

**THE INFLUENCE OF COMMERCE
UPON CHRISTIANITY: A PRIZE
ESSAY, READ IN THE THEATRE,
OXFORD, JUNE 28, 1854**

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The Influence of Commerce Upon Christianity: A Prize Essay, Read in the Theatre, Oxford, June 28, 1854 by William Henry Fremantle

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WILLIAM HENRY FREMANTLE

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*THE INFLUENCE OF COMMERCE
UPON CHRISTIANITY.*

A PRIZE ESSAY,

READ IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JUNE 28, 1854.

BY

WILLIAM HENRY FREMANTLE, B. A.

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THE INFLUENCE OF COMMERCE UPON CHRISTIANITY.

THERE is a great difference between Christianity in itself, and Christianity as it has been in the world. The one is perfect and complete, eternal and immutable, an emanation from God himself, possessed of the attributes of its Author, and to be known so far and in the same manner as He is known. The other is modified and fluctuating, even where the actual corresponds nearest to the ideal; and as we trace it in the lower sphere of its operation, it is subjected to conditions and applications various as the characters of mankind, and becomes only one of the many forces which impel the machine of society—one of the elements which make up the complex organization of human nature. Now we have in this lower sphere a thousand influences and agencies, acting and reacting one upon another. The difference between all these forces and Christianity is that the former are of human origin, in themselves fluctuating and varying, the latter has a higher origin and a higher existence of its own: *they* are of the earth and spring from beneath, *it* comes down from above. These forces, therefore, can never reach into the upper region—the region of absolute truth; but they have a sphere of their own in which the absolute truth can be to a certain extent apprehended; and this is the sphere of history and historical investigation. In looking back upon the past and recounting what has happened, we see Christianity not in its absolute form, but as it appeared to men—as it was influenced by or had influence upon their thoughts and their actions. In considering, therefore, the influence of commerce up

Christianity, we are completely cut off from any investigation of the essence of Christianity, and are only to inquire what has been the actual result where these two forces have been brought in contact.

Before, however, we proceed to the direct inquiry, it may be well to examine the direction in which these forces generally influence the world, and the points which they have in common. And first we must determine what sphere we are to assign to commerce, and in how wide a sense we are to use the word.

In its most general sense, then, commerce is the interchange of commodities: and in this all men are alike engaged. It is impossible for men to live together in society without such dealings continually going forward, and the origin of political life has been traced to the necessity of them. Hence, in a sense, all men are commercial, for all men make exchanges: commerce is the primary element of a civilized life—that without which civilization cannot exist. If we could imagine a tribe of savages passing out of a nomad state and settling down into fixed habitations, one of the first proceedings would be the subdivision of labour and the assignation of trades to particular individuals. No longer would each man provide himself with food from the flesh and milk of his own cattle, or with raiment from their skins; but, as the arts of life became known, the weaver and the farmer and the cobbler would provide the produce of his own art for others beside himself. Hence trade is the substratum of civilization, that which underlies all higher efforts. But in the advanced stages of civilization, when the human race has attained a higher state, this substratum is no longer necessarily the most important element; other principles may arise of greater value. Commerce may, it is true, continually increase, and be the chief characteristic of a highly civilized state, as is the case with the United States; but it is by no means so with the highly cultivated nations of the Old World, France and Germany and Italy. In this more advanced stage, the commerce

necessary for common civilization is assumed—it is implied in the fact that these nations are civilized: and the distinction of commercial and non-commercial nations refers not to this low and more limited kind of trade, but to commerce in its grander and more extensive operations. The spirit, however, is in all cases the same; and it is well to remember, when we speak of commercial classes and commercial countries that no class and no country is altogether without commerce or uninfluenced by the commercial spirit.

We may learn then that commerce influences mankind from beneath; it belongs in the first instance to their material progress. Christianity on the contrary, comes down from above, and influences in the first instance the moral and intellectual progress. The one influences the soul through the body; the other directs the body through the soul: and their influences meet in that sphere of moral and social existence, on which are brought to bear all the converging principles of the material and intellectual world. In that middle sphere of social life, sentiments and opinions are produced by causes of many different kinds; these principles, which have nothing in common, which belong to separate fields of interest, may bear fruit in the same direction; and persons with totally different views of life may unite in one and the same opinion upon a thousand matters even of great importance. Thus it is that the spirit of commerce and that of Christianity unite in many of the sentiments and views which result from them.

Of these the most important is a love of peace. The spirit of commerce, having regard to the security and profitability of trade is full of the warmest feelings of antipathy to war: it needs but a fair field; it desires to molest nobody: it requires but the open sea and the open highway, clear from all obstructions, unmolested by foes, where its harmless inoffensive energy may expatiate. Whatever may be the selfishness of individual traders, the general interests of this great agency are identical with those of mankind in general, and the watchword of commerce

as well as of Christianity is Peace on Earth, good will towards men.

It is, moreover, a pursuit which is emphatically universal. It is connected with the first and most necessary requirements of man, as man, and belongs not to any particular countries, but to the world. It gives therefore a bond altogether independent of class or language or nationality: the merchant has to compete as much with his own countrymen as with foreigners, and feels himself as closely allied to those with whom he trades as to those among whom he lives. It insists upon the great doctrine that man is not independent of man, but, in the widest sense, that the ends of the earth are connected one with another, and nations and countries rely upon one another for mutual support.

'Tis thus reciprocating each with each
 Alternately the nations learn and teach,
 While Providence enjoins to every soul
 An union with the vast terraqueous whole.¹

Such a bond as this, when once felt is by no means one which can easily be dispensed with: commerce is not only world wide in its extension, it is also continually becoming deeper in its influence. It is a tree whose roots are ever silently growing—a cord whose ends unravelled are twined round the heart of nations and amid the intricate relations of society; till at length to sever the bond would be to abolish the principle of gravitation, to hurl the nations from their appointed orbits, to reduce the moral universe to a chaotic void, in which isolated atoms and particles move listlessly without order or law. When the corn trade with Alexandria was interrupted, Rome was starved; were the cotton trade with America cut off, whole classes in England would be reduced to poverty; and a failure in the tea-crop in China would be felt by every individual in England. Again, the effect of commerce is to level and to equalize: it starts with the fundamental maxim that all men are

¹ Cowper's *Charity*.

equal: and is in its essence opposed to all exclusive systems of caste or feudalism, to all institutions which give privileges to a single class, and all measures of government which favour monopoly and regard the interest of individuals rather than that of the whole community. In all these points it harmonizes with Christianity—a religion which teaches that every man look¹ not on his own things but also on the things of others—which tell us that men are bound together as brethren, not because they live in the same country or speak the same language; but because they are children of the same Father, subjects of the same Lord; which asserts that in ²Jesus Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free; and which brings Felix in his palace and Paul in his dungeon to stand on an equal footing before the same tribunal.

But, above all, both the elements of which we are treating, will stand the test of truth and reality and permanence. In our more enthusiastic moments, we are apt to paint to ourselves a glowing ideal picture of that high state of social progress to which, as we vainly would trust, the world is tending, a golden age of human society, a millennium of regenerated existence. In that picture which the imagination draws, but which is not the less true because as yet it has no outward manifestation, and the way that leads to it appears long and difficult, the most prominent characteristic features are piety, peace and liberty. In that happy ideal, war and bloodshed, contention and variance find no place; and with them vanish military glory, and ambition and rivalry whether of war or of politics. But when the intrigues of diplomacy and the feats of arms are gone, and when the mighty deeds and fantastic virtues of chivalry are put aside, as vain and shadowy forms, gloomy and grand, but now grown useless and even monstrous; the genius of commerce flourishes and is welcomed, ministering to the wants of man, and driving far the approaches of

¹ Phil. ii. 4.

² Gal. iii. 28.