

CT 107

THE IMPEACHMENT OF CHRISTIANITY.

BY

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Editor of 'Index,' Toledo, Ohio, U. S. A.

WITH LETTERS FROM MISS FRANCES P. COBBE, AND PROFESSOR
F. W. NEWMAN, GIVING THEIR REASONS FOR NOT
CALLING THEMSELVES CHRISTIANS.

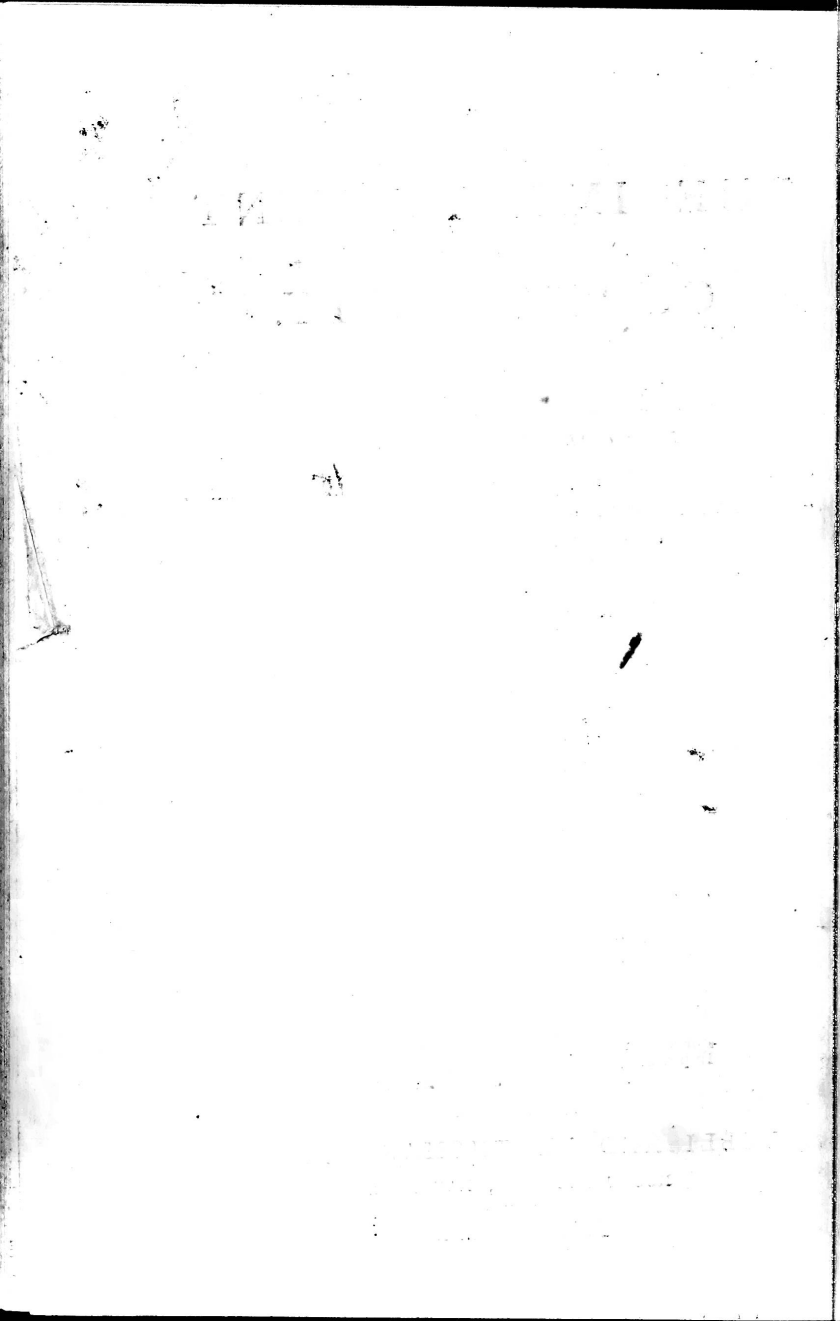


"I do not fear to follow out the truth,
Albeit along the precipice's edge.
Let us speak plain; there is more force in names
Than most men dream of; and a lie may keep
Its throne a whole age longer, if it skulk
Behind the shield of some fair-seeming name.
Let us call tyrants *tyrants*, and maintain
That only freedom comes by grace of God,
And all that comes not by his grace must fall;
For men in earnest have no time to waste
In patching fig-leaves for the naked truth."

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

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THE IMPEACHMENT

OF

CHRISTIANITY.

CHRISTIANITY is the great system of faith and practice which is organized in the Christian Church ; and its history is the history of the Christian Church. Such, I believe, is the definition which it has made for itself ; and such is substantially the only definition of it which will abide the test of time.

Thus defined, I recognize with gratitude the great good which Christianity has done in the past, and is to some extent doing in the present. Nothing can long endure which has not struck root into the true, the admirable, the everlasting ; and Christianity has endured for nearly two thousand years. But it is a product of humanity, and everything human is born to die. To-day Christianity is dying a lingering death—to be prolonged until its usefulness to the world shall have been wholly exhausted. To many it is dead already, and the number of these is increasing day by day. For these I speak.

Together with great good, Christianity has wrought great evil in the world. The good is daily lessening,

4 *The Impeachment of Christianity.*

and the evil becoming daily more marked and more pernicious. It is time that some should with sincerity and openness utter aloud what great multitudes are thinking in the silence of their own souls, even though they may be only half-conscious of the real drift of their own thought. The taught are in advance of their teachers. Christianity no longer proclaims the highest truth, inculcates the purest ethics, breathes the noblest spirit, stimulates to the grandest life, holds up to the soul and to society the loftiest ideal of that which ought to be. It has stood still while the race has moved on. It has become the chief hindrance in the path of man to the destiny marked out for him in the very laws of his own being—the chief obstacle to the realization of those magnificent dreams which are the inspiration of his sublimest endeavour. Thousands are becoming aware of this. For these I speak.

With all seriousness, then, and with intense conviction of the truth and urgent necessity of what I say, I IMPEACH CHRISTIANITY BEFORE THE BAR OF CIVILIZED MANKIND. In the name of all that is best, noblest, and divinest in human nature, I impeach it of high crimes and misdemeanors against the peace of the world and the progress of the race towards a freer and holier future. And I summon it to appear before this high tribunal of Humanity, to show good cause why it shall not stand condemned and sentenced by its judge. For it is not I that speak, but the largest mind, the purest conscience, the tenderest heart, and the most earnest spirit of the nineteenth century. They bring no flippant or idle charge, but utter the world's grave declaration of independence of the Power that has become a Tyranny.

These are the leading counts of my indictment :

1. I IMPEACH CHRISTIANITY IN THE NAME OF HUMAN INTELLIGENCE—

Because it is the great organized Superstition of the Western world, perpetuating in modern times the false beliefs, the degrading fears, and the benumbing influences of the Dark Ages—in proportion to its power over men, paralysing their intellectual faculties, keeping them in the bondage of childish fancies, and governing them by means of an utterly irrational religious terrorism.

Because it is the great enemy of science, retarding the spread of natural knowledge, opposing new truths and discoveries as irreligious, perpetuating popular ignorance on all but permitted subjects, in order that its own empire may be unshaken, and making blind faith in impossible doctrines the highest virtue of the human soul, and the only protection against terrible, yet purely imaginary, dangers.

Because it is the greatest stumbling-block in the pathway of civilization, inasmuch as it withdraws attention from the natural affairs of this life, concentrates all its earnest thought on a future life that is to be eternal bliss or eternal misery, makes a merit of neglect of this world's riches in order "to lay up treasures in heaven," frowns on active enterprize as a dangerous devotion to "carnal things," and thus unfits men for attention to all those objects of honourable ambition on which the progress of civilization so largely depends.

2. I IMPEACH CHRISTIANITY IN THE NAME OF HUMAN VIRTUE—

Because it appeals to hope and fear as the supreme motives of human conduct, holds out promises of an eternal heaven as the reward of obedience to its commands, utters threats of an eternal hell as the punishment of disobedience to them, makes its appeal to human selfishness as the proper spring of human action, and consequently undermines and destroys the disinterestedness of all high morality, which com-

6 *The Impeachment of Christianity.*

mands the right because it is right, and forbids the wrong because it is wrong, regardless alike of punishment and of reward.

Because it teaches that the virtue of the "Saviour" can be a substitute for the virtue of the "saved,"—that the "sinner" can be made pure by the righteousness of another,—that merit and demerit do not belong to the individual, but can be transferred like a garment from back to back. Its great doctrines of "Depravity" and the "Atonement" are a blank denial of the very possibility of personal virtue.

Because it teaches that the natural penalties of wrong-doing can be escaped by "faith in Christ,"—that the consequences of moral evil are neither necessary nor universal,—that the law of cause and effect does not hold in the moral world; and thus weakens the natural auxiliaries of imperfect virtue by fostering the delusion that men can do evil without suffering for it.

Because it enjoins self-abhorrence as the first condition of the "salvation" it offers,—makes the denial of all "worth or worthiness" in mankind the first step in the Christian life, and teaches that Christ will save those alone who have lost all faith in themselves and in their own power to escape the just wrath of God. It thus strikes a deadly blow at the dignity of human nature, extinguishes that noble sentiment of self-respect without which all high virtue is impossible, and smites men with the leprosy of self-contempt. It makes them crawl like reptiles before Christ,—“their hands on their mouths, and their mouths in the dust.” It is the very abolition of true manliness among men.

Because, by this extinction of self-respect, it enfeebles the consciousness of human rights, and thus blights the very idea of natural justice, which is the practical recognition of these rights. No man who despises himself can respect his fellows, or reverence

the rights inherent in their very humanity. Whatever extinguishes human rights before God will extinguish human rights among men. For this reason Christianity has always been blind to justice.

Because, finally, it recognizes no higher law for man than the "revealed will of God." It thus bases all morality on will alone, and says nothing of that necessary Nature of Things which determines all moral relations. It thus confuses men's ideas of right and wrong, and renders impossible that knowledge of true ethical principles which is essential to all enlightened virtue.

3. I IMPEACH CHRISTIANITY IN THE NAME OF THE HUMAN HEART—

Because it recognizes no sanctity in natural human affections, but requires that all these shall be subordinated to an unnatural love of Christ as the Saviour of souls. "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." "If any man hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life, he cannot be my disciple."

Because it extends over myriads of sensitive minds the blackness and gloom of a horrible theology, tortures them with a morbid self-reproach for unreal transgressions, and fills them with excruciating doubts of their final escape from hell, thus destroying their happiness, and robbing their life of its natural beauty and charm.

Because it commands supreme love to a God whose character it depicts as utterly unlovely—a God whose wrath against his own children is a "consuming fire," and who plunges the vast majority of them into eternal agony. It thus degrades the very idea of fatherhood by teaching the "Fatherhood" of a God whose character and acts are as unfatherly as they are incredible.

8 *The Impeachment of Christianity.*

Because it proclaims a "Brotherhood of Man" which denies the natural equality essential to all genuine brotherhood—which perverts the natural sentiment of good-will towards all men into an artificial and exclusive bond among Christians themselves, and into a thoroughly unnatural condescension or pity towards all others—which is, in fact, consistent with the harshest injustice and the most frightful cruelty towards those who reject the Christian creed. It thus degrades and lowers the very idea of brotherhood, by calling that the "Brotherhood of Man" which is simply a fellowship of Christian believers, and which has been too often in history a fellowship of thieves and murderers.

4. I IMPEACH CHRISTIANITY IN THE NAME OF HUMAN FREEDOM—

Because it sets up a despotic authority which, whether as Church, as Bible, or as Christ, makes man a slave in his very soul—an authority which shuts up the human intellect within arbitrarily prescribed bounds, hands over the human conscience to the custody of clerical keepers, and rules all human life, individual or social, with an iron rod.

Because it has always allied itself with despotism in civil government, has joined with the oppressor in keeping the oppressed under foot, and has sought to maintain its own supremacy on the ruins of all human liberty.

Because, as Catholicism, it has been an unmitigated spiritual and temporal tyranny, from which many centuries of constant struggle have to-day only partially emancipated the world.

Because, as Protestantism, it has been an unmitigated spiritual tyranny, and is even now plotting to re-establish itself as a temporal tyranny also.

Because it is the true heir of the ancient Roman Imperialism, seeking now as ever to establish and

maintain an absolute empire over the whole world, and to bind the entire human race not only in political, but also in religious bondage. Wherever Christianity lives, Freedom dies. They cannot both long breathe the same atmosphere.

5. Lastly, I IMPEACH CHRISTIANITY IN THE NAME OF HUMANITARIAN RELIGION—

Because it stands stubbornly in the path of all human progress, blocking the way of every movement which aims at the enlargement of human life,—opposes, and has always opposed, every genuine reform in human affairs,—consults only the interests of its own creed, and sets its face like a flint against the purely secular education in which, by a quick instinct, it recognizes the most dangerous enemy of this creed.

Because it teaches the impossibility of Humanity's advance through its own natural exertions, and insists that it should rely on supernatural assistance alone—thus extinguishing aspiration and drying up the fountain-head of all progress.

Because it teaches despair of human nature, as ruined, lost, and depraved—incapable of all salvation but that which comes from without, and subject to no law of natural development but that of degeneration, carrying it from bad to worse and from worse to worst. It thus denies the great, hopeful doctrine of humanitarian religion, that Humanity tends by its own free efforts to grow better as it grows older, and to emerge from a lower into a higher state in accordance with natural laws.

Because it proclaims ideas of God which would drive every reflective mind acquainted with modern knowledge into absolute atheism, were it not that modern knowledge itself furnishes the elements of a far higher idea of God in Universal Nature. It thus appears as the most insidious enemy of the religious sentiment—the destroyer of that pure and ennobling

10 *The Impeachment of Christianity.*

worship which recognizes the Divine throughout all Time and Space, and creates in the soul of man a consciousness of profound spiritual oneness with the vast Whole of which he is a part.

In the name, therefore, of Human Intelligence, of Human Virtue, of the Human Heart, of Human Freedom, of Humanitarian Religion, I seriously and earnestly impeach Christianity before the tribunal of the Humanity it still continues to outrage and enslave. I impeach it in the name of that which is higher than itself, not lower—in the name of Truth, of Morality, of Love, of Liberty, of God; and I summon it to answer at the bar of Humanity, its rightful judge, that it may clear itself of the high crimes and misdemeanors of which I accuse it, or else submit to the sentence of just condemnation pronounced against it by the public opinion of civilized mankind.

FRANCIS E. ABBOT.

TOLEDO, OHIO, U.S.A.,
January 6, 1872.



The Impeachment of Christianity. I I

WHY DO I NOT CALL MYSELF A CHRISTIAN ?

[The following reply, by Professor Francis William Newman, to the above question appeared in the April number of the *Radical*, 1870, "a monthly magazine devoted to religion," published at Boston.]

1st. Because it is an extremely ambiguous profession, and professions ought to be intelligible. We want to be understood—not misunderstood. Ninety-nine persons out of a hundred understand that to profess oneself a Christian means, at least, to profess that one is a submissive and reverential disciple of Christ ; but I am not and cannot be this.

2nd. Because the admission that Christianity is our religion, draws after it the very vexatious, very difficult, and obscure inquiry : What is Christianity ? in which valuable time and talents are wasted. If, for instance, the Indian Theists called themselves Christians, they would inflict upon their successors the curse of Christian controversies, from Romanism to the extremest Unitarian school.

3rd. Christianity originally aimed to unite mankind, but is now the potent divider. We, from within, are proud of Christianity, and little realize how hateful it is seen from without. What more wicked than the conduct of Christians for centuries together to Jews, to Indians, and to all the dark-skinned races ? Why am I gratuitously to take on myself all this frightful odium ?

4th. Jews, Mohammedans, Indians, will all join without repugnance in a profession of Theism ; but they shudder at Christianity. To insist on this name is to claim that they shall forget the past, and sacrifice their memories and their just hatred to our pride. By disowning the name Christian I purge myself of Christian guilt ; I profess to these that I have sympathy with their equal claims, and will meet them on a strictly common and neutral platform.

F. W. N.

12 *The Impeachment of Christianity.*

*Letter from Miss Cobbe to the Editor of "Index,"
Toledo, Ohio, U.S.A.*

26 Hereford Square, London, S.W.,
December 5, 1869.

MY DEAR SIR,—I have received your letter, and feel much interested in your project of starting a paper which shall represent the interests of simple Theism. Most heartily I agree in your view that the retention of the Christian name by those who can allow no authority in religion, even to Christ, is a mistake fraught with elements of confusion and insincerity. As our noble allies and fellow-worshippers, the Brahmos of India, have gone back to the name of the Creator, so must we, if we are ever to stand absolutely straight before the world, call ourselves by the title which expresses, not the temporary and partial obligation of one nation or another, or even of the whole human race to its greatest prophet, but the eternal and universal allegiance of all to the only God.

The subjects of interest which need to be discussed in the great transition through which we are passing, are of course absolutely boundless. In my humble estimation and from all I can gather of the thoughts of leading minds in this country, the problem of the Future Life will occupy the fore-ground for some time to come. It is, in fact, the question of the day, to which a distinct "yes" or "no" must be given, and on whose decision, one way or the other, hang portentous results for both religion and morality. . . . With sincere wishes for your success, believe me, dear sir,

Cordially yours,

FRANCES P. COBBE.