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The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century

Mr. H.S. Chamberlain's work on "The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century" was taken simultaneously by Theodore Roosevelt and Lyman Abbott for reading; and each wrote, without previous consultation, his views of the book. It so happened that Mr. Roosevelt treated the book in its general aspects; Dr. Abbott took a single phase of the work—its treatment of the Jewish people. We publish here these two entirely independent opinions, which repeat each other only in the first few opening sentences.—THE EDITORS

THIS is a noteworthy book in more ways than one. It is written by an Englishman who has been educated on the Continent, and has lived there until he is much more German than English. Previously he had written a book in French, while this particular book was written in German, and has only recently been translated into English. Adequately to review the book, or rather to write an adequate essay suggested by it, would need the space that would have been taken by an old-time Quarterly or Edinburgh Reviewer a century or fourscore years ago. I have called the book "noteworthy," and this it certainly is. It ranks with Buckle's "History of Civilization," and still more with Gobineau's "Inégalité des Races Humaines," for its brilliancy and suggestiveness and also for its startling inaccuracies and lack of judgment. A witty English critic once remarked of Mitford that he had all the qualifications of an historian—violent partiality and extreme wrath. Mr. Chamberlain certainly possesses these qualifications in excess, and, combined with a queer vein of the erratic in his temperament, they almost completely offset the value of his extraordinary erudition, extending into widely varied fields, and of his occasionally really brilliant inspiration. He is, however, always entertaining; which is of itself no mean merit, in view of the fact that most serious writers seem unable to regard themselves as serious unless they are also dull. Mr. Chamberlain's thesis is that the nineteenth century, and therefore the twentieth and all future centuries, depend for everything in them worth mentioning and preserving upon the Teutonic branch of the Aryan race. He holds that there is no such thing as a general progress of mankind, that progress is only for those whom he calls the Teutons, and that when they mix with or are intruded upon by alien and, as he regards them, lower races, the result is fatal. Much that he says regarding the prevalent loose and sloppy talk about the general progress of humanity, the equality and identity of races, and the like, is not only perfectly true, but is emphatically worth considering by a generation accustomed, as its forefathers for the preceding generations were accustomed, to accept as true and useful thoroughly pernicious doctrines taught by well-meaning and feeble-minded sentimentalists; but Mr. Chamberlain himself is quite as fantastic an extremist as any of those whom he derides, and an extremist whose doctrines are based upon foolish hatred is even more unlovely than an extremist whose doctrines are based upon foolish benevolence. Mr. Chamberlain's hatreds cover a wide gamut.

They include Jews, Darwinists, the Roman Catholic Church, the people of southern Europe, Peruvians, Semites, and an odd variety of literary men and historians.

To this sufficiently incongruous collection of antipathies he adds a much smaller selection of violent attachments, ranging from imaginary primitive Teutons and Aryans to Immanuel Kant, and Indian theology, metaphysics, and philosophy—he draws sharp distinctions between all three, and I merely use them to indicate his admiration for the Indian habit of thought, an admiration which goes hand in hand with and accentuates his violent hatred for what most sane people regard as the far nobler thought contained, for instance, in the Old Testament. He continually contradicts himself, or at least uses words in such diametrically opposite senses as to convey the effect of contradiction; and so it would be possible to choose phrases of his which contradict what is here said; but I think that I give a correct impression of his teaching as a whole.

As he touches lightly on an infinitely varied range of subjects, it would be possible to choose almost at random passages to justify what is said above. Take, for instance, his dogmatic assertions concerning faith and works. He frantically condemns the doctrine of salvation by works and frantically exalts the doctrine of salvation by faith. Much that he says about both doctrines must be taken in so mystical and involved a sense that it contains little real meaning to ordinary men. Yet he is also capable of expressing, on this very subject, noble thought in a lofty manner. In one of his sudden lapses into brilliant sanity he emphasizes the fact that Saint Francis of Assisi was faith incorporate and yet the special apostle of good works; and that Martin Luther, the advocate of redemption by faith, consecrated his life and revealed to others the secret of good works—“free works done only to please God, not for the sake of piety.”

Unfortunately, these brilliant lapses into sanity are fixed in a matrix of fairly bedlamite passion and non-sanity. Mr. Chamberlain jeers with reason at the Roman Curia because until 1822 it kept on the Index all books which taught that the earth went round the sun; but really such action is not much worse than that of a man professing to write a book like this at the outset of the twentieth century who takes the attitude Mr. Chamberlain does toward the teaching of Darwin. The acceptance of the fundamental truths of evolution are quite as necessary to sound scientific thought as the acceptance of the fundamental truths concerning the solar system; and the attempt that Mr. Chamberlain in one place makes to draw a distinction between them is fantastic. Again, take what Mr. Chamberlain says of Aryans and Teutons. He bursts the flood-gates of scorn when he deals with persons who idealize humanity, or, as he styles it, “so-called humanity”; and he says: “For this humanity about which man has philosophized to such an extent suffers from the serious defect that it does not exist at all. History reveals to us a great number of various human beings, but no such thing as humanity”; yet on this very page he attributes the history of the growth of our civilization to its “Teutonic” character, and he uses the word “Teuton” as well as the word “Aryan” with as utter a looseness and vagueness as ever any philanthropist or revolutionist used the word “humanity.” All that he says in derision of such a forced use of the word “humanity” could with a much greater percentage of truthfulness be said as regards the words and ideas symbolized by Teutonism and Aryanism as Mr. Chamberlain uses these terms. Indeed, as he uses them they amount to little more than expressions of his personal likes and dislikes. His statement of the raceless chaos into which the Roman Empire finally lapsed is, on the whole, just, and, to use the words continually coming to one’s mind in dealing with him, both brilliant and suggestive. But in his anxiety to claim everything good for Aryans and Teutons he finally reduces himself to the position of insisting that wherever he sees a man whom he admires he must postulate for him Aryan, and, better still, Teutonic blood. He likes

David, so he promptly makes him an Aryan Amorite. He likes Michael Angelo, and Dante, and Leonardo da Vinci, and he instantly says that they are Teutons; but he does not like Napoleon, and so he says that Napoleon is a true representative of the raceless chaos. The noted Italians in question, he states, were all of German origin, descended from the Germans who had conquered Italy in the sixth century. Now, of course, if Mr. Chamberlain is willing to be serious with himself, he must know perfectly well that even by the time of Dante seven or eight centuries had passed, and by the time of the other great Italians he mentions eight or ten centuries had passed, since the Germanic invasion. In other words, these great Italians were separated from the days of the Gothic and Lombard invasions by the distance which separates modern England from the Norman invasion; and his thesis has just about as much substance as would be contained in the statement that Wellington, Nelson, Turner, Wordsworth, and Tennyson excelled in their several spheres because they were all pure-blood descendants of the motley crew that came in with William the Conqueror. The different ethnic elements which entered into the Italy of the seventh century were in complete solution by the thirteenth, and it would have been quite as impossible to trace them to their several original strains as nowadays to trace in the average Englishman the various strains of blood from his Norman, Saxon, Celtic, and Scandinavian ancestors. Nor does Mr. Chamberlain mind believing two incompatible things in the quickest possible succession if they happen to suit his philosophy of the moment. Generally, when he speaks of the Teuton he thinks of the tall, long-headed man of the north; although, because of some crank in his mind, he puts in the proviso that he may have black as well as blond hair. The round-skulled man of middle Europe he usually condemns; but if his mind happens to run with approbation toward the Tyrolese, for instance, he at once forgets what ethnic division of Europeans it is to which they belong, and accepts them as typical Teutons. He greatly admires the teaching of the Apostle Paul, and so he endeavors to persuade himself that the Apostle Paul was not really a Jew; but he does not like the teachings of the Epistle of James on the subject of good works (teachings for which I have a peculiar sympathy, by the way), and accordingly he says that James was a pure Jew.

Fundamentally, very many of Mr. Chamberlain's ideas are true and noble. I admire the morality with which he condemns the intolerance of Calvin and Luther no less strongly than the intolerance of their Roman opponents, and yet his acceptance of the fact that they could not have done their great work if there had not been in their characters an alloy which made it possible for actual humanity to accept their teaching. But even his sense of morality is as curiously capricious as that of Carlyle himself, and as little trustworthy. He glories in the pointless and wanton barbarity of the destruction of Carthage in the Third Punic War as saving Europe from the Afro-Asiatic peril—pure nonsense, of course, for Carthage was then no more dangerous to Rome than Corinth was, and the sacks of the two cities stand on a par as regards any importance in their after effects. Perhaps his attitude toward Byron is more practically mischievous, or at least shows a much less desirable trait of character. He says that the personality of Byron “has something repulsive in it for every thorough Teuton, because we nowhere encounter in it the idea of duty,” which makes him “unsympathetic, un-Teutonic”; but he adds that Teutons do not object in the least to his licentiousness, and, on the contrary, see in it “a proof of genuine race”! Really, this reconciliation of a high ideal of duty with gross licentiousness would be infamous if it were not so unspeakably comic. On the next page, by the way, Mr. Chamberlain says that Louis XIV was anti-Teutonic in his persecution of the Protestants, but a thorough Teuton when he defended the liberties of the Gallican church against Rome! Now such intellectual antics as these, and the haphazard use of any kind of a name (without the least reference to its ordinary use, provided

Mr. Chamberlain has taken a fancy to it) to represent or symbolize any individual or attribute of which he approves, makes it very difficult to accept the book as having any serious merit whatever. Yet interspersed with innumerable pages which at best are those of an able man whose mind is not quite sound, and at worst lose their brilliancy without their irrationality, there are many pages of deep thought and lofty morality based upon wide learning and wide literary and even scientific knowledge. There could be no more unsafe book to follow implicitly, and few books of such pretensions more ludicrously unsound; and yet it is a book which students and scholars, and men who, though neither students nor scholars, are yet deeply interested in life, must have on their book-shelves. Much the same criticism should be passed upon him that he himself passes upon John Fiske, to whose great work, "The History of the Discovery of America," he gives deserved and unstinted praise, but at whom he rails for solemnly, and, as Mr. Chamberlain says, with more than Papal pretensions to infallibility, setting forth complete patent solutions for all the problems connected not merely with the origin but with the destiny of man. Mr. Chamberlain differentiates sharply between the admirable work Fiske did in such a book as that treating of the discovery of America and the work he did when he ventured to dogmatize loosely, after the manner of Darwin's successors in the '70s and '80s, upon a scanty collection of facts very imperfectly understood. But Mr. Chamberlain himself would have done far better if in his book he had copied the methods and modesty of Fiske at his best—the methods and modesty of such books as Sutherland's "Origin and Growth of the Moral Instinct"—and had refrained from taking an attitude of cock-sureness concerning problems which at present no one can more than imperfectly understand. He is unwise to follow Brougham's example and make omniscience his foible.

Yet, after all is said, a man who can write such a really beautiful and solemn appreciation of true Christianity, of true acceptance of Christ's teachings and personality, as Mr. Chamberlain has done, a man who can sketch as vividly as he has sketched the fundamental facts of the Roman empire in the first three centuries of our era, a man who can warn us as clearly as he has warned about some of the pressing dangers which threaten our social fabric because of indulgence in a morbid and false sentimentality, a man, in short, who has produced in this one book materials for half a dozen excellent books on utterly diverse subjects, represents an influence to be reckoned with and seriously to be taken into account.