

**CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES  
AND MODERN  
THOUGHT: THE BOYLE  
LECTURES FOR 1891**

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Christian Doctrines and Modern Thought: The Boyle Lectures for 1891 by T. G. Bonney

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# CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES

AND

# MODERN THOUGHT

*THE BOYLE LECTURES FOR 1891*

BY

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I DEDICATE THESE LECTURES  
TO THE SISTER  
WHO  
BY HER CARE AND COMPANIONSHIP  
DURING THE LAST TEN YEARS  
HAS LIGHTENED MANY A BURDEN.



## PREFACE.

KNOWLEDGE has grown from more to more during the present century. It is sometimes tacitly assumed that this advance has been adverse to all definite or systematic theology. In a certain sense this is true. A scientific education develops a habit of mind which is sceptical, in the better sense of the word. By it men are rendered less prone to accept, unless good reason can be shown, either the *ipse dixit* of a teacher or the decree of an assembly; they are led to assign a lower value to ceremonial ordinances and the machinery of an ecclesiastical system; they are more fully convinced of the inadequacy of the human mind to comprehend, and of human words to express, the

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things which belong, not to the phenomenal and the temporal, but to the unseen and the eternal.

Men thus trained are slow to admit a finality in any expression of truth. To them a creed or a decree of a council represents no more than the nearest approximation to the expression of a thought which could be made by the best qualified judges at that epoch. But since changes take place in the meaning of words, these formulæ may become inadequate or even misleading. Moreover, since the minds of men are modified by education, in the wide sense of the term, their habits of thought are changed; thus, in the process of time, some difficulties are smoothed away, but others may be created. An argument which in one age was convincing, in another may fail to satisfy; while, as a compensation, it is possible to appeal to new facts and to new considerations. In theology, as in war, certain methods of defence and certain weapons of attack become antiquated. At the



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present day the bravest troops which ever went to battle would be massacred by men of inferior physique and tactical skill, did they take the field with the muskets and artillery which did such good service at Waterloo. In this age, though we may not be superior to our forefathers in dialectics or metaphysics, we have obtained a far more comprehensive view of the natural world, and a closer insight into its processes of operation. By these our position has been materially altered. They have, in a sense, brought men nearer to God by indicating a latent unity in the varied phenomena of the universe, and suggesting that these proceed from and are the outcome of One Almighty Power. But, at the same time, this advance renders our conceptions of that Power less definite. As our conviction of the omnipresence and omnipotence of God grows stronger, our ideas of Him become less anthropomorphic, less capable of expression in words—in short, less definite. Still

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they are not on this account necessarily less assured. A child's conception of something which is external to himself and partially beyond his experience is frequently clear and definite, but it is also, as a necessary consequence, inadequate or even incorrect. When he has grown to manhood, it may become much more vague, but at the same time may be a much nearer approximation to the truth.

A change of this kind is taking place in the sphere of religious thought. Phrases which formerly satisfied are now felt to be inadequate; arguments once deemed conclusive now fail to convince—nay, in some cases, if resorted to, would produce the opposite effect. The progress of knowledge, even during the past half-century, the discoveries in geology, biology, archæology, and philology, have compelled theologians to modify their views as to the nature and function of inspiration, and the date, the origin, and the authority,

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historic or scientific, of some portions of the Bible. Views are commonly held and expressed by men of approved orthodoxy for which, five and twenty years ago, they would have been denounced as heretics and infidels. Science is now free to investigate the early history of our race, and to interpret the picture-writing of the Book of Nature as best she can, without being under any obligation to force the results into conformity with the narrative in the Book of Genesis, or with references to the same in later parts of the Scriptures. Only those who can remember something of the old days, who have themselves heard the thumping of the drum ecclesiastic, and felt a little of the storm of theological vituperation, can appreciate the blessings of the present freedom. But a price has to be paid—as it always must be—for this rapid advance. Liberty, quickly won after long thralldom, is liable to be misused, and some persons now imagine that in the process of clearing