

**THE BIBLE IN EUROPE: AN
INQUIRY INTO THE
CONTRIBUTION OF THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION TO
CIVILIZATION**

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The Bible in Europe: An Inquiry into the Contribution of the Christian Religion to Civilization
by Joseph McCabe

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THE BIBLE IN EUROPE

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AN INQUIRY INTO THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION TO CIVILISATION

BY

JOSEPH McCABE

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PREFACE

RECENT discussions of our educational system have directed attention once more to an historical question of some interest: How far has the religion of Europe been a creative force in the making of its distinctive civilisation? Ever since the Churches entered upon the apologetic phase of their life, they have laid peculiar stress on their past service to Europe, and sought to ground thereon a claim to continued recognition and power. To the majority of people the appeal was effective enough. The co-extension of our Western religion with our Western civilisation, and the permeation of most of our institutions with theological ideas and ecclesiastical traditions, constituted a solid fact that made a minute examination superfluous. When, in addition, a number of obviously sceptical writers urged that the maintenance of religion is essential to the maintenance of our civilisation; when scholars like Mr. Birrell and Mr. Bryce solemnly repeated that the Bible is "the source of England's greatness"; men and women of little historical culture felt that they might continue to lend a sympathetic ear to the solicitations of the clergy.

But the reform of history and the general reconsideration of older convictions have tended to strengthen the attitude of interrogation. The apologetic works, to which one turns for some explicit proof, either offer us only the unsubstantial rhetoric and the strained generalisations of the older fashion of writing history, or else they make indiscriminate appeals to that earlier Christian literature which Mr. Lecky has described as "surpassing in its mendacious ferocity any other that the world has known." Indeed, living masters of

ecclesiastical history, like Professor Harnack, have regretted that their science has not advanced in line with profane history, and abandoned the irregularities of its youth. Still, in reading it, one feels that it is "history with a purpose," and that its purpose is, in the mind of the writers, so lofty and imperious as to throw in the shade the ordinary canons of the profane historian.

The following essay is a study in detail of the social effect of the adoption of the Christian religion in Europe. The beneficent results of some of the Christian ideas and emotions have been enlarged upon so fully at all times that it only remained for me to dwell, at any length, on the less familiar disadvantages of the new doctrines. Here, again, however, most of the facts which I bring to the reader's notice are so well established by historians like Milman, Lecky, Gibbon, Buckle, Boissier, Draper, White, Hallam, Bryce, and others, that I have not frequently been compelled to make original research. Where I have done so, the text is fully supported by authorities. In the main, my little work is a sketch of a side of the historical development of European institutions that is too often ignored. But the study of it is essential for the formation of a sound judgment on the social value of Christianity, and a wise determination of our attitude towards it to-day. That my work is unadorned with those flowers of rhetoric with which the reader is wont to be entertained in the perusal of works on this subject will not, I trust, diminish its utility. The brief space to which I had to confine myself barely sufficed to contain the vast mass of facts that I wished to submit, and I must leave the appropriate observations on them to the discerning and sensitive reader.

J. M.

January 5th, 1907.

CHAPTER I.

THE PASSAGE FROM PAGAN TO CHRISTIAN CIVILISATION

AT the outset of an inquiry such as I propose to make it is particularly necessary to have a definition of civilisation that shall be free from philosophical or sectarian prejudice. The difficulty of giving a precise expression to familiar ideas has often been noted, but there are few subjects on which reflection discovers a larger confusion than here. A dozen authoritative writers assail us at once with radically different views. Dr. Fairbairn, one of the ablest ecclesiastical writers on our subject, bestows a broad blessing on our age, and assures us that *this* is "the age of faith." Dr. W. Barry, writing with equal authority from the Catholic point of view, dwells with sombre phrases on the chief features of our time, and, presumably, finds a superior civilisation in the eighteenth or the fourteenth or some even earlier century; while Dr. Barry's spiritual chief, Pius X., is so perplexed, as he reads the signs of the times, that he can only give the authoritative decision that our world is indeed dominated by Satan, but by that astuter Satan who borrows the drapery of an angel of light. Nor is

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the confusion less when we turn aside entirely from writers whose vision may, without offence, be suspected of a sectarian warp. Mr. Lowes Dickinson conceives our modern development as a restored continuity with the broken civilisation of Greece, "across the delirious fumes of the Middle Ages"; while Mr. William Morris seeks in those Middle Ages, as he reads them, the ideal of the future state. Mr. Edward Carpenter scorns the whole elaborate growth that we call modern civilisation, and advocates a return to an almost patriarchal simplicity; while Mr. Bernard Shaw would breed a superman, and put him in a world far different from any that has yet been.

In the face of these formidable differences, one must shrink from the task of defining civilisation, and have recourse to a less stately expedient. It will be enough for my purpose to select a few points on which most social writers are agreed, and to test the action of the Christian Churches by the proportion in which they have contributed to those qualities.

Dr. Beattie Crozier, in his work on *Civilisation and Progress*, finds the advance of humanity's cause in the expansion of our powers. That is at once in harmony with the current philosophic definition of evolution, and an accurate abstract presentation of the general feeling of thoughtful men. For my purpose, which is, ultimately, rather practical than philosophical, I must take it in