

Recht und Schuld in der Geschichte
A. Schlatter
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In this address delivered before the University of Tübingen on the anniversary of the Emperor's birthday (January 27, 1915) Dr. Schlatter makes certain observations in regard to the war and specifically in regard to the new emphasis which it has thrown upon the ethical factor in the shaping of history. That the nations are animated in this gigantic conflict by what appears to them the cause of righteousness and appeal to the ideal, ethical interests, which they believe themselves to be defending, in justification of their course of action, is in his view an eloquent witness to the reality and primacy of the responsible human will, with its alternative choice of right and wrong, in determining the historical process. As will be seen from this, the address is in no sense a flamboyant war-document, although, of course, it voices a very ardent patriotism and a strong conviction as to the merits of the conflict from the German point of view. Dr. Schlatter makes his observations not as a patriot primarily, but as a calm, philosophical observer of the great historical movement that is taking place. He is fair enough not to confine the ethical signature which, at least subjectively, the conflict bears, to his own side, but freely recognizes its presence in the mind of the British nation, which he calls "the strongest and most venerable of our opponents," and even in the *revanche* idea of the French he does not ignore the quasi-ethical ingredient. But his main contention is, that the war as a historical phenomenon has discredited the modern treatment of history as determined almost exclusively by involuntary, physical, social, and economic forces. The "majesty of history" as residing in its essentially ethical complexion stands once more revealed. Not the historians of intellectualism or culturism, but the historians of ethics, like Treitschke and Carlyle have at present the ear of the people.

Also the theory, characterized by the author as of Hellenic provenience, of the preponderant influence of individual genius in shaping historical issues, receives according to Dr. Schlatter scant support from the experience of the present struggle. Not the individuals, but the broad ranks of the nation itself stand back of the movement.

There is undoubtedly considerable truth in these observations. The war has had a clarifying effect in regard to the principle that only ideal and moral interests of the highest nature can ever justify such a fearful catastrophe from the standpoint of human responsibility. This may be obscured, but it cannot be altered by the fact that both contending parties claim for themselves with equal emphasis the championship of the right. So far as they do so sincerely their appeal to the ethical standard is a sincere tribute to the supremacy of ethics in all human affairs. And even so far as it is done insincerely, and the national or individual conduct is unethical under ethical pretense, the tribute still retains its impressiveness. Much has been said about the religious awakening which the solemn experiences of the war have produced among the several nations involved in it. Paradoxical though it may seem, along the line of Dr. Schlatter's reasoning a parallel hope may be expressed in regard to ethical results.

Less convincing appears to us what the author says about the norm by which the ethical consciousness awakened to a new sense of its own reality and importance ought to be measured. Dr. Schlatter is disinclined to conceive this norm with the necessary objectivity. He thinks the norm should be

viewed in the closest contact with and dependence on historical developments, and seeks in this way the solution of the problem that the contending nations appeal to the same norm. What he characterizes as “geschichtslose” and therefore “grundlose Ethik,” owes its origin, according to his mind to Hellenic philosophy, and is a companion-product to the epistemological method, which relies on abstract concepts and not on concrete observation as a source of knowledge. This comparison seems to us out of place. Even in the theoretical sphere the norm is not found by mere induction, but given in part *a priori* so that it confronts us with objectivity and from the religious point of view acquires the character of revelation. Even more so is this the case in the moral sphere, where the abnormality of sin requires a greater objectivity of standard. No appeal to the internalized ethics of Jesus or Paul can in any way alter this fact. The nations of Europe have themselves in their conduct of the war furnished the most convincing evidence of the fact that humanity has not outgrown the need of an objective rule of right and wrong. The test of rightness which Dr. Schlatter proposes, viz., that a line of conduct, in order to be ethically justifiable, must be “gemeinschaftbildend” is in that general sense entirely inadequate. Whether an action or line of conduct promotive of national social coherence is right or wrong depends not on its adaptation to that end, but on the character and aims of the communal body, which it seeks to promote or preserve and this character must in each case submit to the objective judgment of the law of God. We fear that through applying this subjectivized norm to the historical judgment, the latter is in danger of coming again under the influence of those unethical drifts of historical science against whose influence the author issues his earnest warning and for which he hopes that experience of the war will bring a needful corrective.