

HUMANITY'S GAIN FROM UNBELIEF

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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 phenomenon, all that is necessary for the happening of any and every phenomenon. 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 A superseded religion may often be traced in the festivals, ceremonies, and dogmas of the religion which has replaced it.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.

ments 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.

Take one clear gain to humanity consequent on unbelief, *i.e.*, in the abolition of slavery in some countries, in the abolition of the slave trade in most civilised countries, and in the tendency to its total abolition. I am unaware of any religion in the world which in the past forbade slavery. The professors of Christianity for ages supported it; the Old Testament repeatedly sanctioned it by special laws; the New Testament has no repealing declaration. Though we are at the close of the nineteenth century of the Christian era, it is only during the past three-quarters of a century that the battle for freedom has been gradually won. It is scarcely a quarter of a century since the famous emancipation amendment was carried to the United States Constitution. And it is impossible for any well-informed Christian to deny that the abolition movement in North America was most steadily and bitterly opposed by the religious bodies in the various States. Henry Wilson, in his “Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America;” Samuel J. May, in his “Recollections of the Anti-Slavery Conflict;” and J. Greenleaf Whittier, in his poems, alike are witnesses that the Bible and pulpit, the Church and its great influence, were used against abolition and in favor of the slave-owner. I know that Christians in

the present day often declare that Christianity had a large share in bringing about the abolition of slavery, and this because men professing Christianity were abolitionists. I plead that these so-called Christian abolitionists were men and women whose humanity, recognising freedom for all, was in this in direct conflict with Christianity. It is not yet fifty years since the European Christian powers jointly agreed to abolish the slave trade. What of the effect of Christianity on these powers in the centuries which had preceded? The heretic Condorcet pleaded powerfully for freedom whilst Christian France was still slave-holding. For many centuries Christian Spain and Christian Portugal held slaves. Porto Rico freedom is not of long date; and Cuban emancipation is even yet newer. It was a Christian King, Charles 5th, and a Christian friar, who founded in Spanish America the slave trade between the Old World and the New. For some 1800 years, almost, Christians kept slaves, bought slaves, sold slaves, bred slaves, stole slaves. Pious Bristol and godly Liverpool less than 100 years ago openly grew rich on the traffic. During the ninth century Greek Christians sold slaves to the Saracens. In the eleventh century prostitutes were publicly sold as slaves in Rome, and the profit went to the Church.

It is said that William Wilberforce, the abolitionist, was a Christian. But at any rate his Christianity was strongly diluted with unbelief. As an abolitionist he did not believe Leviticus xxv, 44-6; he must have rejected Exodus xxi, 2-6; he could not have accepted the many permissions and injunctions by the Bible deity to his chosen people to capture and hold slaves. In the House of Commons on 18th February, 1796, Wilberforce reminded that Christian assembly that infidel and anarchic France had given liberty to the Africans, whilst Christian and monarchic England was "obstinately continuing a system of cruelty and injustice."

Wilberforce, whilst advocating the abolition of slavery, found the whole influence of the English Court, and the great weight of the Episcopal Bench, against him. George III, a most Christian king, regarded abolition theories with abhorrence, and the Christian House of Lords was utterly opposed to granting freedom to the slave. When Christian missionaries some sixty-two years ago preached to Demerara negroes under the rule of Christian England, they were treated by Christian judges, holding commission from Christian England, as criminals for so preaching. A Christian commissioned officer, member of the Established Church of England, signed the auction notices for the sale of slaves as late as the year 1824. In the evidence before a Christian court-martial, a missionary is charged with having tended to make the negroes dissatisfied with their condition as slaves, and with having promoted discontent and dissatisfaction amongst the slaves against their lawful masters. For this the Christian judges sentenced the

Demerara abolitionist missionary to be hanged by the neck till he was dead. The judges belonged to the Established Church; the missionary was a Methodist. In this the Church of England Christians in Demerara were no worse than Christians of other sects: their Roman Catholic Christian brethren in St. Domingo fiercely attacked the Jesuits as criminals because they treated negroes as though they were men and women, in encouraging "two slaves to separate their interest and safety from that of the gang," whilst orthodox Christians let them couple promiscuously and breed for the benefit of their owners like any other of their plantation cattle. In 1823 the *Royal Gazette* (Christian) of Demerara said:

"We shall not suffer you to enlighten our slaves, who are by law our property, till you can demonstrate that when they are made religious and knowing they will continue to be our slaves."

When William Lloyd Garrison, the pure-minded and most earnest abolitionist, delivered his first anti-slavery address in Boston, Massachusetts, the only building he could obtain, in which to speak, was the infidel hall owned by Abner Kneeland, the "infidel" editor of the *Boston Investigator*, who had been sent to gaol for blasphemy. Every Christian sect had in turn refused Mr. Lloyd Garrison the use of the buildings they severally controlled. Lloyd Garrison told me himself how honored deacons of a Christian Church joined in an actual attempt to hang him.

When abolition was advocated in the United States in 1790, the representative from South Carolina was able to plead that the Southern clergy "did not condemn either slavery or the slave trade;" and Mr. Jackson, the representative from Georgia, pleaded that "from Genesis to Revelation" the current was favorable to slavery. Elias Hicks, the brave Abolitionist Quaker, was denounced as an Atheist, and less than twenty years ago a Hicksite Quaker was expelled from one of the Southern American Legislatures, because of the reputed irreligion of these abolitionist "Friends."

When the Fugitive Slave Law was under discussion in North America, large numbers of clergymen of nearly every denomination were found ready to defend this infamous law. Samuel James May, the famous abolitionist, was driven from the pulpit as irreligious, solely because of his attacks on slaveholding.² Northern clergymen tried to induce "silver tongued" Wendell Phillips to abandon his advocacy of abolition. Southern pulpits rang with praises for the murderous attack on Charles Sumner. The slayers of Elijah Lovejoy were highly reputed Christian men.

Guizot, notwithstanding that he tries to claim that the Church exerted its influence to restrain slavery, says ("European Civilisation," vol. i., p. 110):

“It has often been repeated that the abolition of slavery among modern people is entirely due to Christians. That, I think, is saying too much. Slavery existed for a long period in the heart of Christian society, without its being particularly astonished or irritated. A multitude of causes, and a great development in other ideas and principles of civilisation, were necessary for the abolition of this iniquity of all iniquities.”

And my contention is that this “development in other ideas and principles of civilisation” was long retarded by Governments in which the Christian Church was dominant. The men who advocated liberty were imprisoned, racked, and burned, so long as the Church was strong enough to be merciless.

The Rev. Francis Minton, Rector of Middlewich, in his recent earnest volume on the struggles of labor, admits that “a few centuries ago slavery was acknowledged throughout Christendom to have the divine sanction Neither the exact cause, nor the precise time of the decline of the belief in the righteousness of slavery can be defined. It was doubtless due to a combination of causes, one probably being as indirect as the recognition of the greater economy of free labor. With the decline of the belief the abolition of slavery took place.”

The institution of slavery was actually existent in Christian Scotland in the 17th century, where the white coal workers and salt workers of East Lothian were chattels, as were their negro brethren in the Southern States thirty years since; they “went to those who succeeded to the property of the works, and they could be sold, bartered, or pawned.”³ “There is,” says J.M. Robertson, “no trace that the Protestant clergy of Scotland ever raised a voice against the slavery which grew up before their eyes. And it was not until 1799, after republican and irreligious France had set the example, that it was legally abolished.”

Take further the gain to humanity consequent on the unbelief, or rather disbelief, in witchcraft and wizardry. Apart from the brutality by Christians towards those suspected of witchcraft, the hindrance to scientific initiative or experiment was incalculably great so long as belief in magic obtained. The inventions of the past two centuries, and especially those of the 18th century, might have benefitted mankind much earlier and much more largely, but for the foolish belief in witchcraft and the shocking ferocity exhibited against those suspected of necromancy. After quoting a large number of cases of trial and punishment for witchcraft from official records in Scotland, J.M. Robertson says: “The people seem to have passed from cruelty to cruelty precisely as they became more and more fanatical, more and more devoted to their Church, till after many generations the slow spread of human science began to counteract the ravages of superstition, the clergy resisting reason and humanity to the last.”

The Rev. Mr. Minton⁴ concedes that it is “the advance of knowledge which has rendered the idea of Satanic agency through the medium of witchcraft grotesquely ridiculous.” He admits that “for more than 1500 years the belief in witchcraft was universal in Christendom,” and that “the public mind was saturated with the idea of Satanic agency in the economy of nature.” He adds: “If we ask why the world now rejects what was once so unquestioningly believed, we can only reply that advancing knowledge has gradually undermined the belief.”

In a letter recently sent to the *Pall Mall Gazette* against modern Spiritualism, Professor Huxley declares,

“that the older form of the same fundamental delusion — the belief in possession and in witchcraft — gave rise in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries to persecutions by Christians of innocent men, women, and children, more extensive, more cruel, and more murderous than any to which the Christians of the first three centuries were subjected by the authorities of pagan Rome.”

And Professor Huxley adds:

“No one deserves much blame for being deceived in these matters. We are all intellectually handicapped in youth by the incessant repetition of the stories about possession and witchcraft in both the Old and the New Testaments. The majority of us are taught nothing which will help us to observe accurately and to interpret observations with due caution.”

The English Statute Book under Elizabeth and under James was disfigured by enactments against witchcraft passed under pressure from the Christian churches, which Acts have only been repealed in consequence of the disbelief in the Christian precept, “thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” The statute 1 James I, c. 12, condemned to death “all persons invoking any evil spirits, or consulting, covenanting with, entertaining, employing, feeding, or rewarding any evil spirit” or generally practising any “infernal arts.” This was not repealed until the eighteenth century was far advanced. Edison’s phonograph would 280 years ago have insured martyrdom for its inventor; the utilisation of electric force to transmit messages around the world would have been clearly the practice of an infernal art. At least we may plead that unbelief has healed the bleeding feet of science, and made the road free for her upward march.

Is it not also fair to urge the gain to humanity which has been apparent in the wiser treatment of the insane, consequent on the unbelief in the Christian doctrine that these unfortunates were examples either of demoniacal possession or of special visitation of deity? For centuries under Christianity mental disease was most ignorantly treated. Exorcism, shackles, and the whip were the penalties rather than the curatives for mental maladies. From the her-

etical departure of Pinel at the close of the last century to the position of Maudsley to-day, every step illustrates the march of unbelief. Take the gain to humanity in the unbelief not yet complete, but now largely preponderant, in the dogma that sickness, pestilence, and famine were manifestations of divine anger, the results of which could neither be avoided nor prevented. The Christian Churches have done little or nothing to dispel this superstition. The official and authorised prayers of the principal denominations, even to-day, reaffirm it. Modern study of the laws of health, experiments in sanitary improvements, more careful applications of medical knowledge, have proved more efficacious in preventing or diminishing plagues and pestilence than have the intervention of the priest or the practice of prayer. Those in England who hold the old faith that prayer will suffice to cure disease are to-day termed "peculiar people" and are occasionally indicted for manslaughter when their sick children die, because the parents have trusted to God instead of appealing to the resources of science.

It is certainly a clear gain to astronomical science that the Church which tried to compel Galileo to unsay the truth has been overborne by the growing unbelief of the age, even though our little children are yet taught that Joshua made the sun and moon stand still, and that for Hezekiah the sun-dial reversed its record. As Buckle, arguing for the morality of scepticism, says:⁵

"As long as men refer the movements of the comets to the immediate finger of God, and as long as they believe that an eclipse is one of the modes by which the deity expresses his anger, they will never be guilty of the blasphemous presumption of attempting to predict such supernatural appearances. Before they could dare to investigate the causes of these mysterious phenomena, it is necessary that they should believe, or at all events that they should suspect, that the phenomena themselves were capable of being explained by the human mind."

As in astronomy so in geology, the gain of knowledge to humanity has been almost solely in measure of the rejection of the Christian theory. A century since it was almost universally held that the world was created 6,000 years ago, or at any rate, that by the sin of the first man, Adam, death commenced about that period. Ethnology and Anthropology have only been possible in so far as, adopting the regretful words of Sir W. Jones, "intelligent and virtuous persons are inclined to doubt the authenticity of the accounts delivered by Moses concerning the primitive world."

Surely it is clear gain to humanity that unbelief has sprung up against the divine right of kings, that men no longer believe that the monarch is "God's anointed" or that "the powers that be are ordained of God." In the struggles for political freedom the weight of the Church was mostly thrown on the side of the tyrant. The homilies of the Church of England declare that "even the wicked

rulers have their power and authority from God,” and that “such subjects as are disobedient or rebellious against their princes disobey God and procure their own damnation.” It can scarcely be necessary to argue to the citizens of the United States of America that the origin of their liberties was in the rejection of faith in the divine right of George III.

Will any one, save the most bigoted, contend that it is not certain gain to humanity to spread unbelief in the terrible doctrine that eternal torment is the probable fate of the great majority of the human family? Is it not gain to have diminished the faith that it was the duty of the wretched and the miserable to be content with the lot in life which providence had awarded them?

If it stood alone it would be almost sufficient to plead as justification for heresy the approach towards equality and liberty for the utterance of all opinions achieved because of growing unbelief. At one period in Christendom each Government acted as though only one religious faith could be true, and as though the holding, or at any rate the making known, any other opinion was a criminal act deserving punishment. Under the one word “infidel,” even as late as Lord Coke, were classed together all who were not Christians, even though they were Mahommedans, Brahmins, or Jews. All who did not accept the Christian faith were sweepingly denounced as infidels and therefore *hors de la loi*. One hundred and forty-five years since, the Attorney-General, pleading in our highest court, said:⁶ “What is the definition of an infidel? Why, one who does not believe in the Christian religion. Then a Jew is an infidel.” And English history for several centuries prior to the Commonwealth shows how habitually and most atrociously Christian kings, Christian courts, and Christian churches, persecuted and harassed these infidel Jews. There was a time in England when Jews were such infidels that they were not even allowed to be sworn as witnesses. In 1740 a legacy left for establishing an assembly for the reading of the Jewish scriptures was held to be void⁷ because it was “for the propagation of the Jewish law in contradiction to the Christian religion.” It is only in very modern times that municipal rights have been accorded in England to Jews. It is barely thirty years since they have been allowed to sit in Parliament. In 1851, the late Mr. Newdegate in debate⁸ objected “that they should have sitting in that House an individual who regarded our Redeemer as an impostor.” Lord Chief Justice Raymond has shown⁹ how it was that Christian intolerance was gradually broken down. “A Jew may sue at this day, but heretofore he could not; for then they were looked upon as enemies, but now commerce has taught the world more humanity.”

Lord Coke treated the infidel as one who in law had no right of any kind, with whom no contract need be kept, to whom no debt was payable. The plea of alien infidel as answer to a claim

was actually pleaded in court as late as 1737.¹⁰ In a solemn judgment, Lord Coke says:¹¹ “All infidels are in law *perpetui inimici*; for between them, as with the devils whose subjects they be, and the Christian, there is perpetual hostility.” Twenty years ago the law of England required the writer of any periodical publication or pamphlet under sixpence in price to give sureties for £800 against the publication of blasphemy. I was the last person prosecuted in 1868 for non-compliance with that law, which was repealed by Mr. Gladstone in 1869. Up till the 23rd December, 1888, an infidel in Scotland was only allowed to enforce any legal claim in court on condition that, if challenged, he denied his infidelity. If he lied and said he was a Christian, he was accepted, despite his lying. If he told the truth and said he was an unbeliever, then he was practically an outlaw, incompetent to give evidence for himself or for any other. Fortunately all this was changed by the Royal assent to the Oaths Act on 24th December. Has not humanity clearly gained a little in this struggle through unbelief?

For more than a century and a half the Roman Catholic had in practice harsher measure dealt out to him by the English Protestant Christian, than was even during that period the fate of the Jew or the unbeliever. If the Roman Catholic would not take the oath of abnegation, which to a sincere Romanist was impossible, he was in effect an outlaw, and the “jury packing” so much complained of to-day in Ireland is one of the habit survivals of the old bad time when Roman Catholics were thus by law excluded from the jury box.

The Scotsman of January 5th, 1889, notes that in 1860 the Rev. Dr. Robert Lee, of Greyfriars, gave a course of Sunday evening lectures on Biblical Criticism, in which he showed the absurdity and untenableness of regarding every word in the Bible as inspired; and it adds:

“We well remember the awful indignation such opinions inspired, and it is refreshing to contrast them with the calmness with which they are now received. Not only from the pulpits of the city, but from the press (misnamed religious) were his doctrines denounced. And one eminent U.P. minister went the length of publicly praying for him, and for the students under his care. It speaks volumes for the progress made since then, when we think in all probability Dr. Charteris, Dr. Lee’s successor in the chair, differs in his teaching from the Confession of Faith much more widely than Dr. Lee ever did, and yet he is considered supremely orthodox, whereas the stigma of heresy was attached to the other all his life.”

And this change and gain to humanity is due to the gradual progress of unbelief, alike inside and outside the Churches. Take from differing Churches two recent illustrations: The late Principal Dr. Lindsay Alexander, a strict Calvinist, in his important work on “Biblical Theology” claims that

“all the statements of Scripture are alike to be deferred to as presenting to us the mind of God.”

Yet the Rev. Dr. of Divinity also says:

“We find in their writings [*i.e.*, in the writings of the sacred authors] statements which no ingenuity can reconcile with what modern research has shown to be the scientific truth — *i.e.*, we find in them statements which modern science proves to be erroneous.”

At the last Southwell Diocesan Church of England Conference at Derby, the Bishop of the Diocese presiding, the Rev. J.G. Richardson said of the Old Testament that

“it was no longer honest or even safe to deny that this noble literature, rich in all the elements of moral or spiritual grandeur, given — so the Church had always taught, and would always teach — under the inspiration of Almighty God, was sometimes mistaken in its science, was sometimes inaccurate in its history, and sometimes only relative and accommodatory in its morality. It assumed theories of the physical world which science had abandoned and could never resume; it contained passages of narrative which devout and temperate men pronounced discredited, both by external and internal evidence; it praised, or justified, or approved, or condoned, or tolerated, conduct which the teaching of Christ and the conscience of the Christian alike condemned.”

Or, as I should urge, the gain to humanity by unbelief is that “the teaching of Christ” has been modified, enlarged, widened, and humanised, and that “the conscience of the Christian” is in quantity and quality made fitter for human progress by the ever increasing additions of knowledge of these later and more heretical days.

ENDNOTES

¹ Farrar's "Critical History of Freethought".

² "Capital and Wages," p. 19.

³ "Perversion of Scotland," p. 197.

⁴ "Capital and Wages," pp. 15, 16.

⁵ "History of Civilisation," vol. i, p. 345.

⁶ *Omychund v. Barker*, 1 Atkyns 29.

⁷ *D'Costa v. D'Pays*, Amb. 228.

⁸ 3 Hansard cxvi, 381.

⁹ 1 Lord Raymond's reports 282, *Wells v. Williams*.

¹⁰ *Ramkissenseat v Barker*, 1 Atkyns 51.

¹¹ 7 Coke's reports, Calvin's case.