

Our Day

A RECORD AND REVIEW

OF

CURRENT REFORM

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WITH THE COÖPERATION OF EMINENT SPECIALISTS IN
REFORM, AT HOME AND ABROAD

Via Lucis, Via Crucis

VOL. III.—JANUARY—JUNE.—1889

BOSTON
OUR DAY PUBLISHING COMPANY
28 BEACON STREET

FALSE HISTORY IN ROBERT ELSMERE.

HAVING lived through the period described in "Robert Elsmere," and visited Oxford in the midst of it, I have been able to find out the antecedents of Elsmere's theory of the Life of Christ. It originated in the Free Thinking movement which arose as a reaction against Puseyism and culminated in the once famous, but now forgotten, "Essays and Reviews." The actual theory was gendered in the brooding mind of Mr. Green, *alias* Mr. Grey, who carried the philosophy of Hegel, that the subjective mind creates the external universe, into religion, and accounted for the resurrection of Jesus by supposing that the love of certain Galileans for a carpenter's son in Nazareth made them fancy that he rose from the dead. The theory has fixed itself in the minds of the Arnold family, and a lady has given it wings as gay as those of an oriole, and now it is flying over the English-speaking and novel-reading world and drawing the admiring and in some cases the believing attention of tens of thousands of weak women and of nearly as many weaker men.

"The writers against religion," says Burke, "whilst they oppose every system, are wisely careful not to set up any of their own." Mrs. Ward is not to be charged with any such guilty carefulness. She is innocent enough not to see the weakness of her argument; she takes no pains to hide it under a bushel, and she sets forth the theory in a most attractive dress, which I must strip off that we may find what is the reality within. I labor under the fearful disadvantage that I have to conduct the contest not in an open gymnastic field, but in the boudoir of a beautiful and accomplished lady.

There never was so impotent an attempt to set up a new religion.

"Oh, that mine adversary had written a book!" cried Job. My cry is: Oh, that the old squire had published his book instead of keeping it wrapped up in a mist, where it looks so large. I believe it could have been easily answered. The objections all came from his German studies. The authoress should have told us that they have all been answered in Germany. They were published in England about the time the Arnolds were trained, and were answered immediately. I feel a difficulty in dealing with them. They do not consist so much in open charges as in whisperings. We all know that insinuations against character may be more difficult to meet than distinct accusations. In fighting with them one feels as if he were beating the air.

The objection is substantially this: Mr. Grey "remained a layman because it was impossible for him to accept a miracle." It is the argument of my countryman, David Hume, the skeptic, which has so often been sifted.

A miracle is not an event without a cause, which it might be impossible to prove, but an event with God acting immediately as a cause—this certainly a sufficient cause.

A religion which contains the preternatural "is doomed," says Matthew Arnold. I make the counter assertion that a religion which does not immediately come from God to man will never be received by man. It is not so easy to get rid of the supernatural. The natural gives clear proof of the supernatural. The order and design in the world is proof of a power above the world. Logic insists that the natural requires the supernatural to create or, if you prefer, to develop and to guide it, to give us these admirable forms of plants and animals and the progressions and providences of history.

But it is said that, in the early ages, people were inclined to believe in the supernatural, and invented miracles, and that, therefore, their testimony on this subject is not to be credited. I admit the premises, but deny the conclusion. The people at the time of our Lord were ready to believe in miracles. But I add, not in such miracles as are recorded in Scripture. Historians and travelers tell us what kind of miracles are invented among the nations. They are commonly great wonders, lights in the sky, monsters appearing on earth, strange occurrences. As a specimen, take those mentioned by Livy, the Roman historian, in a single book, xxiv. 10. A green palm is seen on fire in Apulia. It rained blood in the forum at Rome. The spear of a statue of Mars, at Praeneste, moved out of its place of its own accord. An ox spoke in Sicily. An altar surrounded by men in shining garments was seen in the sky. Armed legions of spirits appeared in Janiculum. In favor of no one of these have we the testimony of a single eye-witness. They have no worthy meaning. How different with the miracles of our Lord. We have the record by those who witnessed them. We have the testimony of the four evangelists, evidently truthful men, each giving his own account, and yet, all substantially one.

These were plain, unsophisticated men. Then we have the declaration of one of the great men of the world—altogether independent of his inspiration—a scholar, a writer, an actor of great practical wisdom. Paul, once so strongly prejudiced against the Crucified, assures us that he saw Christ in the flesh, and that he was overcome by Him. The Arnolds evidently feel a sensitive shrinking from the honest, sturdy, outspoken apostle. This novelist tells us he was no reasoner. Those who can reason themselves know that in the Romans and in all his epistles he is one of the most powerful reasoners that ever put together premises and conclusion. At times he makes a digression, but it is as the man who steps back a few feet that he may gather power to clear the chasm.

Every man who reads the Gospels has a miracle set before him in the discourses of our Lord, which for sublime doctrine and pure precept, for grace and elevation of sentiment, for faithfulness and for pathos and for tenderness, for indignation against sin and pity for the sinner, for knowledge of the human heart, and love to men, women, and children, transcend all that

the highest intellects have done in Greece and Rome, and, as spoken by a Galilean peasant, are themselves a miracle.

The common Christian has not just to prove a miracle against the infidel. All that he has to do for his own conviction is to find that Christianity came from uneducated men in Galilee. This granted, the miracle follows; and he is constrained to say, "Thou hast conquered me, O Galilean!"

"What think ye of Christ? Whose son is he?" We are obliged to think of him, and we have to answer the question — Whose son is he? Whence does he come? We may suppose that he, a mechanic in Galilee, uttered all these truths, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Parables, and we have already a miracle; or we may suppose that some fishermen on the Lake of Galilee, such as Peter, James, and John, devised all these discourses and deeds, or imagined them, and we have still a miracle. Or, if we may adopt a more refined theory — evidently that of the lady novelist — and suppose that there was a wonderful carpenter's son in Nazareth, and that a body of fishermen on the lake constructed the Life of Christ out of him; and we have a still more astounding miracle, with nothing resembling it in the history of the world.

Take one supernatural event — the resurrection of Jesus. We have as full proof of it as of any event in ancient history, say the death of Julius Cæsar, which every one believes in. We have as clear evidence that these four evangelists wrote the Gospels as that Cæsar wrote the Gallic Wars, or that Xenophon wrote the Memoirs of Socrates. But the grand proof of the truth of our religion lies in the combination of evidence. We have a treble cord, which cannot be broken. How have men of science established the doctrine of the uniformity of nature? By an accumulation and combination of observations in all departments of nature. It is in the same way that we prove that there is a supernatural system in the midst of the natural, and fitting into it. Round the life and death and resurrection of Jesus we have a body of conspiring evidences. There were antecedents and there are consequents. We have the anticipation in the history, types, and prophecies of the Old Testament. Then we have the results flowing from the belief in the resurrection of Christ, the preaching of the gospel, the spread of Christianity in all countries, the production and fostering of all that is good in art and history, in the elevation of morals, in the establishment of schools and colleges and hospitals, in raising the status of the working classes, in the comfort imparted to poor and afflicted ones, in the converting power of the grace of God, in the slaves of the wildest passions sitting at the feet of Jesus clothed and in their right mind. All these constitute, from first to last, a unity, a system; he who would overthrow it will have to attack, not the mere outposts, but the consistent whole. It is a bounteous river-system, with its waters flowing over the waste places of the earth, but issuing from the throne of God in heaven.

All these miracles are worthy of God and adapted to the state of man; with a few exceptions they are wrought to deliver from pressing evils in our world, from disease, from sorrow, from sin. The grand end of the

whole is the redemption of the soul, for which the great men of the world have labored, but have failed of their end.

Nor let it be urged that the Jewish and heathen worlds were so predisposed towards the miraculous, that the early Christians had only to proclaim it to find all men believing it. For it is to be remembered that the Gentiles got it from the Jews whom they hated, and the Jews from the Galileans whom they despised.

More persuasive, if not more convincing, we have what are called the internal evidences; the suitability of Christianity to man's nature and want, to his felt weakness and his sinfulness for which an atonement has been provided, as bringing life and immortality to light, and as rolling away the great stone that closed the tomb, and opening the grave that the spirit may arise to heaven.

But the gentlemen and ladies who support this new religion bred in Oxford, tell you that you may have all this great and good in Christianity, and leave out the miracles. Unfortunately for this theory, the miracles run through and through the four gospels and constitute an essential part of the whole. There is not a single chapter of the eighty-nine chapters which constitute the Gospels in which there is not something supernatural recorded or implied; except, indeed, the few chapters such as Matt. v.-vii., which are filled with discourses which are themselves miraculous. The story begins with a supernatural birth and closes with a supernatural resurrection. Between them are innumerable supernatural cures. "They brought to him the sick, the maimed, and the blind, and he healed them all." There is the constant overthrow of the powers of evil, and three detailed cases of a resurrection from the dead. All the parts are joined in a unity. The garment is woven throughout, is without seam, and cannot be divided. It is all offered to us, but if we do not accept the whole we cannot have any part. It all comes from God; but if you would tear out the preternatural from it, Christianity could no more live and have living power than the body of man could after you have torn out bone and nerves and brain.

There are people tremulously asking, What is to be the effect of all this? Some are reading the skeptical parts of the story with the same feeling as Catherine had when her husband told her that he had lost his faith in a real and living Christ, and are trembling as they do so. We may consider its influence on various classes of people.

We know how it has been received by Unitarian students and younger ministers. The younger and abler men are not contented with their present position, and they are anxiously inquiring whether they cannot better it without falling back into the old orthodoxy. "Unitarianism of the old sort is, perhaps," says our novelist, "the most illogical creed that exists, and certainly it has never been the creed of the poor." No scholar or man of shrewd sense believes that Channing's creed can be found in the New Testament. The younger men are looking out for something new. You remember that Robert, when he died, committed his new religion to a Unitarian minister. They and Heber Newton are finding much in the book to

hold out hopes to them. Let me tell them that they will be greatly disappointed if they expect this to be a godsend to them. The older, the more sincere and thoughtful Unitarians, especially fathers and mothers, some of whom have spoken to me on the subject, may well look on what we may now call *Elsmatism* with deep anxiety. It places their young men and women on a sliding scale, down which some of them may slide into Agnosticism, which holds that we can discover no truth in religion. Nothing that has occurred will so try the sect, and it will probably send a portion of them to Phillips Brooks and help to let down others of them into the depths of nihilism.

Over those who have a fixed and intelligent faith, this book will have no effect even though they read it and admire Catherine, and be as greatly charmed with the provokingly interesting Rose as Langham was. Their first feeling may be "they have taken away the Lord." But this will only make them look out for Him, and find that the risen Lord appears to them with new power. Perhaps they will henceforth give less time to the reading of such novels.

But this reconstructed Christianity is to charm the working classes. I admit that the laboring classes have too much fallen away from Christian worship. I fear that there is more of this defalcation in this country than in England, Scotland, and Ireland, where I know of tens of thousands of parishes where the great body of the common people are to be seen devoutly worshipping in the house of God on the Sabbath. It is not so in many places in this country. The responsibility of this, and a fearful responsibility, lies on the churches. One of the first duties of the churches is to devise a means of recovering the laboring men with their wives and children. "To the poor the gospel is preached," and ministers must see that this is done, and that families are won by constant visitations among them.

Meanwhile Elsmatism is not fitted to do this. Of all proffered religions it is the least fitted to gain the laboring man. Some simpering ladies or gentlemen may be beguiled by the gliding, spotted serpent that beguiled Eve, but those who earn their bread by the sweat of their face are not likely to be so deceived. With them everything is real: their cares and privations, their joys and sorrows, fears and hopes, are real; and they must have a reality in their religion. They are not much addicted to the reading of romances; they feel that the kind of life there pictured is not a life for them. They would at once see through the ghostly fiction which Robert Elsmere presents to them. They would tell you that the men who earned a living by fishing on the Lake of Gennesaret were not likely to let their subjective faiths create objects which have no existence, and then worship them. I believe they would reject with scorn this fiction if presented to them, and call it a faith in ghosts. They have no taste for what is offered them so philosophically, "an unknowable reality beyond phenomena." They are not to be satisfied with a flower when what they need is food. If this fiction be pressed upon them, I am sure they will speedily, with their hard hands, crush it into a thousand pieces. What they want is a reality,

a loving, sympathizing Saviour, who toiled as they have toiled, and suffered as they have suffered, who died as they have to die, but who has also risen from the dead and brought up his people with Him.

But the reconstructed religion may reach and reform the discontented, the dangerous classes, the revolutionists, the secularists, the socialists, the dynamitists. Robert is pictured as laboring among these. I have visited such classes. I am bound to testify that even in the most horrid dens of iniquity, the abodes of burglars and murderers, I was never treated rudely when I spoke of one who died for sinners. I believe they would receive kindly, and even gratefully, one who treated them manfully and without condescension, as Robert Elsmere is represented as doing. But as to his creed, I know how they would treat it. Such men are commonly sharp enough and shrewd enough — shrewder in some things than our novelists or novel readers — dreadfully suspicious, and sharp to detect deception; and if you told them that Jesus was created by the fancies of Galilean fishermen, I am sure they would laugh in your face, and if you insisted on their believing your doctrine, they would resent it as an imposture which you meant to lay upon them, and if you did not retreat they might tear not your creed, but yourselves into pieces.

We are told that the New Brotherhood still exists and grows. Perhaps there are some Americans who are hastening to go by the first trans-Atlantic vessel to see the grand experiment. It might be a pity to tell them that no such institution exists in London or anywhere else on this globe. But let them go and seek for it. They will find two or three charities in East London set up by accomplished people to improve the degraded classes by lectures, music, bath-rooms, and varied entertainments, but without any religious teaching. The tendency is so far good, though they are not regenerating the region. They do not propose to teach the creed of Robert Elsmere. The visitants will fall in with a more powerful agency. They will find men and women laboring to reclaim the ignorant and the lapsed in the darkest dens of our great cities, and in the wildest regions of cruelty among the heathen, but they will find that those thus employed have all been impelled by love to Him who came from heaven to earth to seek and save that which is lost. — *New York Ledger*, January 5, 1889.

JAMES MCCOSH.