

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 *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE
CHURCHMAN

MAY, 1888.

ART. I.—CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT CHRIST.

IN the numerous reviews of national progress which have lately excited our attention, much stress has been laid on our alleged social improvement in morals and manners, though the picture has, unhappily, been sorely darkened by the undeniable existence of some lamentable scandals. In like manner we have been thanking God for many blessings which have been granted in the way of Church advancement; but in this case, too, the retrospect has been chequered by the alleged defection of large numbers of the cultivated classes from the faith. These two subjects naturally combine themselves under the lesson suggested by the title I have chosen. An attempt has been made to rest the new religion or morality on some other than the historical Christian basis, and yet all the power and life which it possesses were undoubtedly supplied from the pure springs of Christianity; and if men's faith has begun, indeed, to fade away and perish, it is only so far as that spurious Christianity has been severed from belief in Christ.

It is needless to say that we regard "Christianity without Christ" as a sheer dream and delusion. But the phrase describes with some exactness the attitude of those who are trying "to run with the hare and hold with the hounds" by claiming for the sceptic all the gains, while releasing him from all the restrictions, of the religious life, under which latter the trials of faith are included.

The most grotesque, and by far the most self-assertive, of recent attempts to divorce the framework of Christianity from its Divine Founder was made in France some thirty-six years ago, in the scheme connected with the name of Auguste Comte. "In the name of the Past and of the Future," he declared, in October, 1851, "the servants of Humanity come forward to

claim as their due the general direction of this world. Their object is to constitute at length a real Providence in all departments, moral, intellectual, and material. Consequently they exclude, once for all, from political supremacy, all the different servants of God, Catholic, Protestant, or Deist, as being at once behindhand and a cause of disturbance."¹ In other words, he offers us Providence without God; a religion resting on the worship of Humanity instead of that of the Divine; and he makes this offer with the childish assumption that he has plenary power to fulfil his promises and give effect to his will. He might well call this an "uncompromising announcement," though its failure makes it now look more ridiculous than mischievous. And yet mischievous it undoubtedly was, as giving an impetus to the new unbelief, from which agnosticism, with other forms of error, have issued. But what it concerns us now to note is the fact that it attempted to erect a phantom mockery of the Church, which was to bear a strange external resemblance to Christianity, yet without Christ. It was to be a Church devoted to the Positivist worship. It had its own ritual, its twofold form of prayers, its hierarchy, its nine sacraments, its calendar, its Saints' Days. Its worship, like that of the Church, was to be partly private and partly public, addressed respectively, the private to *Woman (!)*, the public to Humanity (p. 117). "In painting or in sculpture, equally, the symbol of our Divinity will always be *a woman of the age of thirty, with her son in her arms!*" (p. 142). The Positivist Calendar devotes the sixth month to Catholicism under the heading of St. Paul. It contains names for twenty-eight days, such as those of St. Luke, of the chief early Fathers, of sainted women like St. Monica and St. Pulcheria, of mediæval prelates like Hildebrand and Lanfranc, coupled with men so little at home in such company as W. Penn; but, as if by an unconscious shrinking from the impiety, the Greatest Name of all is carefully excluded. The Founder was sanguine that, within a very few years, the whole world would be brought under the control of this caricature of Christianity called the Positivist Church, and under the direction of a Central Patriarch, "the High-Priest of Humanity," who was to live in Paris (p. 141). We see from occasional notices in the newspapers that the worship of Humanity, in spite of the failure of its promises, still gathers together a small band of its adherents in a hall in London. But the ambitious hopes of its founder have vanished like a sick man's dream. It has been found impossible to establish on such lines as these any union between ecclesiasticism and unbelief. Yet from this as well as other sources of delusion

¹ "Catechism of Positive Religion," translated by Congreve, p. 1.

have issued forth a brood of false systems by which the faith is threatened, though God forbid that we should believe it to be really endangered.

It may be desirable to pass briefly in review two or three of the more prominent English publications which tend to set up Christianity without a Divine Christ; a religion, that is, which may profess to retain some reverence for our Saviour, but drops all that is most vital and essential in the Christian faith. One of the writers before us, the late Mr. James Cotter Morison, does, indeed, go much further, in a book of which we speak with the deeper regret because its accomplished author is no more. In the "Service of Man" Mr. Morison throws off the tattered robe of spurious Christianity altogether. Nay, he constructs out of the alleged decay of faith an indictment against Christianity itself; though his evidence is mainly taken from the shortcomings of its professors, which their Divine Master distinctly foretold and condemned. No wonder that unbelief led him on to a sad abyss of Pessimism, which makes his preface—of course the last part written—a record of lost faith and hope which no one can read without sorrow. Two other writers now before us, Dr. Abbott and Mr. H. R. Haweis, differ widely from Mr. Morison, in so far as they both maintain that their theories, mistaken and dangerous as they are, do not disqualify them from retaining a name and place among Christ's servants. And we should be sorry, indeed, to loosen any man's faltering hold upon the outer robe of Christianity, even if he only retains some scraps of it in rags.

1. Dr. Abbott (it is needless, I suppose, to hide the well-known name under a periphrasis, though it is not prefixed to this volume) has written several works, of which the "Kernel and the Husk" is the latest which I have at hand. It is difficult to admit that it presents us with any solid basis for study. The evidence is simply invented by himself; the selection of what portion of the New Testament narrative he will retain is arbitrary; the rules on which he acts are framed by his own judgment alone; and his guesses at possible explanations of miracles (any sort of guess will do) are necessarily futile and groundless, because he regards all miracles as only "religious legends" (p. 345) after all. He desires, indeed, to continue to hold our Blessed Lord in the highest estimation, short of admitting Him to be absolutely Divine. But he maintains that "The miraculous conception, the miraculous Resurrection and Ascension," and such miracles as the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand, were only "supposed incidents of Christ's life," which were useful as instructive pictures in a less accomplished age (p. 198). He believes, then, that Christ was born as other men; died as

other men; never rose again but in a figure; and wrought no miracles, though His "mighty works" sometimes assumed the appearance of miracles by the use of His wonderful gifts and faculties.

Dr. Abbott dedicates the book to "The Doubters of this Generation and the Believers of the next." He has himself "for many years," he says, "found peace and salvation in the worship of a non-miraculous Christ" (Preface, p. vi.). But the doubts which all his arguments encourage eat far too deeply into the substance of the revelation to be readily convertible into examples of faith. His principle binds him to the practice of dispensing, as often as he pleases, with the literal sense of Scripture. It cannot, therefore, be accepted by those who believe that from the time when the voice of inspiration was no longer heard, and the Church was blessed no further with the presence and plenary knowledge of Apostolic witnesses, the New Testament became our only record for the foundations of the Christian faith. It cannot be but that faith would be fatally shaken if it can be proved that what we took for solid rock is nothing better than a bank of clouds.

Dr. Abbott, then, is a remarkable example of the class of writers who are content to base their teaching on a history which they deny to be historical. In dealing with a religion which rests on plain facts from the one end to the other, he thinks he can repudiate as many as he pleases of the recorded facts, and yet retain the full grace and power of the religion. He formulates the theory that the Gospels lead us "through illusion to the truth" (pp. 19, 156, etc.); that "the life of Christ in the flesh was one perpetual source of illusions to the Twelve—illusions through which, by the guidance of the Spirit, they were to be led to the truth" (p. 187). The Synoptic Gospels more especially are filled with illusions, each of which will be found, as he believes, to be instructive when all that we call history has melted away. He maintains that the Fourth Gospel is a practical lesson on the danger of accepting illusions literally (p. 186), and on the mistakes into which the disciples were betrayed by investing Christ's metaphors with a literal meaning. Yet there are plenty of fresh illusions lingering in the narrative ascribed to the beloved disciple; of several most important parts of which he says that "it is impossible to ascertain how far emblematic and historical narratives are blended in such passages" (p. 181). He maintains that "in this Gospel, history is subordinated to poetic purpose, and that its narratives of incidents, resting *sometimes* on a basis of fact, but more often on a basis of metaphor, are intended not so much to describe incidents as to lead the reader to spiritual

conclusions" (p. 180). I fear we cannot expect to find much help in Dr. Abbott's guidance.

2. Mr. H. R. Haweis is another prolific and attractive writer. I take up two volumes of the series which he calls "Christ and Christianity," namely, "The Story of the Four," and "The Picture of Jesus." (They are numbered ** and ***). In the first place, we have a right to complain of his incurable inaccuracy. He misstates the contents of one of the most familiar inscriptions in Rome (ii. 17);¹ he allows his printer to misspell absurdly a trite phrase of Latin (ii. 109); his dates will not hang together from one page to another. But far worse than inaccuracy, on so serious a subject, is what I am compelled to call his flippancy. "Matthew's compilation is the work of a double conscience. Matthew is neither Jew nor Christian" (ii. 61). "John probably talked more than he wrote; perhaps he could not write at all; perhaps the Apocalypse itself is dictated" (ii. 99). He argues that John never could have had the compilation which we call his Gospel read over to him. Some errors are so gross that no Jew could have let them stand. Thus the disciple who was known unto the High Priest is matched by the following decorous parallel: "Now there was a certain man selling newspapers outside Buckingham Palace during the *levée*; and that man happened to know a baker's boy who was a friend of the Lord Chamberlain, and so they both went into the Palace together" (ii. 101). If it fares thus with the servants, we fear to touch upon his handling of the Master. But one instance of his way of dealing with miracles may be instructive. Of the miracle at Cana in Galilee, he says: "Have you ever noticed that if you take out *two words*, 'with water,' the narrative explains itself without recourse to miracle?" (iii. 58). So he goes on to suggest that the water-pots were really filled with *wine* brought by Jesus and His disciples; and that the notion of the water was a mere delusion. "Two words!" The fact that it was water which was made wine runs through every portion of the narrative. And could the supplying of a supplementary gift of wine have been, under any conceivable circumstances, described as a miracle, in which Jesus "manifested forth His glory, and His disciples believed on Him"?

3. It is in one sense a relief to turn to an open opponent, who will not mock our common-sense by puerilities like this. In spite of the acknowledged failure of similar prognostications

¹ The inscription under the well-known *Graffito blasfemo* is not, as he says, *Chrestus*; but "Alexamenos worships his god." It is described three times over in the first volume of the "Dictionary of Christian Antiquities," pp. 149, 261, 516; in the last case with an engraving. This is now thought by some to be a Gnostic symbol.

through all the ages, the late Mr. Cotter Morison believes that the array of our opponents is now so much improved in the use of its weapons of precision, that Christianity is at last on the verge of extinction. He thinks he has proved "that a widespread tendency exists . . . to give up a belief in Christianity; and that the scepticism of the present day is very far more serious and scientific than was the deism of the last century" (p. 241). He also thinks that "the supposed consolations of Christianity have been much exaggerated" (*ib.*); and that the doctrine of forgiveness of sins sets grace above the acknowledged laws of habit, and so "Christianity often favours spirituality and salvation at the expense of morals." He also dwells on a fact which, in a very different sense, we all acknowledge and deplore, that Christianity has far too limited an influence on the world at large. With great professions of fairness (the good intentions of which we have no wish to doubt), he under-estimates the overwhelming force of the opposite arguments, and the mighty power which Christianity continues to exert over the noblest and purest spirits of the world. But the most remarkable thing about his book is, that he absolutely declines to suggest any alternative to Christianity (p. 248). Under his guidance the "service of man" leads us either to a dead wall or to a precipice; and he seems to see a yawning gulf before us which makes the precipice the more likely of the two. "I believe," he says, "we are approaching to a great catastrophe in our industrial system, which will be a calamity without precedent since the Black Death of the fourteenth century" (Preface, p. xiii.). The time is coming fast, he adds, "when the famishing unemployed will not be counted by thousands, but millions; and when a *page of the 'Times'* will suffice for the business advertisements of London" (*ib.*, p. xviii.). Let us respectfully admire this remarkable example of bathos.

Looking back at the Positive Philosophy, of which this is a sad but most unnecessary outcome, we observe that it illustrates the well-known precept of Leibnitz, that false systems are generally right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny. They err, as the same principle is commonly stated, in mistaking half-truths for truths. They are right in the one half-truth on which they rest; wrong in their neglect of the correlative half-truth which is requisite to make their reasoning legitimate or their conclusions complete. There is a hard kernel of truth, in regard to positive science, in the precision with which its teachers insist on the careful observation, registration, and arrangement of facts. The error consists in the belief, that this precept covers all the ground. We may take three great examples in which such of their followers as

Mr. Cotter Morison have halved the truth, when they pass to the unfamiliar spiritual sphere :

1. They insist that the law of habits necessitates the exclusion of the less ordered and less organized movements of grace.

2. They accept certain historical records, but deny their literal accuracy whenever they are found to contain a miraculous element.

3. They countenance systems which owe their whole value to their unacknowledged share in Christianity, while they reject the Divinity of Christ.

In brief, they offer us a doctrine of (a) habits without grace; (b) history without miracle; (c) Christianity without Christ. First they contend that the ethical doctrine of habit is cancelled, instead of being corrected and completed, by the Christian faith, which is grateful to believe that the Holy Spirit is wont to operate through grace upon the soul; next, they continue to echo the cry that the established uniformity of nature makes the claims of the miraculous obtrusive and absurd; thirdly, they try to reserve for their own systems all the blessings which we owe to Christianity, while they would unhappily exclude all faith in the only source of those blessings, the Divinity of Christ our Lord.

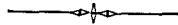
Now, of course, all intelligent people are bound to accept and maintain the half-truths of these writers, so far as they go, as heartily as they do themselves. Intelligent Christians are firm believers in the force of habit, in the uniformity of nature, in the beauty of a moral system. But well-instructed Christians also believe that habit can be controlled and modified by grace; that the uniformity of nature remains subject to the rule of its Maker; and that the beauty of unassisted moral virtue pales beside the precepts and example of our Redeeming Lord.

We can bring out this same conclusion by another process. All those who have had the happiness of being learners or teachers in the older Oxford schools are well aware that the Aristotelian ethics, to which much of their attention was devoted, failed in this essential particular: that however perfect might be the analysis of that great philosopher, his system was deficient both in motive and in power. The analysis was nearly faultless. It is not easy to improve upon it to this moment. Every step in the mental process of choice was detailed with unerring accuracy from the first formation of a wish, to its realization through will in action. The formal and material causes were worked out with marvellous precision. But he failed to give an adequate account of the efficient and the final cause: the efficient, which we know to be God's power; the final, which we know to be God's glory. The Positive Philo-

sophy, when restricted as it is by some of its adherents, recalls us to the heathen level. Its followers propose to improve the machinery by putting out the fire which Christianity has kindled, and it is no wonder if they bring it to an immediate standstill.

The only manner in which, by God's help, we can confront and counteract these evils is *stare super vias antiquas*—to “learn the old truths, speak the old words, tread in the ancient ways.” First of all we must maintain the authority of Scripture, and its plain and historical character. There is no rest for our faith in scriptures which are represented as only a series of illusions; a set of dissolving pictures, as it were, which come and go and pass away, and leave no solid ground of fact behind them. Next we must maintain more earnestly the divinity and sacred personality of Christ as the heart and centre of our preaching, our teaching, our lives. Between Christ the very highest conception of man, and Christ the Θεάνθρωπος, the Divine Person who condescended to assume our human nature, there is a whole heaven's width of difference which no words of man can measure. Another protection against the pleas of a feeble morality is to realize the evils of sin as an unnatural disturbance, which can be counteracted, not by the laws of habit which have failed, but only by grace, with the aid of sacraments and ordinances. And above all things we must rest on the conviction of that future life, which is utterly dropped out of such systems as men like Mr. Cotter Morison put forth. It is a belief which contains the answer to half the fallacies in his volume. His reasonings rest on the assumption that this world is all. They collapse when we accept the firm belief in an eternal world beyond the grave, in which all wrongs will be righted, and every grief will be redressed.

JOHN HANNAH.



ART. II.—EVOLUTION: A RESEARCH IN AMENDMENT.

WE assume that space is infinite. Go whither we may, see as far as we can, we are, as Pascal said, “in an infinite sphere, of which the centre is everywhere, and the circumference nowhere.”¹

Matter, in the various forms known to us—solid, liquid, gaseous—partially occupying this space, is due to pressure.

¹ “Pensées.”