

**CHRISTIANITY THE RELIGION
OF NATURE: LECTURES
DELIVERED BEFORE THE
LOWELL INSTITUTE**

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Christianity the Religion of Nature: Lectures Delivered Before the Lowell Institute by A. P. Peabody

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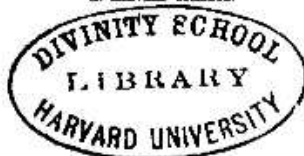
CHRISTIANITY
THE
RELIGION OF NATURE.

LECTURES
DELIVERED BEFORE THE LOWELL INSTITUTE.

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P R E F A C E .

THE author by no means claims as original the conception of Christianity as coincident with the religion of nature ; but he is not aware that precisely this line of proof or defence has been adopted in any formal treatise on the evidences of Christianity. Yet he is profoundly convinced that it is on grounds of *a priori* probability that the controversy between those who admit and those who deny a special, authoritative revelation through Jesus Christ is now to be waged.

It is not a little singular that *a priori* objections took precedence of historical in the early days of the Church. We have no reason to suppose that Celsus denied the miraculous element in the Evangelical narratives. In times of ready faith as to the occult and marvellous in nature and the wonder-working power of demons, it was easy to admit the salient facts recorded in the Gospels, and yet to reject the truths which they seemed to authenticate. The two leading considerations urged by Celsus against the new religion were its promulgation among and for the poor, uneducated, and ignoble, and its claim to universality, both which features appeared to him so intrinsically absurd as to be incapable of proof. It is

no mean evidence of the penetrating and transforming power of the religion thus assailed, that these strongest points of attack are now impregnable stations of defence, — that the whole civilized world would demand as essentials of a divinely authenticated religion that it should embrace within its blessings and its promises all sorts and conditions of men, and that it should be adapted to universal acceptance.

In the last century, Hume indeed maintained the antecedent impossibility of miracles in such a sense as to render them incapable of being authenticated; it being, as he argued, more probable that any conceivable amount of human testimony should be false, than that they should be true. But the greater part of the infidel writers of the century aimed their attacks at the alleged facts and the historical evidences of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Accordingly, it was the prime object of the advocates of Christianity to accumulate proofs of the genuineness and authenticity of the sacred writings. This they did, some of them with more zeal and thoroughness than discrimination and critical discernment. *Non multum, sed multa*, might well have been the motto of not a few, and testimonies of unimpeachable validity and explicitness were often weakened by their juxtaposition with those of doubtful authority or of imperfect relevancy. Lardner's great work lies especially open to this objection, if we consider it as an argument for Christianity, while as a repertory of the materials for argument it cannot be too highly prized or too gratefully regarded. Paley's treatise on the Evi-

dences of Christianity, on the other hand, was admirably adapted to the exigencies of his time. It seems to us a complete refutation of historical scepticism. It is not obsolete, and never can become so. In our own day, with a narrower scope, Mr. Norton's great work on the Genuineness of the Gospels is unequalled as a compact array of historical arguments. His motto is, *Non multa, sed multum*. He rejects all testimony against which a shadow of doubt or a charge of irrelevancy can be urged, nay, almost all individual testimony; for the witnesses that he places on the stand are, with hardly an exception, communities or bodies of men, and official personages who must have virtually spoken in the name and expressed the belief of the several churches or the collective Christendom which they represented. The second and third volumes, comprising the history of the various Gnostic sects, evince conclusively that those heretics, who on theological grounds could not but have rejoiced to invalidate our canonical Gospels, could find no historical pretence for their rejection. Mr. Norton also, at several points, adduces the strongest circumstantial evidence for these Gospels, showing that certain universally admitted states of belief and ecclesiastical habitudes could not have existed, had not the genuineness of the Gospels been universally regarded as beyond dispute. In fine, writers of this historical school have proved conclusively that the authorship of the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles of St. Paul, by the men whose names they bear, rests on much stronger evidence than can be adduced for the genuine-

ness of any other writings of equal antiquity ; and that the facts which they record or recognize have all, and more than all, the marks of authenticity which belong to the universally admitted facts of ancient history.

It may indeed be said that the now dominant school of infidelity, naturalism, or pseudo-Christianity stands on the high ground of searching historical criticism. This we deny. Its historical conclusions are not reasons for, but corollaries from, its unbelief. It assumes the *a priori* impossibility of revelation, special inspiration, and miracle, and on that basis erects its theories of the genesis of the sacred books and of the (so-called) legends or myths which they record. Their reasoning is this: "Had the actual companions of Jesus Christ written the Gospels, their contents could not have been so utterly false as we know them to be ; therefore these books were of later date, of divided authorship, of gradual growth." Were the critical canons and processes of Strauss and the Tübingen divines applied to any other than our sacred books, the manifest result would be a *reductio ad absurdum*. Were these canons and processes admitted in any other field of historical or bibliographical research, no ancient book whatever could be received as genuine, no fact a few centuries old could be regarded as otherwise than fabulous or doubtful, and the whole realm of the past would be given over to Pyrrhonism. But the desperate expedients to which writers of this school are driven, may be regarded as furnishing a valuable contribution to the Christian evidences. Their problem is to account for

the existence, internal character, and general reception of the Gospels on the hypothesis that their contents are in the main false. They can solve this problem only by maintaining that these books came into being and grew into their present shape in ways in which no books were ever known to have their birth and growth; and that — mere foundlings, the children of many parents, owned of none — they foisted themselves at once, as of apostolic authority, upon the faith and reverence of Christian communities in every part of the civilized world. A problem which admits of no more rational solution than this is unsolvable.

Meanwhile the phasis of scepticism which now so extensively prevails renders it incumbent on Christians to demonstrate that the religion of the Gospel is in all its parts, in all its apparatus, in all its history, natural religion, — that it is not a provisional scheme, not a supplementary dispensation, but co-eternal with the mind of God, and coeval with the souls of men, — that its doctrines and precepts are not true and right because they were revealed, but that they were revealed because they are essentially true and immutably right. It is only when this conviction is produced in the mind of the objector, that he is prepared to listen to argument and to weigh evidence as to the historical aspects of the question.

The following Lectures grew out of an invitation received by the author, to prepare for the Lowell Institute a course of Lectures on Natural Religion. He, re-