

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

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

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expository-times\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php)

pdfs are named: [Volume]\_[Issue]\_[1<sup>st</sup> page of article].pdf

An addition has been made to the S.P.C.K. series entitled *Translations of Christian Literature*. It is a translation by J. H. Freese of *The Octavius of Minucius Felix* (3s. 6d. net). The Introduction tells us all that is known of this early Christian apologist and of his book. The editor gives no opinion as to the date, but makes it probable that the book was written in the beginning of the third century.

As one may gather from its title, Dr. C. H. Robinson's new book, *How the Gospel spread through Europe* (S.P.C.K. ; 5s. net), is a popular history. Dr. Robinson had already written the scholar's book in the 'International Theological Library.' He proves now that he can write for everybody. His method here is to take each country by itself and carry its Christian history

down to the year 1000 or thereby. He ends with a general survey of results and an appreciation of the value of the Christian missionary to European civilization. The maps are excellent, distinctly adding to the reader's enjoyment and advantage.

*The Catholic Students 'Aids' to the Study of the Bible* (Washbourne; 5s. net), by Hugh Pope, O.P., S.T.M., D.S.Scr., late Professor of New Testament Exegesis in the Collegio Angelico, Rome, deserves consideration and even resolute study. The second volume is on the Gospels. Its contents are after the manner of the Oxford 'Aids,' but they are arranged more deliberately for continuous reading or class study. The tables, which are many, have been prepared with care. Among other matters the book contains the text of the Biblical Commission on Holy Scripture.

## Christianity the World Religion.

BY THE REV. SYDNEY CAVE, D.D., HENLEAZE.

### II.

#### IV.

It must be admitted that to attempt to make any deductions from the history of religions is a perilous task. The science of comparative religion, as M. Loisy says,<sup>1</sup> 'is not yet very old. It gives the impression of still looking for its sphere and of not yet possessing its method.' Yet, as he adds, 'the chaos is more in appearance than reality. History is history, the knowledge of what has been, and the history of religion is the history of religion, the knowledge of that great human fact, the religions of the world.' Nor are the diversities of religion so illimitable as to make impossible a rapid glance at their characteristics.

Their seemingly innumerable forms resolve themselves into a few classic types. 'It is indeed surprising on how few ideas humanity has had to live.'<sup>2</sup> Thus the lower forms of religion, apparently so multitudinous, are found to be essentially one

in their conception. That very common form of religion—the animism which peoples the world with spirits good and bad, ignores the good, and worships the evil spirits with abject fear—is the same in principle wherever it occurs. And, in any case, a phase of religion so low is irrelevant to the discussion of whether any religion is of final value. Nor do even the higher polytheisms help. However suitable he may regard the worship of the gods for the common people, every educated man knows that really to believe in a multiplicity of gods would involve the confusion of his thought and the negation of his culture. Polytheisms are inextricably bound up with the countries of their origin. In the nature of the case they can contribute nothing to the quest for the absolute. Historical religions which transcend in thought the place of their origin are but few, and these we find fall into two distinct types.

We have Judaism and Islām, religions of law, and Brāhmanism and Buddhism, religions of redemption.<sup>3</sup> The legal religions proclaim a God

<sup>3</sup> In a fuller sketch Zoroastrianism would be added to the first division, and Neo-Platonism to the second.

<sup>1</sup> A. Loisy, *A propos d'histoire des religions*, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> E. Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte*, p. 56—a book to which these paragraphs owe much.

of distinct moral content, but remote from His worshippers. In a religion of redemption, like Brāhmanism, the reverse is the case. The worshipper is identified with Deity, but at a heavy cost. For this unity of the soul with God is possible only by the elimination from each of all distinction. God becomes the ultimate universal of being, ineffable and unknowable. Because God is thought of as attributeless, without definite moral content, life has no moral meaning. The struggle for the good, the remorse of conscience, lose their reality. For ethics, we have an ontology. Because the sense of unity with God is realized not in 'the trivial round, the common task' of life, but through philosophy or asceticism, religion at its highest becomes the prerogative of the few. The perfect Buddhist is the monk. The perfect Platonist is the philosopher, free from human ties; and in Brāhmanism is it not the meditative recluse who best reaches that shore where is eternal peace?

We have thus two types of religion. The one interested and influential in the conduct of this life, but failing to meet man's mystic yearnings: the other, fulfilling man's mystic yearnings, but failing to give to life in this world a moral content meaning. If there be a universal religion it must be adequate to the spiritual necessities revealed by both these types of world religions. We may look for it in a reconciliation of the two types in a higher synthesis of an ethical religion of redemption, which redeems from this world, and yet enables men to find in this world a sphere of moral activity and progress. Is there such a religion? Is Christianity, for instance, at once an ethical religion and a religion of redemption?

#### V.

That Christianity is an ethical religion may be assumed without argument. It demands of its followers obedience to the law of Christ. It proclaims as its good tidings forgiveness and deliverance from the power of sin, and, apart from a few ingenious dilettanti, the superiority of its ethics is generally recognized. But can we claim that Christianity is also a religion of redemption, redeeming, not from sin only, but from the world? It is not so easy to give a simple 'Yes.' Certainly, for the most part, our religion does not so impress those who best represent, in the modern world, the religion of redemption, the spiritual leaders of educated Hinduism. Much in Christianity is

indeed admired and imitated. To its influence many of the social activities of modern Hinduism are avowedly due. But social reforms are not religion. They belong, they say, to the temporal, not the eternal. They admit often that Christ was the greatest of the world's teachers, but they assert that in this one thing Christianity is inferior to the Higher Hinduism, for, wherever else Hinduism may have failed, it has better impressed on the mind of its followers the reality of the spiritual. As a writer in the admirable *Indian Social Reformer* of Bombay put it, 'Hinduism has instilled into the minds of its most ignorant followers an unshakable faith in the supremacy of the spiritual over the temporal, an achievement which is as yet only an aspiration with Christianity.' If 'an unshakable faith in the supremacy of the spiritual over the temporal is as yet only an aspiration with Christianity,' then, so long as that is true, Christianity may hope to continue its work among the outcaste communities, but that is all. If it thus fails to meet the deepest aspirations of Hinduism, we can never hope that the best and most spiritual in India will ever find in Christianity a gospel; and so far as caste Hindus are concerned, it would be wise for the Churches to abandon what would then be the impertinence of their missionary labours. But if 'an unshakable faith in the supremacy of the spiritual over the temporal' be indeed 'only an aspiration with Christianity,' we are driven to ask whose fault is it—the gospel's, or our interpretation of it?

#### VI.

Certainly such a charge could not be brought against the early Church. The Church opposed to idolatry on the one hand, and theosophic mysticism on the other, its proclamation of eternal life. Christians claim to be only sojourners here, their real home is in heaven.<sup>1</sup> Thus the *Didache* tells us that the prayer at the Communion service was 'May grace come and this world pass away. Maranatha, the Lord cometh.'<sup>2</sup>

And with this same word 'Maranatha,' the Lord cometh, Christians encouraged each other to face death gladly in the amphitheatre. So later we find Celsus, the arch-enemy of Christianity, blaming the Christians for their disregard of worldly prudence, and sneering at them 'because, however divided in

<sup>1</sup> E.g. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Book iii. Similitude 1.

<sup>2</sup> The *Didache*, chap. x. 6.

other respects, they all use these words: the world is crucified to me and I to the world.<sup>1</sup> Even one so flippant as Lucian could not help noticing their firm belief in the life that is eternal, and records with immense amusement 'that these miserable people have got it into their heads that they are perfectly immortal.'<sup>2</sup> Moral defects there were many in that early Church, but at least with them the 'assertion of the supremacy of the spiritual over the temporal' was not an 'aspiration' only but an 'achievement.' They claimed to be redeemed from the world and to live in the spirit. Their creed was unelaborated, but their religious experience was definite and positive, and to this reality and power of their spiritual life the progress of Christianity was chiefly due.

And in this the early Church was but showing the spirit of its Master. Extreme as was the eschatological interpretation of Christ, it did at least reveal how false was the liberal conception which spoke of Him as a benign ethicist, interested chiefly in questions of conduct. The Kingdom of God means more than the realm of human kindness. It is a heavenly realm in which men are meant to share already the life which is eternal and triumphant. To be a member of Christ's Kingdom is to be redeemed from the world, and so, in Christ's judgment, anxiety is a sin unworthy of His followers. What Christ preached, the apostles experienced. Thus we find that for such a one as Paul, the Kingdom of God was a present reality. He lived in a communion with God which brought him strength for all his labours and an indomitable courage. In spite of weakness of body, conflict and suffering, he yet can speak of joy and triumph. Already the eternal was his present. The eternal was his home, for there Christ dwelt.

To many in our Churches the simple truth that Christianity means redemption, not only from sin but from the world, comes with an unfamiliar

sound. Over-anxiety is spoken of as if it were merely a matter of temperament or 'nerves,' instead of, as Christ held it, the most unfilial distrust. In our Protestant churches especially, in rejecting, and rejecting rightly, asceticism and the monastic ideal, we have too often ignored those needs these sought to answer. The immense emphasis in the New Testament on the Kingdom of God, and eternal life as a present possession, has been too much forgotten, and we have failed to realize the significance in our experience of Christ's risen life. True, in every age and Church, there have been those who, often in humble and obscure circumstances, have been indeed redeemed from the world, and for them the eternal has been more than the temporal. We have too largely failed to express this experience in the message we proclaim, and, because of this, we have not a gospel adequate to the needs of many of the most spiritual of Hindus. And not only so, in the West too we need, and have been learning, to realize that we cannot construe our religion only for this world. The unseen means more to us to-day because so many of our best and dearest have gone there, too young and vigorous for us to think of them as merely dead.

Is Christianity the world religion? The gospel of Christ is sufficient to be, but if we are to have a religion adequate to the spiritual aspirations of the race, we need to re-explore the meaning of such words as 'eternal life' and 'life in Christ,' and show by our life and in our doctrine that Christianity is a religion of redemption from the world. But if this be so, then we have in Christianity an ethical religion of redemption which redeems from the world whilst it gives to life in the world a meaning and a motive, and a Christianity so interpreted is thus adequate to the two great types of spiritual aspiration: it is the reconciliation in a higher unity of the ethical and the redemptive types of religion; it is the world religion.

<sup>1</sup> *Origen against Celsus*, v. 64.

<sup>2</sup> In his *Proteus Peregrinus*.