

**ON SOME SUPPOSED
CONSEQUENCES OF THE
DOCTRINE OF HISTORICAL
PROGRESS: A LECTURE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649299348

On some supposed consequences of the doctrine of historical progress: a lecture by Goldwin Smith

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

GOLDWIN SMITH

**ON SOME SUPPOSED
CONSEQUENCES OF THE
DOCTRINE OF HISTORICAL
PROGRESS: A LECTURE**

ON
SOME SUPPOSED CONSEQUENCES OF THE
DOCTRINE OF HISTORICAL PROGRESS.

A Lecture

DELIVERED BY

GOLDWIN SMITH, M.A.,
REGIUS PROFESSOR OF MODERN HISTORY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,

APRIL, MDCCCLXLI.

Oxford & London :
J. H. AND JAS. PARKER.
1861.

A LECTURE, &c.

IN previous lectures on the "Study of History" I fully accepted the doctrine of Historical Progress. It is obvious that the knowledge and wealth of our race increase and accumulate from age to age, and that their increase and accumulation re-act powerfully on the moral state of man. It is less obvious, but it seems not less certain, that our views of morality itself expand, and that our moral code is improved, as, by the extension of human intercourse, our moral relations are multiplied, and as, by the advancement of science and jurisprudence, they become better understood. Nor can it easily be denied that this progress extends even to religion. In learning more of man we learn more of Him in whose image man was made; in learning more of the creation we learn more of the Creator; and everything which in the course of civilization tends to elevate, deepen, and refine the character generally, tends to elevate, deepen, and refine it in its religious aspect.

But then it is alleged, and even triumphantly proclaimed, that tremendous consequences follow from this doctrine. If we accept historical progress, it is said, we must give up Christianity. Christianity, we are told, like other phases of the great onward movement of humanity, has had its place, and that a great place, in history. In its allotted epoch it was

progressive in the highest degree, and immense veneration and gratitude are due to it on that account: but, like other phases of the same movement, it had its appointed term. That term it has already exceeded. It has already become stationary, and even retrograde; it has begun, instead of being the beneficent instrument, to be the arch-enemy of human progress. It cumberes the earth; and the object of all honest, scientific, free-thinking men, who are lovers of their kind, should be to quicken the death-pangs into which it has manifestly fallen, and remove once for all this obstruction to the onward movement of the race. Confusion and distress will probably attend the final abandonment of "the popular religion;" but it is better at once to encounter them, than to keep up any longer an imposture which is disorganizing and demoralizing to society, as well as degrading to the mind of man. 'Let us at once, by a courageous effort, say farewell to our old faith, and, by a still more courageous effort, find ourselves a new one!' A gallant resolution, and one which proves those who have taken it to be practical believers in free-will, and redeems them from the reproach of admitting the logical consequences of their own doctrines touching the necessary progress of humanity by way of development and under the influence of invariable laws. If history grows like a vegetable, or like the body of an animal, no effort of courage can be needed, or avail, to direct its growth. We have only to let well, or ill, alone.

The notion that Christianity is at this moment manifestly in an expiring state, or, to use the favourite language of the sect, that "the popular religion has entered on its last phase," is perhaps partly produced by the reform, or attempted reform, of Christian doc-

trine which is at present going on. This movement is supposed to be an exact parallel to the attempt made by the later Platonists to rationalize the popular mythology of Greece, and equally ominous of approaching dissolution to the superstition with which its more philosophic adherents found it necessary thus desperately to deal. The analogy would be more just if the later Platonists, instead of endeavouring to bring a sensual superstition to the level of the age by violently importing into it a spiritual philosophy, had endeavoured to restore it to its primitive and most sensual simplicity. Though even in that case it would not be certain, without further proof, that because the attempt to reform Polytheism had failed, Christianity must be incapable of reform. Historical analogy, as an interpreter of present events, has its uses, and it has also its limits. Christianity supposes that with its Founder something new came into the world. The King of Siam may, after all, be about, in contradiction to the whole of his experience, to see the water freeze.

If, however, they to whom I allude have rightly read the present by the light of the past; if, as they say, a sound and free philosophy of history distinctly points to the approaching departure of Christianity from the world, a terrible crisis has indeed arrived, and one which might well be expected to strike their rhetorical exultation dumb. They admit, I believe, that religion, or whatever stands in the place of it, is the very core, centre, and vital support of our social and political organization; so that without a religion the civil tie would be loosened, personal would completely prevail over public motives, selfish ambition and cupidity would break loose in all directions, and society and the body politic would be in danger of dis-

solution. They cry aloud, as I have said, that Christianity being exploded, a new religion must be produced in order to save humanity from ruin and despair. Now to produce a new religion off-hand, and that at a moment of the most appalling peril, and consequently of the greatest mental agony and distraction, is an achievement which even the most extreme believers in free-will and self-exertion would scarcely think possible to man. I am not aware that so much as the rudiment of a new religion has yet been actually produced, unless it be the Humanitarian religion of M. Comte, which is merely a mad travestie of the Roman Catholic Church, and from which even the disciples of the Comtist philosophy, if they have any sense of the grotesque remaining, turn away in despair. Thus the law of human development, instead of being, like the laws discovered by science, regular and beneficent, the just object of our confidence as well as of our admiration, has failed abruptly, and brought humanity to the brink of an abyss.

It is my strong conviction that history has arrived at no such crisis; that the indications of historical philosophy have been misunderstood, and that they do not point to the impending fall, but rather to the approaching regeneration of Christendom. I do not think that we should refuse to consider, in this lecture-room, a question which lies at the very root of the philosophy of history, merely because it happens also to be of the highest practical importance. I propose, therefore, to add a few remarks on this point, by way of supplement to the two general lectures on the "Study of History," in which the Doctrine of Historical Progress has been maintained.

In the first place, we are struck by the fact that

sustained historical progress has not been universal, as those against whom I am arguing always assume, but has been confined to Christian nations. For a short time the Mahomedan nations seemed to advance, not merely in conquering energy, but in civilization. They have even been set up as the moral rivals of Christendom by those who are anxious that Christendom should not appear to be without a rival. But their progress was greatest where they were most immediately in contact with Christianity, and it has long since ended in utter corruption and irrevocable decay. Where is the brilliant monarchy of Haroun Alraschid? How ephemeral was it compared even with that old Byzantine Empire into whose frame Christianity had infused a new life under the very ribs of death; a life which even the fatal bequest of Roman despotism, extending itself to the Church as well as to the State, could scarcely quench, and which, through ages of Mahomedan oppression, has smouldered on beneath the ashes to burst out again in reviving Greece. Even in the Moorish communities of Spain, the flower as they were of Mahomedan civilization, internal corruption had prepared the way for the conquering arms of Ferdinand and Isabella. Mahomedanism, however, whatever the degree of progressive energy displayed by it may have been, was not a separate and independent religion, but a debased offspring of Judaism and Christianity. From the intercourse of its founder with Jews and Christians it derived the imposing monotheism which has been its strength both as a conquering power and as a system of civilization; while the want of a type of character, such as Christianity possesses, has been in every sense its fatal weakness. Turning to the remoter East, we find that its history has not been

a history of progress, but of the successive descents of conquering races from the more bracing climate of the North, subjugating the languid inhabitants of the plains, and founding a succession of empires, sometimes mighty and gorgeous, but always barren of nobler fruits, which, when the physical energy of the conquering race was spent in its turn, at once fell into decay. The semblance of progress, in short, has been but a semblance, due merely to fresh infusions of animal vigour, not to any sustaining principle of moral life. China advanced at an early period to a certain point of material civilization; but having reached that point she became a byword of immobility, as Egypt, the ancient China, was in a former day. This immemorial stagnation seems now about to end in total dissolution, unless Christian nations should infuse a regenerating influence from without. The civilization of Mexico is deplored by certain philosophers, who seem to think that had its career not been cut short by Spanish conquest, it might have attained a great height, and confirmed their views of history. But what reason is there to think that Mexico would ever have advanced beyond great buildings erected by slave labour, human sacrifices, and abominable vices? Again, we are told that the Christian view of history must be narrow and false, because it does not include in its theory of human progress the great negro and fetichist populations of Africa. But I would fain be informed what part the negro and fetichist populations of Africa have really played in the progress of humanity; or how the invariable law of spontaneous development through a certain series of intellectual and social conditions which we are told governs the history of all nations, has been verified in their case.