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dealt with in this way are apt to smoulder rather than to be extinguished. Such a case is that of the Education Controversy, which now for fifty years has divided Church and Dissent. "Each settlement has been the basis of renewed disputes, and even now controversy is not closed, simply because the law has never established any definite principle" (p. 357).

There is much more in this useful book to which, had space permitted, I would have drawn the attention of my readers. It is a book to be carefully studied, and especially so by those upon whom rests, as I have said, a double responsibility—(1) of knowing, and (2) of guiding what is termed "public opinion."

We are sometimes told that to-day the Church is "out of touch" with this. We are also told that the Church "fails to lead." A study of this book will at least help us to make both these charges untrue.



## What is Christianity?

BY THE REV. BARTON R. V. MILLS, M.A.

### I. THE QUESTION STATED.

**O**PPPOSITION to the Christian religion is no new thing. It began on the Day of Pentecost, and has continued ever since. The motives of its opponents have been very various. Some act on political grounds, from fear of the power of a society which may rival that of the State. Others are offended by the high moral tone of Christianity, which rebukes their own lax lives. The opposition of others is intellectual, and is based on the supposed contradiction between the Christian faith and historical or scientific truth. It is this last kind of opposition which is most common in the present day. There are several things which tend to help its progress. Its appeal is to reason, not to force. The character of its exponents is often high and their ability great. There is nothing in them

or their opinions to set people against them, and a good deal to make them popular. They stand forth as the representatives of that freedom of thought and speech which is dearer than almost anything else to the modern mind.

The motives of this unbelief is always intellectual, but its motives are very various. Coarseness and courtesy, feigned reverence and open contempt, positive assertions on the one hand and vague speculations on the other, are a few among the weapons used. But from the "Écrasez l'infâme" of Voltaire to the magazine article in which, less than twenty years ago, Professor Huxley charged our Lord and the Apostles with deliberate fraud,<sup>1</sup> the attitude of unbelievers has always been the same. We will do them the justice to say that they have been perfectly candid in the avowal of their intentions. Their object was to destroy Christianity, and they did not conceal it. They were its declared enemies, and made no pretension to be within its pale. And the avowed object of their hostility was generally the same. It was the supernatural element which pervades the New Testament, and is inseparable from the Christian religion. This is supremely distasteful to minds of a certain class, who simply set it aside with the dogmatic assertion, "Miracles do not occur." At the same time, the ethical, and to some extent the spiritual, aspects of Christianity appeal to these men, whose moral standard is often extremely high. They wish to have the help and consolation of the Christian religion without accepting its doctrines or its discipline.

### I.

This has produced within the last few years a completely new situation, fraught with fresh and serious dangers to the Christian faith. For it has caused many persons whose frame of mind is religious to adopt an attitude towards Christianity which, if it becomes general, must bring about its downfall. As long as we had to deal with open enemies we knew where we were, and upon whom we might reckon. Now our chief

<sup>1</sup> *Nineteenth Century*, April, 1899.

danger lies in the attitude of those who profess to be our friends. A large school of thought has arisen whose members claim to be good Christians, though they disbelieve many of the statements in the Apostles' Creed. They consider that these are in some cases actually erroneous, in others that they mean the opposite of what they appear to say. This curious mental attitude is said to be, not the abandonment, but the "restatement" of Christian truth. And it is adopted, not from hostility to, but in defence of, the Christian religion! It is intended to make that religion possible for persons who wish to believe it, but who will not accept the miraculous on any terms. So immense learning and intellectual power are brought to bear to prove that, after all, the supernatural parts of Christianity are not essential to it, and that the passages in the New Testament which represent them as such are either spurious or have been quite misunderstood. As these passages are rather numerous, this process involves the reconstruction of Holy Scripture on such a scale as to make it practically a new literature.

1. Two conspicuous protagonists of this new Christian apologetic have appeared of recent years in France and Germany. In the former country the late Auguste Sabatier published in 1897 his "Sketch of a Philosophy of Religion." It is a highly interesting book, the work of a scholar, a thinker, and a deeply religious man. He traces the growth of religion in himself, and tries to find its essence and its source. He considers it to be a part of human nature, which has found its expression in the various great religions of the world. Of these he holds Christianity to be by far the best, and he finds the "Christian principle" in an inward sense of intimate union with God, which was first experienced by Christ and passed on by Him to others. This spiritual religion is quite independent of dogmas and rites, which are the external wrappings that conceal it, and which vary from time to time, while the spirit itself is unalterable. In a later book, "The Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit," written just before his death in 1901,

Sabatier develops the same thesis, and shows how Romanism and Protestantism alike have wrongly looked to authority instead of to the spirit as the source of true religion. In both these books the destructive is far better than the constructive part. The writer has no difficulty in exposing the errors of the religion with which he was best acquainted, but he is much less successful in defending his own view. He devotes an elaborate argument to showing the insufficiency of miracles as evidence of the truth of Christianity, but he shirks the question as to whether certain miraculous events occurred.<sup>1</sup> His argument amounts to this, that the supernatural may or may not be true, but is of the accidents, not of the essence, of the faith.

2. His great German contemporary reaches a very similar conclusion by a somewhat different road. Hardly any religious book that has appeared since "Ecce Homo" has attracted so much attention in England as Professor Harnack's "What is Christianity?" This was published in 1900, and is accessible to English readers in an excellent translation—so we may assume that it is known to most of our readers. The interest aroused by it is not surprising, for its writer is one of the first of living scholars, and his earnestness and real religious feeling are apparent on every page. He is one, as was Auguste Sabatier, of whom any orthodox Christian would say, "Talis cum sis, utinam noster esses." But our respect for high character and splendid scholarship must not allow us to close our eyes to the dangerous character of this and similar books.

Harnack differs from Sabatier in holding that a definite revelation was made by Christ. But this revelation consisted of only one dogma—that of the Fatherhood of God. There is no claim to Divine nature, no foundation of a lasting institution, no insistence on any creed or form of worship. These things Professor Harnack does not regard, as Sabatier did, as mere accessories to the true faith, but as excrescences which must be cleared away, if the Gospel is to be recovered in its primitive purity. In a series of chapters of surpassing interest Dr. Harnack

<sup>1</sup> "Esquisse," etc., p. 83 *et seq.*

shows how this Gospel was distorted into Greek, Roman, and Protestant theology. And he is more drastic than his French predecessor in his treatment of the miraculous, for, instead of regarding it as immaterial, he says at once that "miracles do not occur"; and dealing with the greatest of all miracles—the Resurrection—he adopts much the same line, for he draws a distinction between the Easter *message* and the Easter *faith*. The former is the story given in the Gospels of the visit of the women and the Apostles to the empty grave, from which the glorified body of our Lord had risen. The latter is the belief that He still lived and appeared, as phantoms of the dead have done in other cases, to the expectant disciples. The faith Harnack holds to be of the highest spiritual importance; of the message he says that "we should make short work of this tradition," adding that the New Testament itself recognises this distinction.<sup>1</sup> He arrives at this result by the simple process of rejecting the fourth Gospel altogether, and questioning the authenticity of these passages in the Synoptists which record miraculous events. Whether this process is scientific criticism we do not presume to decide. That it would be easy by such treatment of original authorities to upset any historical statement hardly admits of doubt.

3. It was not to be expected that arguments such as these would be left unanswered by upholders of the traditional view. The most notable reply which they have elicited is probably the well-known "L'Évangile et l'Église," written by the Abbé Loisy about three years ago. That book has attracted a large amount of public attention, partly owing to the treatment its writer has received from the Church of Rome, and partly owing to the very original line which he takes as to the questions under discussion. As against Sabatier, he holds that there was a definite revelation made by Christ; and, as against Harnack, he considers that that revelation includes much more than the German scholar admits. He maintains that it contains the germ of the whole doctrinal system of the Church of Rome,

<sup>1</sup> "What is Christianity?" p. 163, English translation.

and in a most interesting argument he tries to show that it could have led to no other result. He, in fact, applies to religion the doctrine of evolution, and claims that the Roman theological system is not an excrescence on the Gospel, but is to it what the ripe fruit is to its kernel. With this argument Loisy combines a criticism as advanced and as destructive as any German would wish, though always reverent in its tone. As a reply to Harnack, his argument is convincing and complete, but his own position is far less satisfactory. It might as well be used in defence of Calvinism as of Romanism, for each of these is, in the opinion of its adherents, a development of the primitive Gospel. This was well brought out twenty years ago by the American theologian Professor Allen, whose learned work on the "Continuity of Christian Thought" is less read in this country than it deserves to be. Nor is it by any means clear that the Abbé himself holds firmly to the foundation truths of the Christian faith. He has, indeed, to some extent removed misapprehensions on this point by his later work, "Autour d'un Petit Livre," which should be read in connexion with the earlier one. It is in many respects an even more interesting book, and an English translation is much to be desired. But even with this explanation the Abbé's argument is more ingenious than satisfying. It has lately been subjected to an exhaustive examination in the pages of this magazine by the Rev. A. C. Jennings, so we may assume that it is familiar to our readers, and need not deal with it at greater length.

The object of all these writers is to broaden the basis of Christianity, and to make the essentials of its belief as few as possible, so that it may be acceptable to the great majority of men. This is a thoroughly laudable object, but its danger is lest the Christian faith should become so attenuated as to lose all definite character. On the other hand, there are some amongst us who would unduly narrow it, and insist on things as essential which are at least open to question. Thus, there are those who hold that anything that the whole Church ever accepted—even late in the Middle Ages—is part and parcel of

the Catholic faith, and binding on all Christians for all time. Others take their stand on Chillingworth's famous dictum, "The Bible, and the Bible only, is the religion of Protestants," and maintain that nothing that is not explicitly laid down in Holy Scripture can be received as truth. Both these positions have their advocates in the Church of England at the present day.

## II.

Under these circumstances it is not at all surprising that plain men, who have neither time nor inclination for much theological study, should ask the question at the head of this paper, "What is Christianity? We wish to remain Christians, and we want to know what we are called upon to believe." And it must be remembered that many are sorely troubled by hearing doubts cast on truths which they have always thought to be the very foundation of their faith, while others are perplexed by being asked to accept as essential things which are at best merely matters of opinion. This series of papers is a humble attempt to help these people to arrive at a decision. And I would call their attention to the real question before us. This is not whether Christianity or any part of it is *new*. I make no attempt to add another to the many philosophies of religion which are now before the world. I simply ask what it is that our profession of Christianity requires us to believe. The inquiry is one as to facts, not as to opinions. It may be that when the question is answered—if our answer to it is accepted—some will feel that they cannot accept the doctrines which we find to be essential. This we shall regret, but it does not affect our conclusions. It is better that men should avow themselves outside the Christian Church than that we should deprive Christianity of its essential features to enable them to remain within its fold. And I would further observe that there is now no question as to the salvation of those who are unable to accept the Christian faith. It is not for us to limit the mercy of God. But we have a right to ask that the faith, which is our comfort and our hope, shall not be explained away or



unduly strained because some of its articles are not acceptable to the modern mind.

If we wish to ascertain the essential principles of any institution, we must find out what were the views of its original founders—what they insisted on as its *raison d'être*, and what they left to the discretion of their successors. Sometimes, as in the case of the United States, these principles are embodied in a written constitution which can be seen by anyone, and leaves no doubt as to its meaning. Sometimes they can only be ascertained by a careful study of the acts and words of the founders themselves. The latter is the case with the Christian Church. It was founded by certain persons who had received a commission from Christ Himself, and to whom was added one “born out of due time,” who, though not of the original company, did more than any of them to formulate the doctrines and settle the constitution of the society. If we can ascertain what these men held to be essential, and show that substantial agreement existed between them on this point, we shall know what is obligatory on those who claim to belong to the institution which they founded. This, then, is the subject of our inquiry, and it is a purely historical one.

The authorities for it are the books of the New Testament. As to these, I shall make only one assumption—viz., that they are the genuine work of the men whose names they bear. This is, of course, an assumption which would not be granted—at least, as regards some of them—by many critics, including those eminent scholars to whom reference has been made. If I were writing on Christian evidences, it would be necessary to deal with this question at some length; nor is it one which any Christian apologist need fear to face. For the searching criticism to which the New Testament has been subjected makes it increasingly probable that the traditional view as to its authorship is in the main correct. The researches of such scholars as Lightfoot, Salmon, Professor Ramsay, and Dr. Sanday have gone far to establish the genuineness of nearly all these sacred writings. The evidence for them, from a purely

literary point of view, is at least as good as that on which we receive the works of Thucydides or Tacitus. But the object of these papers is not to defend the Christian religion or its books. It is to enable those who believe the New Testament to be the Word of God to ascertain what it really says as to the points at issue. Nor is it necessary to appeal to their inspiration, though of this neither we nor our readers have any doubt. For our present object is not to discuss whether what the Apostles said is true, but what they say.

The period covered by our inquiry is the Apostolic age. This may be divided into three stages, each of which has well-marked characteristics of its own. The first of these extends from the Day of Pentecost to the beginning of the ministry of St. Paul. In it the Christian Church was almost entirely Judaic and Palestinian. We see, indeed, the signs of what it was afterwards to become, but we find them only in their germ. The leading spirit at this early epoch was St. Peter. The next period is that covered by the work and teaching of St. Paul. It sees the Church define its doctrine and adopt its organization, mainly under his guidance, and extend its influence to the Roman Empire and the Gentiles. The third and last stage is that which followed the death of the great Apostle and the destruction of Jerusalem. In it a new generation of Christians has arisen, who have not themselves seen the Lord. The dominant influence in this period, which marks it as still Apostolic, is that of St. John. With his death the Apostolic age closes, and the Church enters on a new phase. This, therefore, forms the natural end of our inquiry. Each of these stages supplements but does not supersede the one which preceded it. It is only by studying them successively and in their connexion with each other that we can form some idea of Apostolic Christianity as a whole, and so answer the question which we have proposed to ourselves. Each one will form the subject of a separate article, while in a concluding paper we hope to give the result to which the whole inquiry leads.

*(To be continued.)*