Pythagoras of Samos say of him that he wore no clothing taken from animals, and that he forbore the use of animals in food and sacrifice, offering up only cakes of honey, and frankincense and hymns."

These were, of course, the sacrifices demanded by Isis, Ceres, Ashtoreth or any other of the many names given to the one all-merciful Queen of Heaven.

The date of the birth of Pythagoras has been disputed, but it is generally believed to have been in the 6th century B.C. at Samos. His family was a famous one and he received an excellent education. One of his tutors was Pherecydes, the great astronomer, who was also one of the first thinkers in the West to have taught the immortality of the soul and the doctrine of metempsychosis.

Modern Pythagoreans are inclined to play down the importance of their Master's humanitarian outlook and to concentrate on his scientific capacities, which were certainly very great—possibly in order to make him more popular in a scientific age. But the ideas of the truly great should not be made to conform to any one age, since they are eternally true; and all ages should be made to conform to them.

It is certainly recounted that on discovering his famous "Pythagorean theorem" the sage was so delighted that he sacrificed a hecatomb of oxen in thanksgiving (it is explained that these were tiny figures of wax, not living animals, the sacrifice of which would have constituted direct disobedience to the Goddess of Wisdom who forbade the shedding of blood on her altars); but Pythagoras, like Plato and other great philosophers who came after him, considered that empirical science was as child's play and unworthy of the attention of adult men, compared with the divine wisdom or philosophy that taught men how to think, live and behave. His humane outlook being the direct outcome of his philosophy, and *vice versa*, those who minimise his teachings on *Ahimsa*, which were so strikingly like those of the modern Gandhiji, obviously do not understand the man. Ovid, living nearer to his time, writes of the great philosopher in his *Metamorphoses* that "he was the first to ban the serving of animal food at our tables,"

and pictures him as pointing out the treachery and ingratitude involved in butchering trustful, harmless animals for food when earth so bountifully supplies fruit, grain, sweet-flavoured herbs, milk and honey, and as saying:

"Alas! what wickedness to swallow flesh into our own flesh, to fatten our greedy bodies by cramming in other bodies, to have one living creature fed by the death of another! In the midst of such wealth as earth, the best of mothers, provides, nothing forsooth satisfies you, but to behave like the Cyclopes, inflicting sorry wounds with cruel teeth! You cannot appease the hungry cravings of your wicked, gluttonous stomachs except by destroying some other life."

Juvenal, complaining of Roman gluttony, wrote in Satire XV:

"What would not Pythagoras denounce, or whither would he not flee, could he see these monstrous sights—he who abstained from the flesh of all animals as though they were human."

Both these writers of antiquity testify to the fact that it was compassion—universal compassionate love for all sentient creatures—that motivated the doctrines of Pythagoras; but Clement of Alexandria refused to accord such purity of motive to the pagan philosopher and attributed his abstinence to his "dream as to the transmigration of souls," (Strom. Book VII. Ch. 4: 32); while his pupil, Origen, with extreme self-righteousness, observed in the *contra Celsum* (Book V: 49):

"Notice the difference in the reason for the abstention from living things between the Pythagoreans and the ascetics among us. For they abstain from living things on account of the myth about the soul's reincarnation.... But if we are abstemious we do this because we bruise the body and bring it into subjection."

It was evidently impossible for him to feel, or credit others with feeling, compassion for helpless creatures, nor could he see, or admit, that such compassion must spring naturally from the Pythagorean clear and mystic vision of the unity of all life, the oneness of things, described by Ovid who, explaining the Master's philosophy, which was also that of the Wisdom Goddess and the Indians, wrote:

"The heavens and everything that lies below them change their shape, as does the earth and all that it contains. We, too, who are

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part of creation, since we are not merely bodies but winged souls as well, can find a home in the form of wild beasts and be lodged in the breasts of cattle. Therefore let us leave unmolested those bodies which may contain the souls of our parents or of our brothers, or those of other relatives, or at least the souls of man."

This sense of the oneness of the essence of all life, if understood and felt, must inevitably result in compassion for all sentient creatures. Unfortunately it has not been taught by the religion of the West for 2000 years. It was deliberately rejected by the theologians, (although as an hypothesis, it logically stemmed from the compassionate love taught and manifested by the Essenic Jesus Christ) simply because it was a pagan view, from which it was essential for the new Faith to be "different," even at the cost of Truth. Hence the insensitivity and violence stemming from centuries of lack of this universal compassion, in the present age, two millennia after one who was known as the Lord of Compassion came to save us from just these things.

Pythagoras imposed nothing on his followers, for he knew that a logical following out of his philosophy must result in living the sort of life that he and his inner circle of students, the Theoretikoi, lived. Therefore some of his students have been reported as abstaining only from certain prohibited animals and drinking wine; but Iamblichus and Porphyry tell us that Pythagoras himself and his true disciples totally abstained from wine as well as flesh, drinking only water.

Like Toistoy of our times, Pythagoras believed that it was through a harmless diet that a better, non-violent and compassionate humanity would be evolved, since "those accustomed to abominate the slaughter of other animals as unjust and unnatural, will think it yet more unjust and unlawful to kill a man, or to engage in war."

The clear directives that Pythagoras left both through his example and teachings as to the leading of a "higher life" than that of the majority of men, make him a moral leader of the first magnitude, and perhaps the greatest of all humanitarians. Had mankind followed his example, they would have been led out of violence, war, self-indulgence and animalism into the Golden Age of which he so often spoke and which a later Teacher designated "the Kingdom of Heaven."