WILL REASON EXTERMINATE CHRISTIANITY?

BY PROFESSOR DAVID SWING.

CHRISTIANITY is now busy with the difficult task of transferring itself from one epoch to another. It is attempting to perform its spiritual functions two thousand years away from the persons, the languages, and the modes of thought amid which it was born. When the Hebrew Scriptures are added to the New Testament, the time-ocean that rolls between the ancient and present periods is made much wider. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob are very far off; while Adam and his immediate group are almost invisible. In clear, dry, cloudless regions, mountains seem near when a hundred miles from the eye; but those lofty figures of Genesis and Exodus are made all the more remote by the presence of a haziness in the air. Not only are those heights far off, but they are clouded.

Estimating the years of Christianity from the death of its sounder, the separation between the men of Galilee and the men of England and America is so great that the Lord's ark comes into these modern fields after having made an exceeding long journey. One may wonder that the sacred emblem ever moved into the sight of the multitudes now living, so little injured in its curtains and jewels, and so full still of the original presence of God. The religion of the East can out-travel her palm-trees and her aromatic shrubs. They are more abject slaves of climate and soil. Not always have two thousand years been able to produce great changes in the intellectual world. In India and China twenty centuries were once unable to place a hat or a shoe out of style. To a plough or a wine-vessel a thousand years were as a day. Clothes decayed or were worn out, but fifty generations did not suffice to render them unfashionable to even the most fastidious taste. But from all the Western nations that permanency of things began not long since to pass away, and mankind began to change not only its ploughs and the form and color of its garments, but all the contents of its mind and heart. New forms of thought came. New starting-points of argumentation were adopted; new

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ends proposed; new standards of measurement set up. So rapid was this change that reasoners who were in high fame in the fifteenth century were laughable logicians in the seventeenth.

Christianity is undergoing that shock which was made necessary by its passing over from the worlds of Abraham and the Apostles to the nations which now border the Atlantic. At the mention of the names Mediterranean, Caspian, Sea of Tiberias, Red Sea, Nile, and Jordan, the mind notes a change of landscape and seems to have made a journey into the past infinite. The Atlantic is modern; the Mediterranean ancient. It was among the islands of that eastern sea the little ships of Solomon sailed, bringing him gold and spices, a lot of peacocks, and a group of beautiful new wives. There Ulysses sailed around twenty years in search of his lost home and absent Penelope. There lived the Argive Helen, whose beauty created a war among nations, and made sea and land a battle-field upon which men wearing impenetrable armor and resistless spears involved the very gods in their contests. There all public men lived, doing and seeing wonders; there literature was a gorgeous picture-book; there art was a full partner of every Venus-born Æneas; there Scylla and Charybdis reached out many necks and opened many mouths with loud barking at the sailors passing in their shaky crafts.

To move from that sea to the Atlantic involves all that newness of feeling that would come from exchanging the galley of Telemachus for one of the steamships which now act their part in the waters between America and England. In one of the ships of Ulysses there were in reserve bags filled with wind, that was to be let out in case the sails should happen upon a dead calm. The means of propulsion now stored in the Atlantic boats are not only different, but they are confessed to be very much better. How modern, how practical, how new, how real is this great western flood! By as much as it surpasses the bays and coasts of Solomon and Achilles, by so much do the nations upon this Atlantic differ from all those which long ago went down to the sea in ships.

The problem of the Christian and of each religious and serious mind is how to make at home in this new epoch the child that has come from afar. All confess the high birth and genius of the exile, but all perceive that it has not the modern language, disposition, nor taste, nor are its old friends here—those loving friends whose affection asked few questions and whose minds saw God

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so easily that it was only the work of a holy hour to see also the Son of God, and of another hour of reverence to perceive that the Son of God was also the Son of Man. It is the problem of the present to transport to America and Europe a faith and a hope that were born in Judea; or, in wider terms, to fit to the millions now living a religion elaborately wrought out by minds so widely removed from the intellect and sentiment of this, the latest, period.

The simple phenomenon is that of philosophy *versus* Christianity. In the course of events in which even Cicero saw that men and thoughts underwent great transformations, Christianity has moved away from the causes which created, or modified, or embellished its greater and minor ideas, and has reached a new country, where the mind universal is deeply colored by the philosophic spirit. Here and there have come individuals whose minds were rationalistic, but they were so few that, like Socrates, they seemed only proofs of nature's fondness for an occasional eccentric movement. This is the first age in which rationalism became a universal form of inquiry and reflection. Reason became partially popularized in the days of Pascal, but the entire seventeenth century, after arguing all of each morning about reason and by means of reason, was wont to go to the church at night and say its prayers and fall asleep at the side of the mother whose word made doubts to be both rare and wicked. What is called philosophy never came into general empire until this century. With this period her sway came as a mild republic; it is not yet known whether the gentle republic is to become a heartless despotism.

Whoever will look back upon the phenomenon of thought as it reaches out over the historic area will soon note that the bulk of it lies there in the two forms of simple declaration and logical conclusion. Except in one or the other of these two forms the past has said but little. Of these two forms, declaration was the simpler, the easier, the more childlike. It came first.

The construction of the earliest literature ought to have been easy and rapid, because the only instrument needed for its production was an active mind. That activity needed not to wait for any slow accumulation of learning; it needed not to fear a mixed figure, nor study to harmonize its utterance with scientific research. If the active mind conceived of a dog Cerberus, whose mouths were three, and whose barking was thus made three times as disagreeable as that of any actually existing dog, that mind

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needed only to file a declaration which should contain a brief description of the quadruped, and from that day Cerberus became a part of perpetual literature. Thereafter Homer, Virgil, and all students and scholars down to John Milton respected the animal, and with great pride alluded to its ability to bark loud and incessantly. There has never been any desire in any land to lessen or increase the number or noisiness of the mouths, and yet all the world knows that the dog could as easily have been equipped with five or seven throats as with three. An open field lay before the inventor of this now classic creature.

As came Cerberus, came volume upon volume of the results of mental activity. Homer is a wonderful assemblage of declarations. Some man or men had been busy long before the Greek entered the creative field, for Homer found Hercules and his labors already in the world. No doubt Helen attracted lovers long before the "Iliad," just as Juliet hung over a balcony long before Shakespeare. Declarations innumerable, beautiful or grotesque, sublime or laughable, covered with tropical luxuriance the entire ancient world—Egyptian, Aryan, Greek, Hebrew, and Roman. The writers and orators of those lands and times seemed busy in a perpetual struggle after the honor of the most abundant and original utterance. This competition was peaceful and amiable. Each author respected the creations of his neighbor to such a degree that if a monster having one eye appeared in some poem that giant went onward with the single orb in his forehead. He became a fixed Cyclops, and soon seemed as actual as the horse or the elephant. When under Herodotus and Aristotle a small local effort was made to state the literal truth, the work of Herodotus became a Homer done in prose, while the fact that the elephant of Aristotle had no knee-joints, and could not lie down, justifies the suspicion that his natural history was also the product of mental activity.

An end would have come to this mental drift had Rome remained in power one or two centuries longer. The Latin race had made itself the heir of that final Greek thought which in the life of Demosthenes and Pericles resembled closely the thought of Burke and Pitt. The existence of such men as Cicero, Tacitus, and the two Plinies offers assurance that invention was giving place to the pursuit of fact; but before this new habit of thought could become fixed, luxury, vices, jealousy, and then assassination handed Rome over to chaos and the barbarians; and when

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literature came back, it was once more that of amazing declaration, with this difference—that the kind of exploits recorded in Hesiod and Homer had been bartered off for the exploits of a whole Europe full of childlike barbarians or wonder-working saints.

The religious principles of the Old and New Testaments came through that long creative period, and should be expected and cheerfully confessed to contain much of what may be called intellectual assertion. Some of the most firm friends of the idea of inspiration claim that this intervention of heaven accepted of what mental custom was dominant in each time and land, and overruled it so that a declarative mind made its creations point to religion instead of pointing toward amusement or love or war. If Helen was a poetic creation, so was Lot's wife; but the two members of old fashionable society pointed to different lines of conduct—the Greek woman reaching out toward war and passionate romance; the Hebrew woman running toward the worship and service of God, and sinking in death because she did not love a noble destiny, but looked back toward a worthless life. The mental operations in the Hebrew and pagan worlds being alike, the Hebrew world contained and still contains the glory of making its men and women all point to the Creator of the heavens and the earth. The Hebrew fictions all pointed toward God. This was in their inspiration.

Rich, varied, and interesting as was that old world of letters, it was unworthy to possess the recent centuries, and so it waits away from the present, not in pain nor under rebuke, but as though resting and sleeping in the mighty chambers of history. The age of logical conclusion has dawned, even if it has not fully come. The task of the church is to carry her religion over from the epoch of assertion to the new era of logical forms. Up as though against Christianity rises the form of Philosophy. War is the result, but it will not be a war of extermination; rather a war of adjustments, and of final compromise and final friendship.

Philosophic thought differs from ancient thought in this—that philosophy is thought reasoned out. Activity of mind is no longer virtue enough. Man must possess logical powers and processes and logical taste. It was not logical in Aristotle to state that the elephant had no knee-joints. It was expected that that scientific gentleman would find the animal and carefully look into the matter. It is the aim of philosophy to be truthful in the highest degree. It being impossible to gather

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up all the isolated facts in the whole world, philosophy must content itself with finding great general statements, just as the architect does not build dove-cotes, but only vast structures for the use of our statesmen or artists, or else temples for the worshipper. Over each sentence of this form of speech truth hovers either as an evident sunbeam or as the diffused light of the whole sky.

If a simple aphorism is selected such as that of some modern, "We admire the heroism of the patriot more than the ambition of the duellist," the causes of the preference, though unexpressed, are ready at one's call, and soon array themselves in all those words which express the greatness of a noble country, the human welfare that may be earned by a hero's death; and, contrasted with these words, the terms which might vainly attempt to tell the folly of the field on which the duellist slays or is slain.

By the popularity of the highest form of expression, namely, the rational form, the literature of romance and poetry is affected by the law of sympathy, and therefore the imagination of a Tennyson and a Bryant, and of their noble brothers around them, resembles no longer that of that old past, which dealt in the superhuman, in the monstrous and the grotesque; but it resembles the truths of reason, and in Byron's "Ocean" or "Thunder-storm" or "Battle of Waterloo," or in Gray's "Elegy," or Bryant's "Thanatopsis," an imagination of the highest order seems a sister of science, and heaps sweet or awful facts upon the heart. The imagination in "Thanatopsis" is as active as the same faculty in the "Arabian Nights"; only it is more reasonable, more sublime, more eloquent. In Mr. Lincoln's favorite poem, and in "The Closing Scene" of T. Buchanan Read, there is as much of the poetic spirit as in any pages of antiquity; but this fancy paints so near the world's truth that the heart weeps as though the verses were not poetry, but the history of its friends and of itself. Imagination is not a creator of falsehoods, but it is chiefly a most rare power of telling man the most beautiful and pathetic truths.

Into an age whose mind is so colored with reason that even its poetic imagery is all reasoned out like a page in ethics or high politics, Christianity is attempting to penetrate. Its conflict is not with science any more than with imagination and the prevalent logical taste. The passing years say that the inspired books were not selected with sufficient care, that they were gathered and enrolled by easy-going folk. The present also complains that inspira-

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tion has been believed in without ever having been defined; that miracles were performed without a reason that bore any fair proportion to the greatness of the miracle; that often the more insignificant the reason the grander the divine intervention; that the stopping of the sun was an event too great for Joshua, and the creation of a great special fish an event too large for the Jonah.

As the atmosphere, when it lies quiet over a warm sea, becomes laden with moisture, and then, when set into motion and rolled far away up the mountain side, is compelled to let fall tremendous showers of rain because unable in its new coolness and new rarity to carry its first load, thus our religion, while lying peacefully over the low and warm Orient, absorbed a strange burden which it cannot now carry over the heights—reason's mountains. It unloads that it may rise.

Whether anything of Christianity will remain is the important and painful question. No one can answer in an absolute term, for only egotism can become a prophet and enable the minds of the present to assume to be living in and comprehending far-off times. If all the past men were the localized slaves of their own century, what law of nature has been changed to empower the present to transport itself into the future field? If the sun did not stop for Joshua, is it to shine in advance for us?

All reason can do is to study the known. It can study the methods of itself, and may look even into the composition of itself. It may observe the passing phenomena. Men now perceive that Christian sermons, Christian literature, conversation, and a deep religious faith move along in their usual power all unconscious of any absence of that supernatural which was so abundant in all the thoughts of their fathers. The story of the evil spirits and the swine may fall away without seeming to harm the Christ. If the lives of two of the most pious and saint-like Christians are viewed in all the attractive details of character, it cannot be learned from those twin hearts which one believes that the Master ordered the spirits to enter the swine, and which one thinks that some wonder-loving disciple added that incident to Christ's life after he had gone from the world. If there can thus be a harmless elimination, the conclusion is unavoidable that the term Christianity was once too large to be a logical appellation, and that it needed or needs a reduction of contents in order to become true. That term once contained all of the Mosaic age, but

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recent thinkers so opened the strong box that the Mosaic treasures rolled out; it once contained Romanism, but the Protestants detached much of that quantity as being more than irrelevant; and now the term opens again, and one of the most dominant ideas of the Protestants—Calvinism—is dismissed from the feast as having no invitation, and as not wearing a wedding-garment.

A religion must have been poorly analyzed for centuries when from it can be taken without loss large parts of the Mosaic age, of Romanism, and of Protestantism, and a mass of nameless private interpretations. That much more can be eliminated from the current creed without affecting the religion of Jesus is probable.

Over the inquiry whether reason will annihilate Christianity, the student of these grave things must remember that this intellectual period does not confine itself to the task of elimination. Philosophy is not a respecter of persons. It alone can truly say with Virgil,—with names changed,—Christian and athiest "shall be treated by me without discrimination." That intellectual power which depletes the Testaments in some of their pages redoubles the radiance of other leaves, and perhaps gives more than it takes away. After having reduced the Christ to an historic character standing up in a wonderful simplicity and solitude, this most reasonable age then willingly surpasses all former times in comprehending and admiring and obeying the Son of Man. One of the most amazing and most sad of historic facts is the utter failure of the church to read aright or to imitate the character of its Master. This century is the first fully to perceive that Christ came in the name of only a spiritual empire; that his life and brotherly feeling revealed the deepest social and political truths; that peace, not war, is man's highest aim; that to live for others is greater than to live for self; that a benefactor is greater than a despot; that God is a Friend; that integrity is better than gold or genius; that the hope of immortality is an inspiration of the human mind. Reason has created an age to which Christ stands nearer than he stood to his own—a new age which rejoices that the man of Nazareth took up children in his arms, rejoices that he taught in love, that he lived as he taught, that he made the word "man" put on an eloquence which should grow in power in all these passing generations. The reason which has so reduced the bulk of Christian tenets has used its power to exalt all that is needful within the domain of religion.

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It would seem that the rational faculty of man is by its limitations, rendered incapable of destroying religion, and therefore incapable of destroying the Christian religion, because Christianity, although it draws its name from Christ, does not repose upon Galilee but upon God, with the Son of Man as its visible prophet, priest, and king. The definitions of this heavenly or earthly leader may undergo modifications many; but Jesus, in all the essentials of an unrivalled worshipper and guide, is as historic as Julius Cæsar or Cicero, and thus lies beyond the reach of any destroying hand. Inasmuch as Christianity passes through the personage who gave it name, and, beyond, is based upon the Creator, along with all modern deism, reason seems debarred from working out a final ruin of the Christian's special praise and hope. If Auguste Comte found in the "ever-unrolling web" of the human race, in its thrilling experiences and powers, an object and motive of his worship of humanity, reason cannot charge folly upon those minds which may worship that Power that is greater than humanity because from it humanity came. Comte may have felt that humanity alone were an adequate basis of a worship, but he was not compelled by reason thus to rear his altar, for the rational powers are not able to affirm that the universe containing such an amazing race of mortals may not contain a greater life—that of a God. Christianity rests upon this greater life; but it differs from deism in having a Christ-element added, and this element reason may discuss and examine, but cannot remove, because its relations to religion are not logical, but simply historic. Reason may alter principles, but it cannot change history.

When it is borne in mind that the second great tenet of Christianity—immortal life—may come from the power, will, and goodness of God, and not necessarily from any functions of physical nature, then that hope lies beyond any harm from common rationalism, and the future is left as open to religion as man's past has been. It would also seem reasonable to suppose that as the mind and soul grow greater as the seasons pass, deepening in sensibility and in reflection, and able to look with more of appreciation and even awe upon the life of man, so godlike and mysterious, so a second life will be longed for more pathetically, and sought for through the eloquence of public or private worship of him from whom life came. An enlarging civilization will, perhaps, enlarge, instead of lessening, its hope of a world to come.

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THE SENSE OF HONOR IN AMERICANS.

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THE CENTENNIAL anniversary of our national political system has naturally led to much discussion concerning the moral tone of our existing political parties, as compared with those which controlled the government at the time of its foundation. It cannot be denied that there are elements of discouragement visible in the political conditions of to-day, which in a way warrant the criticisms of publicists. The greed of office is clearly greater, or, at least, is found in a larger proportion of the population, than it was a century ago. Our political parties appear to be more inspired by the desire for plunder than for principles. The political situation of our cities is legitimately a source of anxiety to many persons who are by no means pessimists. There are always in every community persons who despair of the Republic, and who contemn the actions of their own generation and find that all things tend to ruin. It is fit that these questioners of their own age should be heard; that from time to time those who take an optimistic view of the situation should soberly take account of the state of society and make what answer they can to those of melancholy mind. I propose, therefore, in the following pages to review some part of the evidence which may serve to show how far the political morals of this country have been affected by the first century of our national life.

In entering on an inquiry as to the comparative political morals of the two periods a century apart, we should, in the first place, note the fact that it is not safe to trust our conclusions to the evidence which is derived from any particular class of facts. We cannot, for instance, prove a general decadence of moral sense in politics by the present excessive greed of office, unless we can make sure that the conditions which led to that desire are substantially the same at the present time as formerly. It may be

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