

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

THE MODERN DEFENCE OF CHRISTIANITY:

A CHANGE OF FRONT.

BY CHARLES WATTS.

CHRISTIAN advocates frequently adduce, as a proof of the Divine origin of Christianity, what they term "the continuity of the Christian Church." If by this phrase is meant that for nearly two thousand years Associations have existed called "Christian," it is unnecessary to take exception to the allegation. In what way, however, can the existence of such Organisations prove that Christianity is aught else but the outcome of the human mind? To make the argument sound from a Christian standpoint, it would not be sufficient to prove the continuity of the Church; the continuity of its teachings must also be demonstrated. Christian exponents have not hitherto done this. The fact is that what is called Christianity has at different times appeared in various forms, according to the general conditions of the period. First, it is said there was "primitive Christianity," which, we are told, meant worshipping God and endeavouring to emulate Christ irrespective of creeds and dogmas. By and bye this form of Christianity gave way to the age of ceremonies, the worshipping of images, and the introduction of formularies which supplanted the "primitive purity" of the new faith. In course of time the ceremonies were changed and the formularies altered to suit the miraculous period and the doctrine of implicit belief, which, in their turn, had to give way to "rational Christianity" and emotional adoration for Christ. During this variety of changes diversified, indeed, have been the doctrines professed, such as the divinity of the Virgin Mary, purgatory, infant damnation, the personality of the Devil, hell and its material fire, verbal inspiration of the Bible, predestination, special providence, etc. The general lines of departure from pre-existing

forms are associated with the rise and formation of the Latin, the Greek, and the Reformed or Protestant Churches, followed by the establishment of Nonconformity and Unitarianism. Even the views supposed to have been held of the nature and attributes of God—of the birth, mission, and death of Christ—have not escaped the law of change and modification which has always governed the Church. The only “continuity” in the history of the Christian Church has really been its name and its determined opposition to and persecution of those outside its pale.

A similar change has taken place in modern days in the mode of advocating and defending orthodox Christianity. The controversies once prevalent as to images, saints, the Pope, the Trinity, prayer, miracles, prophecy, and verbal inspiration, are seldom heard of now. The line of defence adopted by Paley, Watson, Wardlaw, Butler, and Pearson is in many respects superseded by the policy of Colenso, Dr. Irons, Professor Jowett, and the late Dean Alford.

It may here be asked, Where is primitive Christianity to be found to-day? and where can be discovered the consistent successors of the old Christian defenders? The Moravians and the Peculiar People are the two sects which practically endorse, more than any others, the earlier views of the teachings of the New Testament. But these believers are comparatively so few in number that they cannot be said to represent the modern Christian Church. Where at the present time can clergymen or ministers be found who will defend in debate with a Freethought advocate such questions as the character of the Christian Deity, as given in the Old Testament; the existence of the Devil; the Trinity; that the Bible is the very word of the very God; and the doctrine of endless torments? These subjects are preached upon from the pulpit by gentlemen who dare not discuss them on the platform. Even the so-called Christian Evidence Society, with all its wealth and boasted influence, refuses to put forward one man to defend Christianity in public debate. Why is this? One would suppose, if the Christian faith were built upon a rock, no Scepticism could prevail against it. If Christian advocates really thought their religion invulnerable, why should

they hesitate to submit it to criticism? The fact is, Orthodoxy will not stand the thought-test of the nineteenth century; the old mode of expounding its claims and defending its positions has proved inadequate to meet the reasoning requirements of the present time. The rapid progress of general education and scientific knowledge has compelled Christian exponents to change their front.

In former times the Bible, "every word and every letter," according to the old-fashioned theory of the Dean of Chichester, was thrown into the teeth of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and other investigators and discoverers of natural truths. Now, however, Christians proclaim: "Oh! the Bible was not intended to teach physical science." So much the worse, then, for the Bible. No sane person will deny that science has been the greatest benefactor to the world. To it are we indebted for the marvellous improvements so manifest in the present century. If the Bible is "God's word," containing rules for man's guidance, it should teach that which is undoubtedly the guiding principle of his life. We readily grant that the Bible does not teach science, although its defenders once claimed that it did. It professes to do so, however, and much of its space is devoted to such scientific questions as the origin of man, disease and death, and the solar system; only upon all these subjects the Bible writers evidently wrote nothing that we can now accept as scientifically accurate. Is it not strange that Christian instructors did not recognise this fact until the nineteenth century? Why did they continue to inculcate a theory of creation which was thoroughly erroneous, and which is now rejected by every scholar whose intellect is not prostrated before the shrine of blind belief?

A noteworthy feature of the modern defence of Christianity is that it attempts, not really to *defend*, but to *explain away*, the plain teachings of the Bible. For example, Christian apologists now maintain that a very long world-period, a geological and biological era, elapsed between the time spoken of in the first and second verses of Genesis. If this wise discovery had any foundation, how is it that we can discern no reference to it in the book? Why is it that the writer of the first chapter of

Genesis said not a syllable about previously existing forms of life? God, who is said to be omniscient, must have foreseen the geological discoveries of later times, and that those discoveries would conflict with his inspired revelation. Why, therefore, did he not have a clause introduced that would have reconciled the Bible with modern science?

Another example of the Christian method of "explaining away" may be seen in their mode of defending the Bible account of the Deluge. We are now told that this was only a partial cataclysm or inundation. Strange to say, however, while adopting this change of front the theologians are illogical enough to attempt to prove that every race of men has its traditions of a deluge. How can these two directly antagonistic theories be consistently held? If the Deluge had been *partial*, no wise man would urge a general tradition, which, from the orthodox standpoint, would seem to show that it was universal. But it is not to be marvelled at that we find numerous traditions of a great devastation caused by water. In most countries inundations, floods, abnormally-high tides, periodically occur. These fasten themselves indelibly upon the imagination of the terrified people, and are sure to be transmitted from father to son for thousands of years.

There can be no doubt that the Bible teaches the universality of its Flood, and that, great as the difficulty is to believe its statements thereon, the difficulty is not lessened by introducing the explaining-away theory of a partial Flood. (For facts in support of these two allegations the reader is referred to my pamphlet on "The Bible and Science.")

Failing to reconcile the Bible with science, Christians seek to depreciate science by calling its doctrines "speculative theories." It is quite true that some portion of the *theory* of scientific men is allowed to be *speculative*—i.e., it is not yet demonstrated; but the scientific facts already established are sufficient to prove—(a) that the earth could not have been created within six days; (b) that the beginning—if beginning there could be in an infinite chain of nature-action—must have been countless ages ago, before ever the Jews were thought of; (c) that the Bible story of the Deluge is a self-

evident absurdity; (*d*) that the Fall, Atonement, universal relapse into sin, and the consequent necessity for a redemption, are opposed to history, justice, and humanity, and cannot, therefore, be defended by reason and experience

Christian advocates are just now very ready to answer in the affirmative the old philosophical puzzle of "Is there a first cause?" Supposing they could prove their affirmation, it would effect nothing in their favour unless they could also show that this "first cause" is identical with the Deity of the Book of Genesis and with Jesus Christ. The "first cause" argument is one of Theism, not merely Christianity, whose "first cause" Christian advocates of the present generation decline to defend.

Christian apologists, finding it difficult, in this critical age, to defend successfully any one doctrine of orthodoxy against the attacks of Rationalists, fall back for refuge upon the assertion that the "Christian evidences are cumulative." They urge that the Christian faith must be judged as a whole—a complete system. To this we answer, that if the "evidences" are cumulative, so also are our objections to them. What are the alleged "cumulative evidences" as set forth in the Bible? Practically, they are these. God having the power to make man perfect, formed him out of such inferior materials, and organised him so badly that his weakness was manifested at the first test to which he was subjected. The result was that he fell, and although God is supposed to be omnipotent, he did not *improve* the work of his own hand, but, by a cold-water process, actually destroyed the whole of mankind, one family excepted. By and by the human race again multiplied; but wickedness and misfortune still marked their fallen condition. Therefore, God then decided to send his son, who was of the same age as himself, to correct the errors of the original creation, with the injunction that those who did not believe in the Son should perish everlastingly. Notwithstanding that this belief was necessary to salvation, no provision was made to impart a universal knowledge of this plan of redemption. The consequence is that at the present time, after it has existed nearly two thousand years, only about one-third of mankind know anything about it; and among those the first portion do not un-

derstand it, the second portion find its application personally impracticable, and the third portion reject it altogether. Thus the weakness, cruelty, and total failure of this orthodox scheme are so apparent that the "cumulative" objections to it are so numerous and powerful as to destroy the force of any supposed "cumulative evidence."

Another feature of the modern defence of Christianity is to be seen in the attempt to prove that morality and progress have always been identified with some form of supernatural religion. Hence it is said that a society that did not reverence and worship God after the manner of either the Mosaic or Christian dispensation would sooner or later revert into semi-brutality.

Let us apply the test of history to this position. First, then, we notice the morality and culture of the Jews of the Exodus. Led by Moses, under God's guidance, we yet find them manifesting the lowest possible moral qualities, the most utter forgetfulness of virtue, the least self-reliance and energy. They resort to falsehood, theft, and murder, and ultimately, without any rational ground for so doing, forsake their God and worship a golden calf. Where at this period do we find their works of art, their philosophers, and their advanced institutions?

Under the succeeding "dispensation" what do we behold? The Christian Church overturning old literature, opposing the extension of knowledge, destroying teachers, banishing learning, and doing its best to extinguish the light of reason. From the reign of the first Christian monarch to the partial renunciation of the then "national" faith in the sixteenth century, the state of society earned for that period the name of the Dark Ages.

We are told by modern Christians that God's revelation was a continuous development; first an illumination to Adam and Eve, then to Abraham, then to Moses, and then by Jesus Christ to the world. A mere glance at the Bible and history will show the folly of such a position. How many of the earth's population were the better for Adam's revelation? We have the decided answer to this in the story of the destruction of the race by the Flood. How many were improved through

Abraham's call? But few indeed outside his own family, and even within that circle the revelation failed to inspire the members with either truth, honour, or honesty. How many benefited from Moses' dispensation? Simply the Jewish people—a mere handful of the human race. Lastly, how many have received the alleged advantages of the revelation of Jesus? After nearly nineteen centuries have passed since he came, how stands the case? Let the following figures, representing the number of the adherents of the various religions of the world, serve as an emphatic reply :—Parsees, 150,000; Sikhs, 1,200,000; Jews, 7,000,000; Greek Catholics, 75,000,000; Roman Catholics, 152,000,000; other Christians, 100,000,000; Hindoos, 160,000,000; Mohammedans, 155,000,000; Buddhists, 500,000,000. It must here be understood that 327 millions of nominal Christians include Atheists, Secularists, Deists, and Rationalists. Deduct all these from the sum total of professing Christians, together with the indifferent class, and how few, indeed, comparatively speaking, bow to the name of Jesus!

In many instances the modern mode of defending orthodoxy is a system of casuistry. It does not openly contradict science and criticism, but it will base an argument upon incidental coincidences. Thus recent researches in the East have shown that the Bible contains the real names of Assyrian and Chaldean monarchs. Hence the inferences are at once drawn that because a King called Sennacherib once really lived, therefore, says the Christian Evidentialist, Isaiah and God turned back the time of day. Because there was once really a King of Egypt named Shishak, therefore Samson killed a thousand men with the jawbone of an ass, Elisha made iron float on water, and Joshua stopped the earth's motion.

Truly the times are altered since Watson, in reply to Paine, endeavoured to represent the Christian religion as the perfection of rationalism. All along the line the contending forces have changed their very nature. Now, the Christian defence is nothing more than an endeavour to depreciate the logical inferences deducible from all scientific investigation. As proof of this, reference need only be made to the labours of Colenso and of the German Rationalists. The principal object of certain

theologians now appears to be, not what they can refute, but how much they can retain by explaining away and by pruning down. The moral of this is easily drawn. Of all systems orthodoxy is dying the most easy but certain death. Other systems, like Paganism, have had to be extirpated by the sword, or have been proscribed by the State; but Christian orthodoxy is declining from its own inherent weakness—its inability to withstand the test of modern thought. Of course, it is not here meant that the whole of Christianity will disappear. It will be its errors, its creeds, and its dogmas that will fade before man's cultured intellect; but its truths, like all verities, will remain and become allied with systems more practicable, and with principles more in accordance with the requirements of an advanced civilisation.

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