

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bib-sacra\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php)

## ARTICLE IV.

BACON'S "CHRISTIANITY OLD AND NEW."<sup>1</sup>

BY EDWIN S. CARR, A.M., D.D.,

CHILLICOTHE, ILL.

THE author does not spend much time at the outset in characterizing the "old Christianity." Here and there through the book its archaic features are suggested; as, on page 3: "a system committed once for all to a divinely appointed hierarchy, or embodied in a miraculous book."

Bacon's "new Christianity" is not embodied in a miraculous book. The alleged miraculous occurrences of Scripture are repudiated entirely as matters of fact; they are as indifferent to the truly critical historian as Gordon has shown them to be for the theologian (p. 57). The author declares there can be no halfway work in applying the tests of criticism, — they must be applied to the New Testament as well as the Old. With the vision of Elisha's servant and the ascension of Elijah go the Transfiguration and the visible ascension of Jesus. How about Christ's resurrection? The author nowhere suggests the bodily resurrection of Christ as a fact. It is rather a spiritual experience of the disciples; "it deserves the study of psychologists such as the late William James" (p. 60). I first got this idea from a German theological student at Heidelberg in 1888. He said, "The resurrection was *bloss psychologisch*, only his disciples saw

<sup>1</sup>Christianity Old and New. By Benjamin W. Bacon. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1914. \$1.00.

him." This doctrine was not taught at that time at Yale Divinity School.

It is interesting to note in this connection that the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions holds its annual meeting in New Haven this month. This society is founded upon the "Last Command of the Risen Christ," and at its meetings this alleged Last Command is frequently and reverently quoted. The members of this society will assemble in New Haven as the guests of a School of Religion which teaches that the Risen Christ never uttered the Last Command, for the very simple and conclusive reason that he never rose!

When I was a student at Yale Divinity School in 1883-87, the Bible was regarded as a miraculous book. Dr. Timothy Dwight, then occupying Bacon's chair of New Testament Greek, once said: "If there is anything of questionable historicity in the New Testament, I think it is the statement about the dead coming forth and appearing in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' death." This was regarded as approaching dangerous heresy. Bacon's Christianity is certainly new from the old Yale standpoint of Dwight and Fisher.

I will dwell a little upon Bacon's philosophy of miracle, as it supplies the key to his method and his system. "Miracles are not made by the facts, but by the interpretation put upon the facts. And each age makes its own interpretation. The same phenomena are to one man, of one age, miracles; to another of a later age, 'providential' occurrences, or perhaps only operations of 'natural law' imperfectly understood. It is not the business of the historical critic to decide philosophically which point of view is more correct, but to read records of the past with eyes trained to the light of the writer's period" (p. 58). In other words, the fact is not the

essential thing, but its subjective effect on the observer. In the apologetics of the "old Christianity" it was assumed that a man who saw Lazarus or Jesus rise from the dead could know the fact and give credible testimony in relation to it. In Bacon's "new Christianity" the testimony of a first-century Jew on such a point would be worthless, because he probably got the suggestion from the story of the man who came to life when his body touched the bones of Elisha (2 Kings xiii. 21). The fact cannot be substantiated by evidence; but what matter? If the Jew believed Christ and Lazarus were alive, although in reality they were dead, he might strike out and preach Christ as the risen Redeemer, and so found a world-conquering religion. Bacon's "new Christianity" is evidently a revamping of Sabatier's "Religion of the Spirit,"—equally vitiated by the false subjectivism which, since Schleiermacher, has been the curse of Protestant theology.

It is true that Bacon criticizes Mythical Idealism as too subjective; he declares that myth can nourish faith only so far as its underlying ideas are "true," corresponding to observed fact (p. 119). In his opening chapters, however, he so discredits all his New Testament witnesses, that when he comes to establish the "historical" Christ, his result is absurdly illusory. Paul, the first witness, perverts all the facts to fit his Greek ideas of incarnation; Peter twists the facts to fit his preconceived theories of the Messiah, etc. If these witnesses are as worthless as Bacon represents them to be in his opening chapters, and not the historic Christ but Aryan myth is "the parent from which Christianity drew the vital energy of its earliest and greatest days" (p. 80), Bacon must in consistency stand with the Mythical Idealists, holding that "the results of criticism, applied to the records

of Christian faith, have been entirely destructive, — nothing whatever has survived but myth" (p. 43).

Bacon directs his criticism against nineteenth-century liberalism and twentieth-century idealism. In opposition and contrast he develops his new Christianity.

The type of nineteenth-century liberalism is assumed to be President Eliot's "Religion of the Future." Eliot holds that criticism has destroyed nothing but worthless myth and legend, and restored the concrete fact. The mist of dogma which enveloped the plain and sublimely simple precepts of the mechanic Teacher of Nazareth has been dispelled, and Christianity is restored to its "Hebrew purity" (p. 44). The basal principle of Bacon's criticism of Eliot is that we are dealing with the history of religion, and that the thought rather than the thing concerns us. Historic facts are important, but more important are contemporary judgments of the significance of facts, inferences, convictions, faiths, doctrines; because what we aim to discover is the progress of man's inward experience, his religious instinct (p. 47). In this subjective point of view, the solid ground of New Testament history, which has been held in common by both liberal and orthodox American thinkers, — A. P. Peabody, Charles Eliot, Timothy Dwight, George P. Fisher, — is abandoned for the cloudland of subjective impression and feeling. Jesus, whom our American leaders have held to be in fact the way, the truth, and the life, becomes merely a peg on which were hung the vague and groundless theosophic speculations of a decadent heathenism. Bacon asserts that in the free-for-all struggle for supremacy in the Roman world, those heathen ideas of incarnation, etc., which were attached to the name of Jesus won the victory; and he ascribes this fact to the power of Jesus as an historic, concrete, personality. Would

it not then be more reasonable, and as much in harmony with all the facts, to assume in essence the traditional theory of a transcendent personality, back of and dominating the entire religious development, embracing in his teaching all that was true and vital in both Gentile and Jewish thought?

Eliot demands a substantial, historic Jesus as the basis of faith. Bacon here contends against Eliot that the Jew to whom I refer above, who believed that Jesus and Lazarus had risen from the dead, could preach just as effectively regardless of the objective fact; and then he proceeds to affirm that the reason the Jew conquered the Roman world by his preaching was because Christ was an historical personage, — he actually did rise from the dead. In his argument against the mythical idealists in the next chapter, Bacon directly reverses these contentions. The idealist says nothing remains in the New Testament but myth, subjective belief is the only essential. Now Bacon declares that subjective belief is baseless and helpless without a substantial historic foundation, and he affirms that New Testament criticism is quite prepared to furnish this substantial foundation to the idealist, though for some mysterious reason Bacon refused, in the preceding chapter, to accommodate President Eliot in the same way. Bacon does well to attempt to repudiate the phantom Christ of the idealists; but, manifestly, his premises and his generally subjective attitude associate him, unavoidably, with that party.

How did it come about that Bacon's new Christianity sprang from the seemingly unpromising soil of the old Christianity which flourished at Yale a generation ago? When I first entered Yale in the early '80's Bacon was about leaving the Seminary. I regarded him with profound respect as the grandson of the great Leonard Bacon, and perhaps with awe

as the great Ben Bacon, the distinguished half-back of the 'Varsity team. The influences which found young Bacon in this conservative environment and shaped him into the iconoclast of to-day I conceive to be mainly two: (1) the dominance in our American thinking of Germany's extreme and fantastic critical theories; and (2) the incoming of evolution. I pass to consider the second influence, as it is more to my immediate purpose. When I first went to Yale, evolution was just beginning to affect the University seriously. I think the first general university lecture I attended in the fall of 1883 was by Dr. James D. Dana, aiming to show the general harmony between the geological ages and the creation days of Genesis. In the Seminary, Harris, Fisher, and the rest recognized vaguely "progress in revelation," but the center of the Yale theology of that day was a static mass of doctrinal material which the thoroughgoing evolutionist would repudiate as impossible. Its essential features were: (1) a miraculous person of Christ; and (2) a miraculous book. This Christ was the power of God and the wisdom of God, — he did not need the intellectual assistance of the Greek philosopher, nor aid from the heathen religions or the Roman state, in propagating his gospel. His disciples, clear-eyed, had seen his glory, and, knowing his heavenly and infallible truth, made known to men the full counsel of God, without myth, legend, or priestly humbug of any sort. Evolution will have none of this, as a real happening in Judea two thousand years ago. As Strauss puts it: "The Idea is not wont to express itself perfectly in one individual and imperfectly in all the rest. The demand now is for a race-ideal. God is to become incarnate in the race, instead of in a single individual."

The second feature of old Yale's Christianity was no less

repugnant to the evolutionary theory, — a miraculous book. It was written by men who saw and knew facts and who reported them with dependable accuracy. They possessed, in practical fullness, the faith once delivered to the saints. I once asked Professor Fisher: "What is progress in theology? Is it the more and more complete grasp of that sum of Christian truth which lay in the minds of Christ's first disciples? Or, is the movement to something above and beyond what they knew and experienced?" After a moment's thought he replied, — "It is the first." Here then we have a miraculous book, written by men miraculously taught and guided. Note that these ideas were central and dominant in Bacon's early environment, and observe, too, that he is descended from a long and famous line of defenders of stalwart New England orthodoxy.

The first section of the book we are discussing has the title, "Evolution of Religion." "It has been taken for granted that the truth or falsity of a belief could be determined by the mode of its attainment. We have arguments of this type: Humanity has reached its theistic world-view through the devious paths of primitive folk ways and nature-myths. Argol, the theistic world-view is a delusion" (p. 28). This would have been about the opinion of the old Christianity of Yale, where we were taught, and I still believe, for that matter, that any pure and worthy theism the world possesses came by revelation from Christ's transcendent person. The Bacon of to-day, however, is a thoroughgoing evolutionist, so it is good-bye to a miraculous book, written by men miraculously taught and guided; is it also good-bye to a miraculous Christ?

It is well known to all students of doctrine that the person of Christ is always the crux for the reforming theologian. It is a simple and pleasing task to appease liberal thought by



throwing away the miracles and in general the supernatural elements of the old Christianity; but if a man is still to do business as an orthodox theologian he must retain some features of the traditional Jesus. And having abandoned miracle, and patronized or ridiculed those who clamor for signs and wonders, it is awkward to construct a person of Christ who obviously has miraculous features. Schleiermacher had this trying experience, as is true of Gordon and Foster in our day; and Bacon appears as a fellow sufferer in this goodly company. How can Bacon convince a hard-headed and more or less skeptical world that Jesus is the Christ, with the Father and the Spirit to be worshiped and glorified? He has discredited all witnesses as biased and incompetent; he has discredited his Christ by teaching that his religion owed its start in the world to myth and legend and lucky external circumstance. How then prove his Christ sufficiently supernatural to serve the purposes of orthodox faith? Hume, Zeller, and others declare a miracle can never be substantiated by evidence; who can question it, with such witnesses as those of Bacon! The tremendous antecedent probability is that Jesus was of common human clay, however distinguished and gifted. Obviously, every rule of evidence and reason would force Bacon to stand with President Eliot, and say: "Jesus is a noble character, possibly the world's moral ideal, but in his nature and character there is nothing supernatural." And the amazing thing is that this is exactly what Bacon does not do.

On the contrary, he quotes practically every classical passage in the New Testament exalting Jesus as Redeemer, Lord, Christ, incarnate God. And Bacon nowhere questions, but everywhere implies, that these titles apply in fullest measure to Jesus. And surely this should satisfy the most bigoted

of conservatives. And so, like a well-instructed scribe, Professor Bacon brings forth from his treasure of critical science things new and old. Theology is modernized and reconstructed, the lion of evolutionary science lies down with the lamb of Christian faith, and the golden age of love and peace dawns upon our troubled world.

But when we rub our eyes and begin to question how this sleight-of-hand trick was done, we quickly discover it to be a most manifest fakè. And here appears the beauty and the supreme excellence of Bacon's method: "The question is not as to the fact, but as to the interpretation put upon the fact." Bacon nowhere asserts that Jesus was, two thousand years ago, or is now, Redeemer, Lord, Christ, incarnate God. He assures us, however, on his authority as an expert in New Testament interpretation, that, two thousand years ago, Paul, Peter, Mark, and some others believed these things about Jesus. It seems probable that these persons derived some pleasure and profit from believing these things about Jesus; although we are confronted by the somewhat disconcerting fact that, because of this belief, Paul was beheaded and Peter was crucified. If you will believe these things about Jesus now, it may help you some morally and spiritually; and it may be said for your encouragement that it is much safer now than it appears to have been two thousand years ago, to believe and preach things which have no actual or historic foundation. The scoffer may affirm that beheading or crucifixion is not too severe a penalty for a man who works off such a fraud on the public; but Professor Bacon doubtless assures the converts of the new Christianity that it is a striking proof of the soundness of the evolution theory and of the perennial and indestructible vitality of our holy faith that these conditions are all changed.

As an orthodox Congregational clergyman, I desire to state that neither Professor Bacon, nor Dr. George A. Gordon, nor any other of our theological reformers whose names now come to mind, is authorized to speak for me, as a defender of our ancient and orthodox faith. If forced to a choice, rather than accept the fake Christ of Bacon's new Christianity, or the phantom Christ of the Mythical Idealists, I would at once choose the comparatively reasonable and historically comprehensible Jesus of President Eliot. And I am confident that the rank and file of our orthodox Congregational membership will agree with me, when they understand the absurdly illusory nature of the "reconstructions" of our New Theology. I believe that our Congregational churches are of too high a level of intelligence to be permanently deceived by these combinations of fallacy and fake.