

**THE SCIENTIFIC
OBSTACLES TO
CHRISTIAN BELIEF;
BOYLE LECTURES, 1884**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649779574

The Scientific Obstacles to Christian Belief; Boyle Lectures, 1884 by George Herbert Curteis

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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GEORGE HERBERT CURTEIS

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SCIENTIFIC OBSTACLES
TO
CHRISTIAN BELIEF.

BOYLE LECTURES,
1884.

BY
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London:
MACMILLAN AND CO.
1885.

LONDON:
R. CLAY, SONS, AND TAYLOR,
BREAD STREET HILL, E.C.

PREFACE.

*Extract from a Codicil to the Last Will and Testament of
the HON. ROBERT BOYLE, Esq., dated July 28, 1691.*

“**W**HEREAS I have an intention to settle in my lifetime the sum of Fifty Pounds per annum for ever, or at least for a considerable number of years, to be for an annual salary for some learned Divine or Preaching Minister, from time to time to be elected and resident within the city of London or circuit of the Bills of Mortality, who shall be enjoined to perform the offices following, viz.—To preach Eight Sermons in the year, for Proving the Christian Religion against notorious Infidels, viz., Atheists, Theists, Pagans, Jews, and Mahometans, not descending lower to any controversies that are among Christians themselves: these Lectures to be on the first Monday of the respective months of January, February, March, April, May, September, October, November, in such church as my trustees herein named shall from time to time appoint;¹ to be assisting to all Companies, and encouraging of them in any undertaking for Propagating the Christian Religion in foreign parts; to be ready to satisfy such real scruples as any may have concerning these matters, and to answer such new objections and difficulties as may be started, to which good answers have not yet been made. . . . I will that after my death Sir John Rotherham, Sergeant-at-Law, Sir Henry Ashurst, of London, Knight and Baronet, Thomas Tennison, Doctor in

¹ The Boyle Lectures are now preached in the Chapel Royal, Whitehall, on some of the Sundays following Easter Day, in the afternoon.

Divinity, and John Evelyn, sen., Esq., and the survivors or survivor of them, and such person or persons as the survivor of them shall appoint to succeed in the following trust, shall have the election and nomination of such Lecturer, and also shall and may constitute and appoint him for any term not exceeding three years, and at the end of such term shall make a new election and appointment of the same or any other learned Minister of the Gospel, residing within the city of London or extent of the Bills of Mortality, at their discretions."

THE rapid spread of unbelief in England during the last ten years has struck every observer. But its causes have been very superficially investigated. Christians have been in too great a hurry to defend what was so justly dear to their own hearts. And the all-important question has therefore been deferred, which ought to have stood first in their deliberations for defence, viz., *What precisely are, at the present day, the obstacles to Christian belief?* Until that question has been faced and answered, apologists are in danger of striking quite wide of the mark, and of simply "beating the air." No doubt even such ill-directed energy has its value. It displays to all beholders the extreme preciousness of the Gospel to those who have the privilege of retaining their faith; and it confirms the assurance and animates the courage of the great mass of implicit believers.

What such hasty and random strategy, however, does *not* do is to maintain the cause of Christ against outside attacks, and to convince unbelievers. For that purpose quite another sort of strategy is needful. The apologist must calmly "sit down first and count the cost." In other words, he must bravely face the full perils of the situation; he must not under-estimate the forces which his adversary is able to bring into the field; he must intuitively enter into the opponent's views, appropriate and (as it were) sympathise with them, and divine beforehand what is likely to be advanced in maintaining them. Above all, the Christian leader—if he is to win, not merely a skirmish, or even a battle, but the whole campaign—must "count the cost" in another sense. He must know what to surrender. It is merely brutal and useless strategy to defend everything without discrimination. In every age some points become of less vital importance than they were before; some breastworks are found to be incompetent to resist improved methods of attack; and some outlying defences, to every eye but that of their passionate defender, have manifestly become worse than useless, mere traps for impounding and wasting the force urgently required elsewhere,

mere gratuitous invitations to the foe to effect a lodgment and to proclaim a victory, if not actually to gain one.

For instance, it should be clearly understood by all who would defend the Christian faith in England, that here (at least) no *scorn* is felt for that faith. The extraordinary blessing which divine Providence has accorded to this country in her possession of a reformed and ever-reforming, yet at the same time catholic and historical and national, Church has secured us against that danger. Had the Church of England presented, at this moment, the aspect either of a powerful, but unreformed, corporation—or had she, on the other hand, been reformed indeed, but frittered into innumerable and powerless fragments, had she lost her catholic organisation, or forfeited her claim to be the old historic Church of the nation—in either case the defence of Christianity would have been greatly compromised. Contempt would have been felt and expressed for an organism which had grown too ossified and senile to bear the touch of reform; and indifference would be expressed for a spiritual discipline which failed to command the allegiance, or to stir the enthusiasm, even of its own professed adherents. Surrounded, however,

as she now is, by a host of minor voluntary societies, which act as safety-valves against over-government within, and provide a happy refuge without for every serious discontent, the Church of England has thus far amply justified her privileged position in this country, and has—by the almost universal admission of her foes—formed the main bulwark of modern Christendom against unbelief.

To this body, then, above all others, seems now committed by divine Providence, the task of making head against the advancing inroads of nineteenth century unbelief. It is a many-sided body. It offers "facets" (as it were) corresponding to many points of the mental compass. But especially its three great schools of opinion—the so-called High, Low, and Broad parties—present fronts of sympathy and attraction for the three main types of, at least Anglo-Saxon, mankind. In the HIGH CHURCH school the imaginative element predominates; and in the touching beauty of its ritual and the lovely tranquillity and peaceable self-subordination that reign there, thousands of devout souls have found a quiet framework for their religious lives, and a soothing remedy against that morbid excitement which too