
A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

Christianity in History.

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Even in a season distinguished by an unusually interesting output of theological works, the volume issued by Dr. Bartlet and Dr. Carlyle[1] may be held to stand highest of all. Theirs is an interesting and long-established partnership, between a liberal-minded Nonconformist and a liberal-minded Churchman; but never before have the two friends collaborated on so important a scale or with such striking success. While each of the authors is an expert on a special period, neither of them is a specialist in the bad sense. They have many-sided interests. And in this volume they have worked through the whole material in consultation with each other—a fact which adds not a little to the value of their book.

To put Christianity into six hundred pages is no small task for the best equipped and most capable of minds. By approaching the subject historically—not in the way of constructing an imaginary or (at the best) an arbitrary Essence of Christianity—the authors have made their task easier in kind but more burdensome in quantity. The history they offer us is not confined to doctrine. Doctrine has its place in the book, and is permanently of value; yet it is only the skeleton or the scaffolding of the Christian life. Nor does the narrative lose itself in external events. It essays a middle path, trying to put on record how the Christian spirit and life has manifested itself, individually and socially, age by age. When we consider the difficulty and vast importance of such an enterprise, the narrative may be said to move with surprising ease. As far as possible, the reader is spared. Quotations from any foreign language, with scarcely an exception, are given in English translation. Historical assertions are hardly at all argued out—space forbade that. The well-informed reader, up to the limits of his own knowledge, will be able to divine the grounds for the assertions made; the unlearned reader can assure himself that he is given, on each point, conclusions which have commended themselves to two very able and well-furnished minds, who know the evidence in full, and who have dismissed as less probable other views on the points in question. One thing the authors have been able to do for their readers. They quote original materials, not very often, but tellingly. Sometimes these are familiar passages, more often unfamiliar, always first-hand matter wisely chosen; *e.g.* early sacramental liturgies, showing the religious mind of the age in its truest because most devotional attitude.

Part I., 'The Beginnings,' deals with the N.T. While the presence of an eschatological strain in the thought of the Master is admitted, it is urged that other and deeper elements must have been central on His own intention. 1 Peter is regarded as the most typical of N.T. Epistles, free from the more startling peculiarities found in the great mind of St. Paul. In St. Paul's own case, it is urged that he *cannot* have been as much of a sacramentalist as some would make him to-day. He has laid down eternal spiritual principles which forbid sacramental extravagances. His own sacramental language must be viewed as symbolic.

Part II. is the most elaborate of all. The preface dwells upon this fact, not by way of apology, but rather to explain why it must be so. The growth of the system conveniently known as Catholicism is traced almost inch by inch on the three lines of sacraments, doctrines, orders. It is pointed out that all three are in correlation, and that all are tinged with local and temporary influences from the non-Christian environment. Catholic sacramentalism has something of a pagan quality. Nicene doctrine has something of that sacramentalism at its heart.

The Middle Ages (Part III.) are treated with a freer movement of generalization and in less detail. Indeed, the Part is rather an essay than a history proper; though doctrinal growths are duly noted, and the crowning sacramental exaggerations described with a touch almost of indignation. In spite of admitted mediæval emphasis upon authority, we are reminded that the Middle Ages steadily appealed to 'custom,' and beyond it to

[1] *Christianity in History: A Study of Religious Development.* By J. Vernon Bartlet, M.A., D.D., and A. J. Carlyle, M.A., D.Litt. 12s. net. (Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1917.)

Divine or Natural Law, as a safeguard against arbitrariness. Almost paradoxically we are told that the period subserved the growth of individuality, if only because of its plea for Church autonomy in face of the State. Such a thesis enables the authors to trace continuity, and to divine even in the 'dark' ages the promise and potency of the modern world.

The authors draw special attention to their treatment of the Reformation (in Part IV.), not in abstract separation from its past and future, nor yet as the first of modern phases, but—along with kindred minor movements—as part of 'the Great Transition.' Continuity, once again! We are made to feel how tremendous an event was the Protestant breach with Rome, and, if inevitable, yet in some ways how regrettable.

In Part V., 'The Modern World,' the treatment gains not alone in interest, but—if one may trust one's impressions—in penetration and mastery. Recent Christianity is studied against the background of the world of free modern culture, especially scientific, but also æsthetic and poetical. The characterization of Coleridge's poetry is extraordinarily telling; so is the exhibition of the significance of Faust's turning to magic because weary of dry logic. A spirited apology is offered for Romanticism, as a return to beauty, to sympathy with the Middle Ages, to the spirit of a wider corporate life. Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel, Ritschl are touched off briefly but in most suggestive fashion.

The leading positive clue which the authors put forward in the name of a Christian philosophy is a worthy analysis of personality. This is to safeguard what is moral and what is evangelical in Christian faith and life. For lack of such a philosophy, early Christology could only be half-successful, and early sacramentalism was held in no sufficient check. But the foundations are now (one gathers) in good measure laid. Personality in man, by a profound intuition, grasps and responds to the personality of God (Augustine, Abelard, the early Friends, Jacobi, Coleridge,—after Kant and Hegel, but more wisely,—F. D. Maurice). Christ is the supreme influence developing the personality of His redeemed. What Christology this will yield cannot of course fully appear in such a treatise as the present History, though there are suggestive hints. One ought also to mention repeated protests, in the interests of moral personality, against exaggerated 'Absolutism' and against reckless appeals to omnipotence.

More generally, and writing as historians, the authors—as their title-page already declares—work with the clue of Development. A subtle thought! Sometimes it emphasizes what changes may establish themselves by slow degrees. P. 192, in view of the final form of sacramentalism in the ancient Church, ejaculates: 'Such changes can development bring about!' But more frequently the other side is stressed, as on p. 590: 'the master-idea, giving unity and continuity amid all diversity, is Development.' Another effect: if everything has its place in the development, no phase can claim to be more than a single humble part of the many-sided truth. To historians, everything is 'relative.' Doctrine is relative—not this doctrine or that, merely, but doctrine as such. At its best it is secondary. The life of godliness is primary. Catholicism or High-Church sacramentalism, the leading form (as regards time and as regards space) of organized Christianity, is shown up and discredited when its origins are impartially recorded. But what about Christ Himself? Very delicately and reverently, in Part I., we are warned that the Master's teaching as first apprehended—nay, more than that, even as first delivered—contained certain inadequate and temporary elements. This problem of the distinctiveness of central Christianity recurs, perhaps with added difficulty, towards the end of the book. Once again we find ourselves within sight of matters suggested, but not fully discussed, in the present volume.

Possibly, in the long run, it is not the historian, with his 'relative' view of all things, who can speak the last word regarding Christ and Christianity. Yet historical treatment is a wholesome correction for all the dogmatisms—one's own, as well as those of others. And the History before us is full of good things. A short notice can hardly display even specimens of the riches of Eshcol. There is as much of the evangelical temper in this volume as there is of learning and of liberality. Every competent reader who works through it will find that he has appreciably advanced his own theological and religious education.