

**AN EXAMINATION OF HARNACK'S  
'WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?': A  
PAPER READ BEFORE THE TUTORS'  
ASSOCIATION ON OCTOBER 24,  
1901**

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Association on October 24, 1901 by W. Sanday

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*An*  
*Examination of Harnack's*  
*'What is Christianity?'*

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE TUTORS' ASSOCIATION  
ON OCTOBER 24, 1901

BY

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THIS paper is printed in the hope that it may contribute a little to the settlement of opinion at a time when it is exposed to some disturbing influences. Harnack's book is but a sample—perhaps the best, in any case a brilliant sample—of a particular form of the critical movement that is most conspicuous in Germany, but also by no means unrepresented among ourselves. In it the questions at issue stand out with great distinctness; and the opportunity seems a good one for taking our bearings in regard to them as well as we can.

The paper was written some weeks ago, away from books and libraries, and I have since become aware of a number of essays and pamphlets on the subject in German besides those which are mentioned. I refer to this, not because it is likely that further study of the literature would have greatly altered my own views, but just as an indication of the wide interest that Harnack's publication has aroused. Many tendencies of the age find in it eloquent expression.

W. S.

OXFORD:  
*October, 1901.*

AN EXAMINATION  
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I MAY assume that Harnack's book<sup>1</sup>, which has attracted a good deal of attention in this country as in Germany<sup>2</sup>, is by this time well known and that its merits are recognized—its fresh and vivid descriptions, its breadth of view and skilful selection of points, its frankness, its genuine enthusiasm, its persistent effort to get at the living realities of religion. The nearest parallel that I can remember in English would be Matthew Arnold's theological writings, *St. Paul and Protestantism, Literature and Dogma, God and the Bible*. Harnack is indeed a trained theologian, where Matthew Arnold was an amateur; though I am not sure that in this respect the difference will be so much

<sup>1</sup> The German title is *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Leipzig, 1900); the English, *What is Christianity?* The translation (by Mr. Bailey Saunders) as a whole is excellent, and very idiomatic; but a few points might, perhaps, be improved. On p. 38 I think that *In dem ruhigen Gleichmass der Gleichnisse* should be rather 'in the quiet *equability*, or equable calm, of the parables' (cf. 'worlds whose course is equable and pure') than 'symmetry.' On p. 201 *Kautelen* is rather 'safeguards' than 'guarantees.' On p. 205 'theocracy' (*bis*) should be 'theocracy' (i. e. 'mingling of divinities'). On p. 206 '*pleni-tude* of its religious experiments' should be 'multitude.'

<sup>2</sup> One of the reviews speaks of it as having attained an 'astonishing circulation' (*erstaunliche Verbreitung*).

felt as might have been expected, since it is evident that Harnack's lectures were rapidly thrown off; we understand that they were delivered *ex tempore*, and taken down from shorthand notes; and they bear some marks of this in the fact that the statements sometimes stand in need of verification. And while Harnack escapes from unfortunate definitions like that of the 'stream of tendency which makes for righteousness,' I rather doubt whether he has anything quite so original and good as Matthew Arnold's account of the doctrine of *necrosis* (*Die to live!*)<sup>1</sup>.

On the other hand, curiously enough, the theologian's is the greater literary success, because his book is so much more compact and well proportioned. It is also without the flippancies of Matthew Arnold, though the latter has passages of great beauty.

It should be said that in Germany there are distinctly two opinions about Harnack's lectures. They have been warmly praised in organs with Ritschlian sympathies such as the *Theol. Litteraturzeitung*, 1900, col. 590 ff., and *Theol. Rundschau*, 1901 (March), p. 89 ff.; but they have also called forth uncompromising criticism from representatives of Lutheran orthodoxy, like Prof. W. Walther of Rostock, and Prof. Lemme of Heidelberg<sup>2</sup>.

It is a pity that both these pamphlets, but more especially Prof. Lemme's, should be so polemical in tone. Dr. Lemme is strongly anti-Ritschlian. He declares war to the knife against Ritschl, and all his following. For him Harnack's book is simple Nihilism, a radical breach with all dogmatic and ecclesiastical Christianity. He

<sup>1</sup> *St. Paul and Protestantism*, pp. 69-83.

<sup>2</sup> The *Theol. Literaturblatt* for Sept. 13, 1901, reviews three hostile pamphlets besides Prof. Walther's, which seem to be of less importance. One by a Roman Catholic Professor at Vienna is especially disappointing, as it does not go into the merits of the case, but only utilizes Harnack's book for purposes of party. It does, however, bear testimony to the interest excited by the book among Roman Catholic students at the University.



pursues this into every corner and strips off its disguises. He will not allow his opponent to shelter himself behind words and phrases. His language is throughout that of an impassioned challenge, to which he demands a plain answer Yes or No.

Prof. Walther is more balanced. He is well aware that there is a large class estranged from the Church. He sees that it is more particularly for this class that Harnack is writing; but he thinks that his concessions go much too far.

It may sufficiently indicate the two positions when it is said that, whereas Walther maintains that all that is left of the specific contents of Christianity is just the three points common to all religions, God, Virtue, and Immortality, Lemme would refuse to allow the last, and directly calls upon Harnack to say whether he denies the life after death or not.

It seems to me that this is pushing controversy too far. It is characteristic of the school of Ritschl to lay stress wherever they can on the tangible facts of present religious experience. There is warrant for this in the Biblical conception of eternal life, which is certainly treated as beginning here and now. It seems only fair that Harnack, if he pleases, should lay stress on this without having his faith impugned in a doctrine that he has never questioned.

Indeed, we may go further and ask if a passage like the following is not quite unequivocal:—

‘Whatever may have happened at the grave and in the matter of the appearances, one thing is certain: this Grave was the birthplace of the indestructible belief that death is vanquished, that there is a life eternal. It is useless to cite Plato; it is useless to point to the Persian religion, and the ideas and the literature of later Judaism. All that would have perished and has perished; but the certainty of the resurrection and of a life eternal which is bound up with the grave in Joseph’s garden has not perished,

\* | and on the conviction that *Jesus lives* we still base those hopes of citizenship in an Eternal City which make our earthly life worth living and tolerable. "He delivered them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage," as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews confesses' (p. 162).

It cannot be said that this is a matter of words and phrases, because the whole argument requires that the life after death should be real.

I should be prepared myself to make some allowance for the circumstances under which the lectures were delivered. They were addressed to a miscellaneous audience of some 600 students taken from all the faculties. I can well believe that the lecturer stated his case in the form that he thought would be most acceptable to them. The lectures were, as I have said, spoken *ex tempore*; and while they owe to this much of the real eloquence and fire by which they are distinguished, it is possible enough that they are less guarded and qualified than they would have been otherwise. I set down to this much of the impression of over-confidence of which the critics complain.

### I

V | It is true that Harnack conceives of the effect of the movement to which he gives expression as a process of 'reduction.' What he offered to his audience was a 'reduced' Christianity—I think myself unduly 'reduced.' By Christianity he means the teaching of Christ, and not—as we have been in the habit of understanding it—the sum total of New Testament teaching as to the contents of the religion which Christ came to found. He does indeed speak of the impression which Christ—

V | 'Himself and his Gospel made upon the first generation of his disciples' (p. 15, E. T.).

But he does not seem to accept the whole of that

impression as authoritative. If he had done so some of the most characteristic features of his book must have come out quite differently. He seems to conceive of Christianity as though it consisted only of ideas, of teaching. Hence we are not surprised to find that he leaves out much that we have been in the habit of regarding as essential to it. But surely the point at which he draws the line is arbitrary. Even on historical grounds the frame-work is too small for the picture that has to be got into it. It is impossible adequately to appreciate any conspicuous historical phenomenon only by its initiation. The great question of Christianity must be What think we of Christ? But we certainly cannot answer this by considering only His teaching, and stopping short of the interpretation which is given to His teaching by His followers.

I must confess to disappointment in more ways than one. It is easy enough to see that Hamack's conclusions follow from his premises. But his premises are in several ways not what I should have hoped.

His previous writings had not prepared me for the sweeping and I must needs think unjust language that is used in reference to the Fourth Gospel. I had watched for some time a certain oscillation of opinion on this head; and to the outcome as it is now formulated (p. 19 f., E. T.) I should wish to enter an emphatic protest. I will undertake to say that such an estimate though often asserted has never yet been proved. The indications of trustworthy character long ago alleged remain where they were. The Fourth Gospel does but develop features in the history and personality of Christ to which the other Gospels clearly point. On the basis of the Fourth Gospel St. Paul and the primitive Church are intelligible, but they are not intelligible otherwise. The most real objection to the Fourth Gospel is an objection to the supernatural