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Humanity's Gain from Unbelief



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Содержание

HUMANITY'S GAIN FROM UNBELIEF	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	7

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HUMANITY'S GAIN FROM UNBELIEF

As an unbeliever, I ask leave to plead that humanity has been real gainer from scepticism, and that the gradual and growing rejection of Christianity – like the rejection of the faiths which preceded it – has in fact added, and will add, to man's happiness and well being. I maintain that in physics science is the outcome of scepticism, and that general progress is impossible without scepticism on matters of religion. I mean by religion every form of belief which accepts or asserts the supernatural. I write as a Monist, and use the word "nature" as meaning all phenomena, every phænomenon, all that is necessary for the happening of any and every phænomenon. Every religion is constantly changing, and at any given time is the measure of the civilisation attained by what Guizot described as the *juste milieu* of those who profess it. Each religion is slowly but certainly modified in its dogma and practice by the gradual development of the peoples amongst whom it is professed. Each discovery destroys in whole or part some theretofore cherished belief. No religion is suddenly rejected by any people; it is rather gradually out-grown. None see a religion die; dead religions are like dead languages and obsolete customs; the decay is long and – like the glacier march – is only perceptible to the careful watcher by comparisons extending over long periods. A superseded religion may often be traced in the festivals, ceremonies, and dogmas of the religion which has replaced it. Traces of obsolete religions may often be found in popular customs, in old wives' stories, and in children's tales.

It is necessary, in order that my plea should be understood, that I should explain what I mean by Christianity; and in the very attempt at this explanation there will, I think, be found strong illustration of the value of unbelief. Christianity in practice may be gathered from its more ancient forms, represented by the Roman Catholic and the Greek Churches, or from the various churches which have grown up in the last few centuries. Each of these churches calls itself Christian. Some of them deny the right of the others to use the word Christian. Some Christian churches treat, or have treated, other Christian churches as heretics or unbelievers. The Roman Catholics and the Protestants in Great Britain and Ireland have in turn been terribly cruel one to the other; and the ferocious laws of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, enacted by the English Protestants against English and Irish Papists, are a disgrace to civilisation. These penal laws, enduring longest in Ireland, still bear fruit in much of the political mischief and agrarian crime of to-day. It is only the tolerant indifference of scepticism that, one after the other, has repealed most of the laws directed by the Established Christian Church against Papists and Dissenters, and also against Jews and heretics. Church of England clergymen have in the past gone to great lengths in denouncing nonconformity; and even in the present day an effective sample of such denunciatory bigotry may be found in a sort of orthodox catechism written by the Rev. F. A. Gace, of Great Barling, Essex, the popularity of which is vouched by the fact that it has gone through ten editions. This catechism for little children teaches that "Dissent is a great sin", and that Dissenters "worship God according to their own evil and corrupt imaginations, and not according to his revealed will, and therefore their worship is idolatrous". Church of England Christians and Dissenting Christians, when fraternising amongst themselves, often publicly draw the line at Unitarians, and positively deny that these have any sort of right to call themselves Christians.

In the first half of the seventeenth century Quakers were flogged and imprisoned in England as blasphemers; and the early Christian settlers in New England, escaping from the persecution of Old World Christians, showed scant mercy to the followers of Fox and Penn.

It is customary, in controversy, for those advocating the claims of Christianity, to include all good done by men in nominally Christian countries as if such good were the result of Christianity, while they contend that the evil which exists prevails in spite of Christianity. I shall try to make out that the ameliorating march of the last few centuries has been initiated by the heretics of each age, though I quite concede that the men and women denounced and persecuted as infidels by the pious of one century, are frequently claimed as saints by the pious of a later generation.

What then is Christianity? As a system or scheme of doctrine, Christianity may, I submit, not unfairly be gathered from the Old and New Testaments. It is true that some Christians to-day desire to escape from submission to portions, at any rate, of the Old Testament; but this very tendency seems to me to be part of the result of the beneficial heresy for which I am pleading. Man's humanity has revolted against Old Testament barbarism; and therefore he has attempted to disassociate the Old Testament from Christianity. Unless Old and New Testaments are accepted as God's revelation to man, Christianity has no higher claim than any other of the world's many religions, if no such claim can be made out for it apart from the Bible. And though it is quite true that some who deem themselves Christians put the Old Testament completely in the background, this is, I allege, because they are out-growing their Christianity. Without the doctrine of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, Christianity, as a religion, is naught; but unless the story of Adam's fall is accepted, the redemption from the consequences of that fall cannot be believed. Both in Great Britain and in the United States the Old and New Testaments are forced on the people as part of Christianity; for it is blasphemy at common law to deny the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be of divine authority; and such denial is punishable with fine and imprisonment, or even worse. The rejection of Christianity intended throughout this paper, is therefore the rejection of the Old and New Testaments as being of divine revelation. It is the rejection alike of the authorised teachings of the Church of Rome and of the Church of England, as these may be found in the Bible, the creeds, the encyclicals, the prayer book, the canons and homilies of either or both of these churches. It is the rejection of the Christianity of Luther, of Calvin, and of Wesley.

A ground frequently taken by Christian theologians is that the progress and civilisation of the world are due to Christianity; and the discussion is complicated by the fact that many eminent servants of humanity have been nominal Christians, of one or other of the sects. My allegation will be that the special services rendered to human progress by these exceptional men, have not been in consequence of their adhesion to Christianity, but in spite of it; and that the specific points of advantage to human kind have been in ratio of their direct opposition to precise Biblical enactments.

A. S. Farrar says¹ that Christianity "asserts authority over religious belief in virtue of being a supernatural communication from God, and claims the right to control human thought in virtue of possessing sacred books, which are at once the record and the instrument of the communication, written by men endowed with supernatural inspiration".

Unbelievers refuse to submit to the asserted authority, and deny this claim of control over human thought: they allege that every effort at freethinking must provoke sturdier thought.

¹ Farrar's "Critical History of Freethought".

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