

NATURAL CHRISTIANITY

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Natural Christianity by W. H. Fremantle

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BY THE HONBLE.

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PREFACE

"NATURAL religion" has acquired a bad name; and the title of this treatise may suffer from it. I have endeavoured to meet this in the first pages of this book; but it may be well to state my purpose in writing it in a more direct and explicit manner.

My purpose, then, is to draw out the fact that Christianity, being divine and supreme, must assert and work out its sovereign position by blending with human life, and with the general development of the whole system of nature which God has made. The assertions of the introduction to the Gospel according to St. John have been followed out, which represent the Word of God as the foundation of all things visible and invisible, asserting that He speaks to the conscience of every man, that, as incarnate in Christ, He claims supremacy over every man and every society of men, and must reign over a united and redeemed universe: and further, that He has entrusted to all who believe in this purpose the duty of carrying it out in dependence upon Him. The Society or Church, therefore, which is to effect this must be universal, and every one who longs for righteousness ought to be welcomed into the band of those who are building up the Kingdom.

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I find, however, that many otherwise faithful men do not believe this, and are content to set before themselves and the Church the salvation or saintliness of a certain number, the rest (which they speak of as "the World") being left out. Natural Christianity, on the contrary, recognizes that Christ is, in His own words, "The Saviour of the World," and, in the words of St. John, "the Light which lighteth every man," the fountain of all goodness in all countries and ages, the guide of its development, and the assurance of its final triumph.

I find also that, in the carrying out of the mission of the Church, a wrong position and value has been assigned to the function of public worship. Our Lord said nothing about it, and gave no rules or exhortations about it, but bent all His energies to the inspiring of the whole life of His followers with the spirit of faith and righteousness. But now, when men think of religion and the Church, the idea before their minds is the practice of public worship, the buildings in which it is conducted, the regulation of its ministers, with some adjuncts of beneficence. But the true object of the Church is not merely to testify by word or by prayer, but to live out the whole life in all its branches, public and private, in all its relations to God and to man, in the faith and spirit of the Master. Towards this, no doubt, public worship is a great help; but it must be, as the Master left it, free,

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comprehensive, and mutable. Instead of this, public worship has been made the supreme function; and rules about it, often belonging to former ages, are made the condition of partaking in it and of membership in the Church. Consequently religion is viewed as an exotic system, denaturalizing human life, and leading to alienation and strife. Natural Christianity must seek to redress the balance, making the life primary, and public worship and its adjuncts auxiliary.

I find that, mainly through the cause just mentioned, the mass of our working people, the very class from which our Saviour sprang, are alienated, first, from public worship, which seems to them to have no connection with their lives, and also, to a large extent, from religion itself. They are apt to look upon the ministers of religion as agents of a system which has been thrust upon them and to which they do not intend to be enslaved.

I find, further, that the strife between religion and science, though greatly mitigated, has been so by the perception, on both sides, that religion is an indispensable part of human nature, and also by the conviction that its assertions must not contravene the knowledge which we have of the outer world or of history, and, further, that, while seeking to realize the presence of God universally, it is not only permissible to His servants, but their duty in an age like ours, to investigate the means

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by which he has wrought out His purposes. This conviction leads to that which is here advocated as Natural Christianity.

Further, I find that, amongst educated men, there is a tendency to be shy of religion as of something strange, the adherents of which do not speak their language or care for what they care for. A Christianity which cares for all sides of human life and all its interests may, I trust, do something to remove this feeling.

I am aware that much of what I am dealing with here is difficult, and in some ways perilous. But truth must come first, even in touching upon matters and men whom we love. It was said by Dr. Arnold that, the more he loved an institution, the more he wished for its reform and its perfection: and this saying holds good as to the whole field of life. Nothing can withdraw itself from criticism. But criticism does not imply denial, nor need inquiry lead to negation. And it may be permitted to one who has exercised a strenuous ministry of more than fifty years to commend by his experience the principles which have served him, and have given him an increased and convinced attachment to the Bible and the Church; and that, while opposed to any separate government by the clergy, he has lived in the fullest sympathy with the profession to which his life is devoted and the work of its ministers.

I have avoided the intricacies of Biblical

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criticism by relying upon the passages which seem to be of unimpeachable authority, or to enunciate some truth which, when rightly apprehended, becomes axiomatic.

I may be allowed to say that, while I have given a strong opinion that the function of public worship has been unduly exalted in comparison with a complete life of faith and righteousness, this must not be taken as an undervaluing of this function itself; but as implying (1) that there is now, as there has been in most periods of Christian history, a danger of dwelling too exclusively and too rigidly upon its forms and rules; (2) that this has led to a growth of clerical power which, though little realized, is one of our greatest dangers; and (3) that the only antidote to this is to set forth the importance of a full life lived in Christian faith—that which I have called in a previous work "The Gospel of the Secular Life." If, in doing this, I have seemed to go too far, and said what may give offence, I would ask the reader to rectify this impression by the assurance that my object is not to lay stress upon any mere negation, but to enlarge men's views of God's purpose, and of the work of the Church as the instrument for bringing in His reign of universal justice and truth and love.

W. H. FREMANTLE.