

# **THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION**

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The Christian Religion by George P. Fisher

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**GEORGE P. FISHER**

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THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

BY

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## THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

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I COMPLY with the request of "The North American Review" that I should write an article on the Christian Religion. Not being ambitious to shine in the character of a *malleus hæreticorum*, I shall not enter the lists as a combatant in the debate which has lately been waged in its pages. Religious controversy is sometimes necessary: it is often useful; but it is always exposed to disadvantages. It is very apt to draw about it a multitude of readers whose interest in it is akin to that which animates the spectators of a cock-fight. It easily degenerates into a game of fence, where the vivacity and expertness of the competitors in the duel are of more consequence than the justice of the cause. Christianity is a large matter; the Bible is a large book, or rather collection of books forming a connected whole. It is easy for an ingenious mind to bring forward objections, suggest difficulties of greater or less weight, and propound mistaken or half-mistaken assertions. Of all warfare, guerilla-fighting is the least satisfactory. It is proverbial that a question respecting any system, however well founded, may be asked in one line, which it may require pages to answer. To reply to a medley of such objections one by one is like the business of picking up pins;

and, even when the work is really done, the impression left is that made by an apology, according to the fine old maxim, "*Qui s'excuse s'accuse.*" Most of the popular objections are not in the least novel. A critical attack, peculiar in its character, has been made on Christianity in recent times in Germany by Strauss and Baur. It has been renewed in France in a modified form by Renan. Materialism, either in a bald shape or in its agnostic dress, has made itself a prominent antagonist. But assailants of Christianity in American journals frequently take up last-century weapons which have been cast aside by adversaries of the gospel who are abreast of the times. To confute attacks of this sort, such as were common in the old deistical controversy, would be to beat straw already well thrashed. In truth, it is remarkable how many of these objections were made by Celsus as early as the close of the second century,—for example, the objection from alleged discrepancies in the Gospels,—and were successfully disposed of by Origen, the great Christian scholar of that day.

I prefer a more positive method of handling the subject. As there is a variety of topics to be touched upon, it will be convenient to separate them by numerical designations.

1. Christianity is not a new thing. It is not contending for a foothold on the earth. Its roots are deep in the soil. It is a great, long-established, widespread, and still advancing religion. It is the faith of the enlightened nations, incorporated in them at the beginning of their existence, helping to create them, presiding over their growth. It has moulded to a great extent their political and social institutions, their sentiments and usages, and leavened their literature and laws. It has entered into their very blood and marrow. To dislodge Christianity as a supernatural religion, were it possible, from the convictions and life of the European nations and their offshoots, would be a revolution the magnitude



and terrible effect of which, as I believe, it is impossible to conceive. The old Græco-Roman religion fell, but it fell by the expulsive power of a new and better faith. Had it been swept away by mere unbelief, with nothing but atheism, or the indistinct and fluctuating creed of natural religion, to stand in the room of it, who can doubt that there would have been a ruin without a recovery? But the principal thing which I wish to say under this head is, that the burden of disproving Christianity and demonstrating that it rests on a false foundation properly falls on the assailing party; and, further, to intimate that the task is not a light one.

2. It should be understood, at the outset, that no one claims that the system of Christianity is free from difficulties, which may, here and there, be of a perplexing character. This is no more than is admitted by everybody, except narrow partisans, in the case of every science. The same thing is true, I believe, of the law of gravitation. There are mysteries which are not cleared up, which revelation does not pretend to clear up,—some, it is likely, which the human intelligence, at its present grade of development, is incapable of exploring. We are not yet arrived at the summit where we can overlook the universe. Christianity is a practical system: its founder likened himself to a physician. We are justified in taking food, and in taking medicine when we are sick, and this not merely on grounds of experience. We can see to some extent the *rationalis* of the operation of food and medicine, even without an exhaustive knowledge of chemistry and physiology, and the hidden process of life and growth. An apostle only claimed for himself and others to “know in part,” to have a fragmentary and obscure knowledge—but still a real knowledge—of things invisible. The question respecting any creed proposed for belief, whether in religion or philosophy or science, is whether the reasons for it are stronger

than the reasons against it, and whether they are enough stronger to justify credence. Christianity asks no more for itself than is conceded in regard to every other system and theory, and in regard generally to events which do not fall under the immediate notice of the senses; though even here time and space, sense-perception, and the reality of an external world are not free from the most perplexing difficulties.

3. Another thing which may as well be said here is, that Christians are not all agreed in their opinions, that it is unreasonable to expect them to concur on all points, and that it is unfair to identify the special ideas of a class with the essentials of Christian belief. What master in philosophy was ever interpreted just alike by all of his adherents? The disciples of Plato have differed as to his meaning on particular points. One of them has maintained one thing, and another the opposite. Some have denied certain Dialogues to be his, which others with equal confidence have declared to be genuine. Yet there is an essential Platonism in which, as a body, Platonic disciples are agreed. Where is there a political party which has existed for a score of years, the members of which are perfectly at one in their creed? How commonly do they disagree as to the meaning of their "platform," and this when there is no designed ambiguity in it! It would be too much to expect that on a subject like Christianity, covering, as it does, so broad a field, and as to the precise character of the Bible as a whole, and of its component parts, there should be an absolute accord among all who call themselves, and deserve to be called, Christians. To take a single example: there are some who hold that every thing that is said in the Scriptures which bears on natural and physical science is correct, and of divine authority. There are others who hold that the biblical writers, whatever they knew of the physical world, accommodated their

language to the science of their time. Others, again, hold that in the Bible are positive errors in science, which, however, are affirmed, not to militate against its authority as a teacher of moral and religious truth. These last are not to be denied the name of Christians: the fundamental principles of supernatural Christianity they may cherish with all their hearts. It is a blunder of ignorance, or a trick of controversy, to refuse to discriminate between what is essential to a system and the diverse opinions, on points not essential, which spring up among its adherents. The line of demarcation it may not be so easy to draw. There may be a difference as to where exactly it should run; but the existence of such a line none but a sophistical reasoner will ignore.

4 Before proceeding farther, it is well to advert to an idea which I had formerly supposed was nearly extinct in the world, — the idea, namely, that religion, and the Christian religion in particular, is a bane. The Epicureans thought it an advantage to have deities which stood aloof from all concern for men or connection with human affairs. Lucretius wrote a poem to set forth the atomic theory of the universe, and thus to deliver men's minds from the terrors of superstition and all the gloom and torture of soul of which religion was the occasion. It cannot be denied that religion has been the occasion of incalculable suffering. Think of the uncounted victims of religious intolerance! Think of the animosity and bloodshed caused by religious wars! What an amount of misery arose out of the European wars of the seventeenth century, which had their origin largely in religious dissension! It seems a quick way to abolish these manifold calamities to abolish religion itself. Does it need to be said that there is another side to the picture? Apart from the fallacy of charging on a feeling or principle the consequences of its abuse or perversion, one should look at the comfort, wholesome restraint, uplifting hope,