

**THE INDEX TRACTS,  
NO. 14; A STUDY  
OF RELIGION**

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The index tracts, No. 14; A Study of Religion by Francis E. Abbot

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**FRANCIS E. ABBOT**

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# THE INDEX TRACTS.

No. 14.

## A Study of Religion,

BY

FRANCIS E. ABBOT.

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THE BOSTON  
SUNDAY AFTERNOON LECTURES  
FOR 1873.

A STUDY OF RELIGION: THE NAME AND  
THE THING.

BY FRANCIS E. ABBOT.

FIFTH LECTURE IN THE COURSE OF SIX "SUNDAY AFTER-  
NOON LECTURES," GIVEN IN HORTICULTURAL  
HALL, BOSTON, UNDER THE AUSPICES  
OF THE FREE RELIGIOUS ASSOCI-  
ATION, FEBRUARY 9, 1873.

If there is one word above all others which articulates in a breath the supreme sublimity and the most melancholy abasement of human nature,—which carries imagination up to the heights of a heroism so pure and lofty that common lungs gasp for coarser air, and then plunges her into dungeons of superstition so foul with blood and filth that the choke-damp of the coal-mine seems innocuous by comparison,—it is assuredly the word RELIGION. The page of history is lighted up by it, now as by a flood of golden sunshine, and again as by the glare, lurid and smoky, of infernal fires. All that is sweetest and tenderest, bravest and truest, most inspiring and most inspired in the human heart, has been sunned into living beauty by religion; all that is most dark, wrathful, false, crafty, cruel, has been nursed into bloody and deceitful deeds by her influence. Religion, and religion alone, has

had skill to sweep the entire key-board of humanity, evoking alternately the thunders of the hoarsest and harshest bass and the silver melodies that sing to us all we know of the angelic and divine.

THE STUDY OF RELIGION.

Politics, trade, industry, literature, art, philanthropy,—there is no human interest that has not been moulded or shaped by religion; and no study so comprehensive or profound awaits the future historian as that which is busied with the religious development of man. The *future* historian, I say; for, although I have been so venturesome as to entitle my lecture "A Study of Religion," I am painfully aware that no study of it can at this day be otherwise than fragmentary and crude,—that in their very best investigations this present generation are but dabblers and babblers in a matter too high for them. The materials for building up a true science of religion (science must be herself the historian and the analyst) exist to-day uncut, nay, unquarried even, in the traditions and annals and poems and bibles and philosophies, the cultus and the customs, the social systems and the countless institutions of many and diverse nations, of some of which even the names are as yet scarcely known; while the constructive task of planning and executing this great master-piece of intellectual architecture can fall to the lot of those only who shall inherit the results of whole generations of mighty minds. The great structures of the existing world-religions eclipse wholly, to the common observer, the very possibility of such a science; they stand for religion itself to the common intellect; they fill the field of vision; and their magnitude, which is as nothing beside the boundlessness of the slow-coming religion of man, is quite as much as even our best scholars can appreciate to-day. In what I have presumed, therefore, to call a "study of religion," I beg to be acquitted of the pretence of anticipating the proper task of succeeding centuries.

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## THE CLEW OF AN IDEA.

Yet, while stumbling and groping my way, as it were, amid the ruins of decaying world-religions, and consciously devoid of the light which is needed to illumine the path of escape, I do indeed believe that the clew of an idea is given which even in the dark shall serve as a guiding-thread. These vast tottering temples of faith in which the worshippers still congregate by millions, unlike as they appear to careless inspection, betray, notwithstanding, a far profounder unity than can be detected in mere similarity of moral precepts or identity of special beliefs. Such similarity or identity, though in itself a comparatively recent discovery, appears to me to be a quite superficial fact. Moral precepts and special beliefs, mere rules and mere opinions, never yet made a religion; they do not contain the vital principle essential to the organic existence of every world-faith. Deeper than to ethical codes or to theological conceptions must we look, if we would discover the vast arterial system of spiritual life which makes all religions one. What we want to discover is the common blood of them all, not the likeness of fingers or toes. The "sympathy of religions," as the phrase has been happily coined, is a great and fruitful truth; but there is danger lest we seek it in surface characteristics. When it is seen that moral precepts and theological beliefs are never the real bond of union even among the adherents of the same religion, we shall be cautious how we proceed in taking them as the bond of union among different religions. Without "unity of spirit," churches are ropes of sand; without unity of spirit, different religions, bristling as they all do with conscious hostility, could never be one in substance as they really are. It is something, then, to be warned against going off on a false scent in the search for unity. It is something to be aware that moral precepts and theological doctrines, whether shared or not shared in common by different religions, do not and cannot constitute the essence of religion, but are simply the various forms of manifestation assumed at various times and under varying circumstances by a



permanent force in human history. Opinions in ethics and in theology change from age to age; what is held to be right and true in one stage of development is seen to be wrong and false at a later stage. But the deep and powerful impulsion to *seek* for the right and true, without which these very changes could never have taken place, is an abiding element of human nature; and it is in this direction that we must look, if we would indeed discover that common essence which is the real nexus of unity among the diversities of law, creed, and cultus.

#### THE PREJUDICE AGAINST RELIGION.

In the study of religion, however, one great cause of mistake and injustice should be scrupulously eliminated,—I mean, the preconception or prejudice which pronounces beforehand that religion is pure superstition. Whoever enters on this study with a bias so unscientific as this will arrive at no results. Religion must be studied as one of the greatest facts of human history, if not the very greatest. It must be studied with the previous conviction that every fact of history, even the most trivial, has its proper place and deserves to be studied with scientific impartiality. The blind fury of the partisan, whether turned in this way or that, is a complete stoppage of ear and eye, disqualifying for all valuable research. The anti-religion rage which makes the very name a red rag to be rushed at with all the violence of a mad bull, and which is by no means an uncommon phenomenon of the day, should be as carefully guarded against as the most submissive superstition. Criticise without scruple the mischievous perversions and abuses of religion; acknowledge without palliation all the evil it has done; but avoid the mental obfuscation of confounding a permanent force with a transient form. This the adherents of the various religions do, conceiving the favored form of religion to be religion itself, and therefore condemning all other forms as false and abominable; but this the scientific student can never do, who sees that the evils done by religion in the world's history are

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due to the misapplication of a force whose intelligent direction must be most beneficial.

## RELIGION AS FIRE.

When I say, therefore, as I must, that I believe in religion, the case is the same as when I say that I believe in fire. Of all agencies employed by man, fire is perhaps the most useful and the most terrible. It will warm your house, and cook your steak; but it will just as readily burn them up, aye, and you too, if it escapes the governance of your mind. Without fire civilization would be impossible; but the great wilderness of blackened ruins within a stone's throw from this Hall, marking the spot where the conflagration raged with frightful fury through your stores and warehouses, shows how remorselessly fire will unmake the very civilization it has made. So it is with religion. Without it human life would freeze into the desolation of an arctic winter; without it the tender flush on the face of humanity, looking upward and forward in the rocky path she climbs, would fade away, and the golden aureole of a divine purpose would vanish forever from her head; without it the suffusing glow of hope and reverence would die out from the world of men, and the hard lines of care and stolid selfishness would be ploughed by the hand of Time where now he traces the marks of noble thought and earnest aspiration and grand enthusiasm for the true, the beautiful, the good. Yet the same mighty force which, if only guided by intelligence, makes each human heart an altar, has made it, and will make it again, under the guidance of ignorant folly, a lazar-house of superstition and a torture-chamber of cruelty. Let reason lose her mastery of the inner impulse of religion, and the fire which should warm, comfort, and preserve, will with all-devouring flames turn into ashes every costly product of civilizing mind. Truly, a fearful friend is this fire of the human soul,—the greatest of all blessings or the most terrible of all curses! I repeat it, I believe in religion as I believe in fire; for, notwithstanding the incalculable evils that result from their abuse, mankind could dispense with the one as little as with the other.

## THE NAME AND THE THING.

Believing that words are vitally connected in human thought with that which they represent, in studying religion I would consider first the *name*, and afterwards the *thing*.

## THE NAME:

## I. DERIVATION.

The popularly accepted derivation of the word religion is from the Latin word *religare*, signifying "to bind back or behind, to bind fast." If this derivation is correct, the word would seem etymologically to contain the idea of *bondage*, as its root-meaning; and consequently the use of it in connection with any word suggesting *liberty*, as in the phrase "Free Religion," must be condemned, as one of those attempts to put new meanings into old theological words against which every true radical instinctively and on principle protests. Should ripe and impartial scholarship ever pronounce in favor of this derivation, I for one should be disposed to abandon the word religion altogether, while still cleaving to that which to my mind it now fairly and fitly expresses. Far be it from any intrepid thinker to seek to avail himself of the prestige of any word to which his honest and unbiassed thought does not justly entitle him! Let him trust the cause of truth to itself for its final vindication in the eyes of mankind.

At the same time it should be noted, in any thorough discussion of the subject, that the verb *religare* not only means *to bind fast*, but also, in poetical and post-classical Latin, *to unbind*, as in the line of Catullus [lxiii. 84]:—

"At hæc minax Cybebe, religatque juga manu."

It might be not unreasonably urged that warrant could be found, even in the vulgar derivation of the word religion, for its appropriate conjunction with the word free.

But there is no occasion to rest the case on any doubtful or questionable grounds. The best authorities are in favor of deriving the word religion, not from *religare* at all, but from *relegere* or *religere*, signifying "to go through or over

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