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ON THE
HISTORICAL DEPRAVATION
OF
CHRISTIANITY.

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PUBLISHED BY THOMAS SCOTT,
NO. 11 THE TERRACE, FARQUHAR ROAD, UPPER NORWOOD,
LONDON, S.E.

1873.

Price Threepence.

LONDON:

PRINTED BY C. W. REYNELL, 16 LITTLE PULTENEY STREET,
HAYMARKET, W.

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CHRISTIANITY is not the only religion which has undergone depravation. Side by side with it Mohammedanism has developed its celibate fakîrs and its traditions, directly or indirectly, against the doctrine of the prophet. The Parsee religion has been corrupted by apathy, ignorance, and contact with Hindooism, and Parsee reformers look back to the earlier state for purer doctrine. Hindoos also allege, and in important points have proved, that moral enormities in their creed and practice are a later depravation; insomuch that a school has arisen which appeals to the Vedas or ancient Scriptures against modern error. Finally, in the farthest east and north of India the Buddhist religion has undergone change, damaging additions, startling developments, which remind every one of Christianity. Its first preacher and eminent founder has been deified, an enormous apparatus of monks, nuns, and holy orders has grown up, with a materialistic worship utterly opposed to the spirituality of its origin.

There is a philosophy now abroad among the opponents of Christianity, which charges upon the religion whatever evil has been historically intro-

duced into it. The main purpose of this tract is to consider under what form such charge is justified, and where it is unjust.

I. But before entering on the general question, I wish to deal with a special accusation, which I perceive to be made very widely and persistently. I copy from a book which I just now opened at random:—"The tenets of every man's religious creed determine, more or less, the precepts of his morality. He whose creed includes salvation to its recipients and damnation to doubters and unbelievers, *is of necessity a persecutor.*" This is part of a chapter with which I on the whole agree, while I strongly deprecate this mode of attack as unjust and untrue.

The vague phrase *more or less* makes it impossible to deny the former sentence; yet the theoretic and the practical morality of every nation are far more influenced by national law and history, by literature and science, than by its religious creed; and, in turn, the current morals modify the creed. Next, at no time did any Christianity known to me teach that all its recipients would be saved. "Repentance of sin" has always been taught and held to be as needful as "faith in the Lord Jesus Christ." To do evil that good may come has always (in theory) been held sinful. However intense a Christian's belief that rejection of Christianity is a damnable sin, that has not the slightest tendency (according to any good logic) to turn him into a persecutor. I want to know, Was the man who wrote this charge ever a Christian himself? If so, had *he* the heart of a persecutor then? I do not believe it; yet I cannot account for his inability to understand how the case presents itself to Christians who abhor persecution, as I think all earnest Protestants do. It may be of interest to state what arguments were used (to my personal knowledge) *from within the Anglican Church* in the years 1827-29, in favour of admitting Dissenters, Catholics, and Jews to an equal participa-

tion of all civil and political rights. Of course it was seen that they applied equally to Hindoos and Mussulmans in India; but indeed that was not in contest. It was urged:—

“Christians who happen to be English have the political rights of Englishmen, just as Paul had Roman citizenship from his birth; but it is not *because* we are Christians that we have any right to State-power. We can claim nothing to which every Pagan would not be equally entitled; for imagine that some spiteful opponent had attacked Paul by saying, that if Christians could get the opportunity, they would eject from the Senate and from all the posts of administration every adherent of the old religion, and ask yourself how Paul would have replied. Would he not have rebutted the charge as a slander showing utter ignorance of Christianity, which teaches that *our citizenship is in heaven*? Christ’s kingdom is not of this world; we have no more right to oust Pagans from posts of honour than to deprive them of their goods. If we could use power better than they, perhaps also we could use money better than they; but this will not justify despoiling them. We claim *our* rights as men and equals. In order to rob us of these, it is pretended, most falsely, that we do not concede to *others* the rights of men and equals. Such, surely, would have been Paul’s reply.”

A fortiori, like arguments apply to the direct persecution of a misbeliever. “I claim to announce Christianity anywhere and everywhere. If I were to preach in Turkey, and a Mussulman were to imprison me for it, I should feel and judge that he was unjust. If he may not use violence against me for uttering my convictions, neither may I against him for uttering his convictions. To persecute him for it would be sin in me; and *my sin would be worse than his error*. To kill him for his error would be *murder* in me. If his error is a wickedness, God is his judge; but I am not. Who made me judge over him?”

Where does Jesus or an Apostle command any private person or any magistrate to use violence against the teachers of error? Did the Apostles teach that magistrates or any hierarchy bear the sword to enforce religious truth? Nay, but Paul says that a Bishop must be *no striker*. And again: The servant of the Lord must not *strive*, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing opponents, if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth. James not only agrees with Paul, but goes beyond him. The wise man, full of knowledge, is to win over opponents by good works and meekness of wisdom, which is pure, peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated. James will not permit even denunciations, but declares that these furies of the tongue are set on fire by hell; and that if a man cannot keep his tongue with a bridle, his religion is vain."

In my youth and early manhood, I believed (or supposed myself to believe) that there was an eternal hell in which the wicked would be punished, and a perverse rejection of Christ I held to be wickedness. Nevertheless, this never suggested to me, nor could have suggested, that it was right for Christians to touch by legal punishment or restraint those who taught a foreign religion or atheism. To justify persecution by logic from the New Testament would have appeared to me then, as it does now, to be wholly puerile. I am amazed to find people quote, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord," as an argument why Christians *must* believe it right to use the sword against unbelievers; whereas it is Paul's argument for the very contrary. Not only so, but if the case had happened—which certainly never did—that I met a Christian reasoning *from the Scriptures* for persecution, I should unhesitatingly have said that the doctrine was essentially opposed to the whole spirit of Christianity, and was therefore incapable of proof by quoting detailed texts. Nothing

but a confusion of the Old Testament with the New led the Puritans astray, and the Independents set them right before long. Hooker and his contemporary Anglicans, I think, were free from this specially Puritanical confusion.

The doctrine of persecution I hold to be a *depravation* of Christianity, to which the New Testament affords no countenance. It rose out of human passions—pride, self-confidence, impatience, love of power, and other still baser motives, all vehemently condemned by the original Christian doctrine to whichever of the earliest Christian schools we look.

II. I return to the more general question. We see how early the *elements* of monkery and nunnery, of ceremonialism, of episcopal power, of saint-worship, and other errors, can be found within Christianity. Are we therefore to treat full-blown Romanism as the *legitimate* unfolding of Christianity?

Those who say Yes appear to me to confound two things—the erroneous logic *natural* to an ignorant age, and *legitimate* logic. Given the Roman world in its actual state, in which the more educated stood aloof from Christianity in disdain, while the uneducated, the busy, and the slaves flocked into it, perhaps it is strictly true that, with such materials and circumstances, the downward course of Christianity into grossly carnal ordinances, a monstrous creed, and priestly rule, was *inevitable*. But this has no tendency to disprove the assertion that the new system was a depravation and essentially different from the original; and that to pass it off as Christianity is a portentous misrepresentation.

I gravely deprecate forms of speech which must seem to Protestants a wild injustice. They earnestly desire to hold fast the original Christianity. It is fair and right to tell them that they do not go far enough back, or to show them the difficulties of their search; and there is nothing in this to irritate them. But to declaim against *Christianity*, and mean by the

word simply *Romanism*, puzzles them on the one side, or, on the other, insults them by identifying their religion with an essentially different system, which they disclaim, perhaps abhor. When it is notorious that in the course of history the tendency of every national religion is to change, and often for the worse, there is no ostensible fairness, no plausibility, in accepting the latest state as truly exhibiting the *essence* of the first. Neither, therefore, *on the face of the matter*, has the critic a right to adduce the later stage as an aspersion on the honour of the earlier.

I have carefully written, "*on the face of the matter.*" But an assailant may allege, that the deprivations are not accidents; that if the logic of the historical development was weak, the weakness was largely caused by errors essential to the religion from the first. If he can prove this, he may justly maintain, that the later state, though a deprivation and not a legitimate development, is still a solid objection against the original teachers.

The closer the history of Christianity is canvassed, the more undeniable does it appear, that its tendency to deprivation was caused by its diligently fostering the spirit of credulity as a religious duty. If it be said, as above, in excuse, that none of the highest intellect of the age entered the Christian Church,—that it was peopled by slaves and an uneducated mass, who hung on the lips of a few pious but narrow-minded teachers,—the reply is at hand, that neither Jesus nor the Apostles went the way to bring educated men into the Church. Whether Jesus laid claim to miracles, may be doubtful; but those who believe that he did, will not say that he used any method likely to convince the educated of their truth. He did not even leave behind him an authenticated copy of his precepts and doctrine. So long as James and Paul speak on purely moral subjects, we find plentiful reason to admire and honour them; but as soon as Paul begins to expound the Old Scriptures,

the intellectual weakness of his Rabbinism warns us at once *why* he could not make converts among educated men; yet his failures, instead of suggesting to him that his logic was unsound, makes him only moralize, like a modern Mussulman, on the mysterious wisdom of God, who hides divine truth from the wise and prudent, and reveals it to babes. Indeed, the words, as I now quote, are ascribed to Jesus himself.

I do not think any candid person can deny that the first teachers of Christianity quickly despaired of converting any but the ignorant. They invariably addressed men's consciences only, as if there could be no such thing as legitimate intellectual doubt, which needed for removal arguments addressed to the intellect. What can be more inconsequential and pointless than the historical rhapsody imputed to the inspired Stephen? What less fitted to remove the reasonable hesitations of a thoughtful and good man than the addresses in the book of Acts ascribed to Peter and Paul? Paul at Athens is said to have moved incredulity by announcing a *future day*, on which God would judge the world by the intervention of a Man; and the only evidence he offers of the truth of this is, that God has given *assurance* of it by raising that Man from the dead. Although the book of Acts is not the same thing as Paul's own epistle, this sketch is in general harmony with his doctrine and method. We see distinctly, in his 1st Epistle to the Corinthians, ch. xv., where he undertakes to reprove and refute those who deny the future resurrection of the body, how little understanding he has of the evidence required by his case. That Jesus was risen, he probably did not need to prove, but only to show that this entails the resurrection of mankind; yet in his own way he undertakes to prove both. On neither topic is he aware how entirely unsatisfactory is the evidence which he offers. Those who know anything of Socrates or Aristotle may easily imagine the blank

astonishment of those good and wise men, if such proof had been laid before them as adequate. Yet the resurrection of Jesus, if a fact, was a physical fact, addressed to the common intellect, and no way a spiritual truth, to be judged of by spiritual discernment. But Paul, after a short and rapid assertion that Jesus had been many times seen after his death, and that, last of all, he himself had seen him [of course, in a vision or trance], rushes into a close and animated argument, on which evidently is his chief dependence. They *must* believe the resurrection of Jesus, he says; for if it be not true, they will lose all future reward for present sacrifice, and all motive for preferring virtue to vice. (What would King Hezekiah have said to this astonishingly base argument?) Nay, he adds, they are "yet in their sins," if Jesus is not risen, as though deliverance from the power of sin were not a matter of fact to the spiritual man, of which he is himself conscious, and a sufficient judge! Thus he reduces to a minimum ordinary evidence concerning an outward fact, which in no other way can be sustained; and overbears an inward spiritual fact by a simple dogma! If it be said, that when he wrote, "Ye are yet in your sins," he meant, "Ye are unforgiven;" it is obvious to reply that Hebrew Psalmists and Prophets had long taught that God forgives all sins hated and renounced by the sinner, and does not make forgiveness depend on His raising some one from the dead; nor did Jesus ever assert such dependence. In the second place, the resurrection of Jesus, if a fact, took place under totally different circumstances from that of men whose bodies have "seen corruption," that is, suffered dissolution; and the *argument* from the one to the other is not complete, even as an analogy. Paul indeed does not define what he means by "resurrection," while he scolds as a "fool" any one who understands him literally.

While the paucity of cultivated men in the Church is a theme of pious exultation, "lest any flesh glory,"

at the same time even in Paul, noble and heart-stirring as his moral tone is, we cannot but see that he is far quicker to denounce and threaten unbelief, than to meet doubts with patient candour. This element reigns through nearly all the New Testament. I gladly except the Epistle of James, which is almost free from dogmatic elements, and wish to believe that in this respect also he represents Jesus to us. Yet Matthew, Mark, and Luke agree in ascribing to Jesus haughty denunciation, where it appears least justified. It is not practically possible to reach a Christianity in which intellectual doubt was kindly welcomed and candidly satisfied. It is always treated as a sin, and easy faith magnified as a high merit. This, I apprehend, is the fatal fact which ensured corruptions through the triumph of credulity in the Church.

Fancy and folly, bad logic and blundering, haste and love of the marvellous, are ever at work to deform every oral tradition, and pervert the interpretation of whatever is written. The only check upon their inroads lies in keen and jealous criticism. To commend easy belief as a virtue, and frown on slowness to believe as a dishonour to God, was certain to entail illimitable error, burying out of sight the original doctrines. If easy belief in a newly-announced marvel is meritorious to-day, so will it be to-morrow, so will it be next year: hereby a premium is offered for a harvest of lies. From the beginning, the merit of believing things wonderful was distinctly proclaimed; in the third century it was frankly applied to believing things incredible. The reasoning faculty, unless kept in constant exercise, withers as certainly as the hand or the arm. While we approach God mentally, or seek moral edification devoutly, argumentation is lulled to sleep: hence, if devotion absorb the mind wholly, free intellect gets no play. To foster criticism is the only sure way of holding fast attained truth, not to speak of advancing to new truth. To

scold down free thought prepares the corruption of a religion by weakening the mind of the votaries. When Infallibility is ascribed to any set of enunciations and statements, every flaw in a noble discourse becomes its most admired feature, and is most insisted on, *because* it is difficult to believe,—*because* it mortifies “that beast Reason,” to use Luther’s vehement phrase. The doctrine of Infallibility, which is the head and front of Popery, is but the consolidation of the authoritative tone of teaching which was originally made a supplement to defective argument. It is a familiar thought, that if the earth, without human labour, bore to us, as in a fabled Paradise, milk and honey, fruits and crops, clothes and shelter, our bodies would be enfeebled by laziness and inaction. Just so do our minds become torpid and weak, when truth is guaranteed to us authoritatively. Infallibility, whether in a Church or in a Book, such as shall supersede criticism of the things asserted, is as little to be desired, and as little to be expected, in Theology as in Morals or Politics. No form of Christianity has shaken off its incrustations of error, except where Free Science has arisen to exercise and brace the spirit of criticism. The noble moralities of the New Testament will stand out more admirable and more valuable, when surrounding error is purged away: but until this work of criticism is performed, and the dogmatic principle disowned, the spiritual and moral will continue to be drowned in the ecclesiastical. Depravation and schism, anathema and recrimination, must be expected in the future, as in the past.

