

What is Christianity?

**Lectures Delivered in the University of Berlin
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By

Adolf Harnack

**Rector of, and Professor of Church History in, the University, and
Member of the Royal Prussian Academy, Berlin**

Translated into English

By

Thomas Bailey Saunders

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Prefatory Material

AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

To meet the wishes of my English friends I have assented to the publication of these Lectures in English as well as in German, and as my esteemed friend Mr. Bailey Saunders was so self-denying and obliging as to undertake the translation of them, I was sure of their being in the best hands. Whether there is as great a need in England as there is in Germany for a chord and plain statement of the Gospel and its history, I do not know. But this I know: the theologians of every country only half discharge their duties if they think it enough to treat of the Gospel in the recondite language of learning and bury it in scholarly folios.

A. HARNACK.

BERLIN October, 1900.



TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

The following Lectures were delivered extempore to a class of some six hundred students drawn from all the Faculties in the University of Berlin. An enthusiastic listener took them down in shorthand, and at the close surprised Professor Harnack with a complete report of what he had said. A few alterations sufficed to transform the Lectures into a book, and German readers everywhere were thus happily enabled to share in some of the privileges of the original audience.

I deem it an honour to have any hand in offering to my fellow-countrymen a similar advantage. Goethe, writing in his last years to Carlyle, described translators, in grandiloquent language, as the agents of intellectual commerce among the nations. The duty of such agency in regard to the contents of this volume I have done my humble best to discharge, convinced as I am that in the traffic in ideas between Germany and the English-speaking peoples all over the world both the matter of Professor Harnack's discourse and the spirit in which he treats it are alike worthy of attention.

T. BAILEY SAUNDERS.

London, November, 1900.



What is Christianity?



LECTURE I

THE great English philosopher, John Stuart Mill, has somewhere observed that mankind cannot be too often reminded that there was once a man of the name of Socrates. That is true; but still more important is it to remind mankind again and again that a man of the name of Jesus Christ once stood in their midst. The fact, of course, has been brought home to us from our youth up; but unhappily it cannot be said that public instruction in our time is calculated to keep the image of Jesus Christ before us in any impressive way, and make it an inalienable possession after our school-days are over and for our whole life. And although no one who has once absorbed a ray of Christ's light can ever again become as though he had never heard of him; although at the bottom of every soul that has been once touched an impression remains, a confused recollection of this kind, which is often only a "superstitio," is not enough to give strength and life. But where the demand for further and more trustworthy knowledge about him arises, and a man wants positive information as to who Jesus Christ was, and as to the real purport of his message, he no sooner asks for it than he finds himself, if he consults the literature of the day, surrounded by a clatter of contradictory voices. He hears some people maintaining that primitive Christianity was closely akin to Buddhism, and he is accordingly told that it is in fleeing the world and in pessimism that the sublime character of this religion and its profound meaning are revealed. Others, on the contrary, assure him that Christianity is an optimistic religion, and that it must be thought of simply and solely as a higher phase of Judaism; and these people also suppose that in saying this they have said something very profound. Others, again, maintain the opposite; they assert that the Gospel did away with Judaism, but itself originated under Greek influences of mysterious operation; and that it is to be understood as a blossom on the tree of Hellenism. Religious philosophers come forward and declare that the metaphysical system which, as they say, was developed out of the Gospel is its real kernel and the revelation of its secret; but others reply that the Gospel has nothing to do with philosophy, that it was meant for feeling and suffering humanity, and that philosophy has only been forced upon it. Finally, the latest critics that have come into the field assure us that the whole history of religion, morality, and philosophy, is nothing but wrapping and ornament; that what at all times underlies them, as the only real motive power, is the history of economics; that, accordingly, Christianity, too, was in its origin nothing more than a social movement and Christ a social deliverer, the deliverer of the oppressed lower classes.

There is something touching in the anxiety which everyone shows to rediscover himself, together with his own point of view and his own circle of interest, in this Jesus Christ, or at least to get a share in him. It is the perennial repetition of the spectacle which was seen in the "Gnostic" movement even as early as the second century, and which takes the form of a struggle, on the part of every conceivable tendency of thought, for the possession of Jesus



Christ. Why, quite recently, not only, I think, Tolstoi's ideas, but even Nietzsche's, have been exhibited in their special affinity with the Gospel; and there is perhaps more to be said even upon this subject that is worth attention than upon the connexion between a good deal of "theological" and "philosophical" speculation and Christ's teaching.

But nevertheless, when taken together, the impression which these contradictory opinions convey is disheartening: the confusion seems hopeless. How can we take it amiss of anyone, if, after trying to find out how the question stands, he gives it up? Perhaps he goes further, and declares that after all the question does not matter. How are we concerned with events that happened, or with a person who lived, nineteen hundred years ago? We must look for our ideals and our strength to the present; to evolve them laboriously out of old manuscripts is a fantastic proceeding that can lead nowhere. The man who so speaks is not wrong; but neither is he right. What we are and what we possess, in any high sense, we possess from the past and by the past only so much of it, of course, as has had results and makes its influence felt up to the present day. To acquire a sound knowledge of the past is the business and the duty not only of the historian but also of everyone who wishes to make the wealth and the strength so gained his own. But that the Gospel is a part of this past which nothing else can replace has been affirmed again and again by the greatest minds. "Let intellectual and spiritual culture progress, and the human mind expand, as much as it will; beyond the grandeur and the moral elevation of Christianity, as it sparkles and shines in the Gospels, the human mind will not advance." In these words Goethe, after making many experiments and labouring indefatigably at himself, summed up the result to which his moral and historical insight had led him. Even though we were to feel no desire on our own part, it would still be worth while, because of this man's testimony, to devote our serious attention to what he came to regard as so precious; and if, contrary to his declaration, louder and more confident voices are heard to-day, proclaiming that the Christian religion has outlived itself, let us accept that as an invitation to make a closer acquaintance with this religion whose certificate of death people suppose that they can already exhibit.

But in truth this religion and the efforts which it evokes are more active to-day than they used to be. We may say to the credit of our age that it takes an eager interest in the problem of the nature and value of Christianity, and that there is more search and inquiry in regard to this subject now than was the case thirty years ago. Even in the experiments that are made in and about it, the strange and abstruse replies that are given to questions, the way in which it is caricatured, the chaotic confusion which it exhibits, nay, even in the hatred that it excites, a real life and an earnest endeavour may be traced. Only do not let us suppose that there is anything exemplary in this endeavour, and that we are the first who, after shaking off an authoritative religion, are struggling after one that shall really make us



free and be of independent growth —a struggle which must of necessity give rise to much confusion and half-truth. Sixty-two years ago Carlyle wrote:—

In these distracted times, when the Religious Principle, driven out of most Churches, either lies unseen in the hearts of good men, looking and longing and silently working there towards some new Revelation; or else wanders homeless over the world, like a disembodied soul seeking its terrestrial organisation, into how many strange shapes, of Superstition and Fanaticism, does it not tentatively and errantly cast itself! The higher Enthusiasm of man's nature is for the while without Exponent; yet does it continue indestructible, unweariedly active, and work blindly in the great chaotic deep: thus Sect after Sect, and Church after Church, bodies itself forth, and melts again into new metamorphosis.

No one who understands the times in which we live can deny that these words sound as if they had been written to-day. But it is not with “the religious principle” and the ways in which it has developed that we are going to concern ourselves in these lectures. We shall try to answer the more modest but not less pressing question, What is Christianity? What was it? What has it become? The answer to this question may, we hope, also throw light by the way on the more comprehensive one, What is Religion, and what ought it to be to us? In dealing with religion, is it not after all with the Christian religion alone that we have to do? Other religions no longer stir the depths of our hearts.

What is Christianity? It is solely in its historical sense that we shall try to answer this question here; that is to say we shall employ the methods of historical science, and the experience of life gained by studying the actual course of history. This excludes the view of the question taken by the apologist and the religious philosopher. On this point permit me to say a few words.

Apologetics hold a necessary place in religious knowledge, and to demonstrate the validity of the Christian religion and exhibit its importance for the moral and intellectual life is a great and a worthy undertaking. But this undertaking must be kept quite separate from the purely historical question as to the nature of that religion, or else historical research will be brought into complete discredit. Moreover, in the kind of apologetics that is now required no really high standard has yet been attained. Apart from a few steps that have been taken in the direction of improvement, apologetics as a subject of study is in a deplorable state: it is not clear as to the positions to be defended, and it is uncertain as to the means to be employed. It is also not infrequently pursued in an undignified and obtrusive fashion, Apologists imagine that they are doing a great work by crying up religion as though it were a job-lot at a sale, or a universal remedy for all social ills. They are perpetually snatching, too, at all sorts of baubles, so as to deck out religion in fine clothes. In their endeavour to present it as a glorious necessity, they deprive it of its earnest character, and at the best only prove that it is something which may be safely accepted because it can do no harm. Finally, they cannot refrain from slipping in some church programme of yesterday and “demonstrat-



ing” its claims as well. The structure of their ideas is so loose that an idea or two more makes no difference. The mischief that has been thereby done already and is still being done is indescribable. No! the Christian religion is something simple and sublime; it means one thing and one thing only: Eternal life in the midst of time, by the strength and under the eyes of God. It is no ethical or social *arcanum* for the preservation or improvement of things generally. To make what it has done for civilisation and human progress the main question, and to determine its value by the answer, is to do it violence at the start. Goethe once said, “Mankind is always advancing, and man always remains the same.” It is to *man* that religion pertains, to man, as one who in the midst of all change and progress himself never changes. Christian apologetics must recognise, then, that it is with religion in its simple nature and its simple strength that it has to do. Religion, truly, does not exist for itself alone, but lives in an inner fellowship with all the activities of the mind and with moral and economical conditions as well. But it is emphatically not a mere function or an exponent of them; it is a mighty power that sets to work of itself, hindering or furthering, destroying or making fruitful. The main thing is to learn what religion is and in what its essential character consists; no matter what position the individual who examines it may take up in regard to it, or whether in his own life he values it or not.

But the point of view of the philosophical theorist, in the strict sense of the word, will also find no place in these lectures. Had they been delivered sixty years ago, it would have been our endeavour to try to arrive by speculative reasoning at some general conception of religion, and then to define the Christian religion accordingly. But we have rightly become sceptical about the value of this procedure. *Latet dolus in generalibus*. We know to-day that life cannot be spanned by general conceptions, and that there is no general conception of religion to which actual religions are related simply and solely as species to genus. Nay, the question may even be asked whether there is any such generic conception as “religion” at all. Is the common element in it anything more than a vague disposition? Is it only an empty place in our innermost being that the word denotes, which everyone fills up in a different fashion and many do not perceive at all? I am not of this opinion; I am convinced, rather, that at bottom we have to do here with something which is common to us all, and which in the course of history has struggled up out of torpor and discord into unity and light. I am convinced that Augustine is right when he says, “Thou, Lord, hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in Thee.” But to prove that this is so; to exhibit the nature and the claims of religion by psychological analysis, including the psychology of peoples, is not the task that we shall undertake in what follows. We shall keep to the purely historical theme: What is the Christian religion?

Where are we to look for our materials? The answer seems to be simple and at the same time exhaustive: Jesus Christ and his Gospel. But however little doubt there may be that this must form not only our point of departure but also the matter with which our investigations



will mainly deal, it is equally certain that we must not be content to exhibit the mere image of Jesus Christ and the main features of his Gospel. We must not be content to stop there, because every great and powerful personality reveals a part of what it is only when seen in those whom it influences. Nay, it may be said that the more powerful the personality which a man possesses, and the more he takes hold of the inner life of others, the less can the sum-total of what he is be known only by what he himself says and does. We must look at the reflection and the effects which he produced in those whose leader and master he became. That is why a complete answer to the question, What is Christianity, is impossible so long as we are restricted to Jesus Christ's teaching alone. We must include the first generation of his disciples as well those who ate and drank with him and we must listen to what they tell us of the effect which he had upon their lives.

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But even this does not exhaust our materials. If Christianity is an example of a great power valid not for one particular epoch alone; if in and through it, not once only, but again and again, great forces have been disengaged, we must include all the later products of its spirit. It is not a question of a "doctrine" being handed down by uniform repetition or arbitrarily distorted; it is a question of a *life*, again and again kindled afresh, and now burning with a flame of its own. We may also add that Christ himself and the apostles were convinced that the religion which they were planting would in the ages to come have a greater destiny and a deeper meaning than it possessed at the time of its institution; they trusted to its spirit leading from one point of light to another and developing higher forces. Just as we cannot obtain a complete knowledge of a tree without regarding not only its root and its stem but also its bark, its branches, and the way in which it blooms, so we cannot form any right estimate of the Christian religion unless we take our stand upon a comprehensive induction that shall cover all the facts of its history. It is true that Christianity has had its classical epoch; nay more, it had a founder who himself was what he taught — to steep ourselves in him is still the chief matter; but to restrict ourselves to him means to take a point of view too low for his significance. Individual religious life was what he wanted to kindle and what he did kindle; it is, as we shall see, his peculiar greatness to have led men to God, so that they may thenceforth live their own life with Him. How, then, can we be silent about the history of the Gospel if we wish to know what he was?

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It may be objected that put in this way the problem is too difficult, and that its solution threatens to be accompanied by many errors and defects. That is not to be denied; but to state a problem in easier terms, that is to say in this case inaccurately, because of the difficulties surrounding it, would be a very perverse expedient. Moreover, even though the difficulties increase, the work is, on the other hand, facilitated by the problem being stated in a larger manner; for it helps us to grasp what is essential in the phenomena, and to distinguish kernel and husk.

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Jesus Christ and his disciples were situated in their day just as we are situated in ours; that is to say, their feelings, their thoughts, their judgments and their efforts were bounded by the horizon and the framework in which their own nation was set and by its condition at the time. Had it been otherwise, they would not have been men of flesh and blood, but spectral beings. For seventeen hundred years, indeed, people thought, and many among us still think, that the “humanity” of Jesus Christ, which is a part of their creed, is sufficiently provided for by the assumption that he had a human body and a human soul. As if it were possible to have that without having any definite character as an individual! To be a man means, in the first place, to possess a certain mental and spiritual disposition, determined in such and such a way, and thereby limited and circumscribed; and, in the second place, it means to be situated, with this disposition, in an historical environment which in its turn is also limited and circumscribed. Outside this there are no such things as “men.” It at once follows, however, that a man can think, speak, and do absolutely nothing at all in which his peculiar disposition and his own age are not coefficients. A single word may seem to be really classical and valid for all time, and yet the very language in which it is spoken gives it very palpable limitations. Much less is a spiritual personality, as a whole, susceptible of being represented in a way that will banish the feeling of its limitations, and with those limitations, the sense of something strange or conventional; and this feeling must necessarily be enhanced the farther in point of time the spectator is removed.

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From these circumstances it follows that the historian, whose business and highest duty it is to determine what is of permanent value, is of necessity required not to cleave to words but to find out what is essential. The “whole” Christ, the “whole” Gospel, if we mean by this motto the external image taken in all its details and set up for imitation, is just as bad and deceptive a shibboleth as the “whole” Luther, and the like. It is bad because it enslaves us, and it is deceptive because the people who proclaim it do not think of taking it seriously, and could not do so if they tried. They cannot do so because they cannot cease to feel, understand and judge as children of their age.

There are only two possibilities here: either the Gospel is in all respects identical with its earliest form, in which case it came with its time and has departed with it; or else it contains something which, under differing historical forms, is of permanent validity. The latter is the true view. The history of the Church shows us in its very commencement that “primitive Christianity” had to disappear in order that “Christianity” might remain; and in the same way in later ages one metamorphosis followed upon another. From the beginning it was a question of getting rid of formulas, correcting expectations, altering ways of feeling, and this is a process to which there is no end. But by the very fact that our survey embraces the whole course as well as the inception we enhance our standard of what is essential and of real value.

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We enhance our standard, but we need not wait to take it from the history of those later ages. The thing itself reveals it. We shall see that the Gospel in the Gospel is something so simple, something that speaks to us with so much power, that it cannot easily be mistaken. No far-reaching directions as to method, no general introductions, are necessary to enable us to find the way to it. No one who possesses a fresh eye for what is alive, and a true feeling for what is really great, can fail to see it and distinguish it from its contemporary integument. And even though there may be many individual aspects of it where the task of distinguishing what is permanent from what is fleeting, what is rudimentary from what is merely historical, is not quite easy, we must not be like the child who, wanting to get at the kernel of a bulb, went on picking off the leaves until there was nothing left, and then could not help seeing that it was just the leaves that made the bulb. Endeavours of this kind are not unknown in the history of the Christian religion, but they fade before those other endeavours which seek to convince us that there is no such thing as either kernel or husk, growth or decay, but that everything is of equal value and alike permanent.



In these lectures, then, we shall deal first of all with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and this theme will occupy the greater part of our attention. We shall then show what impression he himself and his Gospel made upon the first generation of his disciples. Finally, we shall follow the leading changes which the Christian idea has undergone in the course of history, and try to recognise its chief types. What is common to all the forms which it has taken, corrected by reference to the Gospel, and, conversely, the chief features of the Gospel, corrected by reference to history, will, we may be allowed to hope, bring us to the kernel of the matter. Within the limits of a short series of lectures it is, of course, only to what is important that attention can be called; but perhaps there will be no disadvantage in fixing our attention, for once, only on the strong lines and prominent points of the relief, and, by putting what is secondary into the background, in looking at the vast material in a concentrated form. We shall even refrain, and permissibly refrain, from enlarging, by way of introduction, on Judaism and its external and internal relations, and on the Graeco-Roman world. We must never, of course, wholly shut our eyes to them nay, we must always keep them in mind; but diffuse explanations in regard to these matters are unnecessary. Jesus Christ's teaching will at once bring us by steps which, if few, will be great, to a height where its connexion with Judaism is seen to be only a loose one, and most of the threads leading from it into "contemporary history" become of no importance at all. This may seem a paradoxical thing to say; for just now we are being earnestly assured, with an air as though it were some new discovery that was being imparted to us, that Jesus Christ's teaching cannot be understood, nay, cannot be accurately represented, except by having regard to its connexion with the Jewish doctrines prevalent at the time, and by first of all setting them out in full. There is much that is true in this statement, and yet, as we shall see, it is incorrect. It becomes absolutely false, however, when worked up into the dazzling thesis that the Gospel is intelligible only as the religion



of a despairing section of the Jewish nation; that it was the last effort of a decadent age, driven by distress into a renunciation of this earth, and then trying to storm heaven and demanding civic rights there—a religion of miserabilism! It is rather remarkable that the really desperate were just those who did not welcome it, but fought against it; remarkable that its leaders, so far as we know them, do not, in fact, bear any of the marks of sickly despair; most remarkable of all, that while indeed renouncing the world and its goods, they establish, in love and holiness, a brotherly union which declares war on the world's misery. The oftener I re-read and consider the Gospels, the more do I find that the contemporary discords, in the midst of which the Gospel stood, and out of which it arose, sink into the background. I entertain no doubt that the founder had his eye upon *man* in whatever external situation he might be found—upon *man* who, fundamentally, always remains the same, whether he be moving upwards or downwards, whether he be in riches or poverty, whether he be of strong mind or of weak. It is the consciousness of all these oppositions being ultimately beneath it, and of its own place above them, that gives the Gospel its sovereignty; for in every man it looks to the point that is unaffected by all these differences. This is very clear in Paul's case; he dominates all earthly things and circumstances like a king, and desires to see them so dominated. The thesis of the decadent age and the religion of the wretched may serve to lead us into the outer court; it may even correctly point to that which originally gave the Gospel its form; but if it is offered us as a key for the understanding of this religion in itself, we must reject it. Moreover, this thesis and the pretensions which it makes are only illustrations of a fashion which has become general in the writing of history, and which in that province will naturally have a longer reign than other fashions, because by its means much that was obscure has, as a matter of fact, been cleared up. But to the heart of the matter its devotees do not penetrate, as they silently assume that no such heart exists.

Let me conclude this lecture by touching briefly on one other important point. In history absolute judgments are impossible. This is a truth which in these days—I say advisedly, in these days—is clear and incontestable. History can only show how things have been; and even where we can throw light upon the past, and understand and criticise it, we must not presume to think that by any process of abstraction absolute judgments as to the value to be assigned to past events can be obtained from the results of a purely historical survey. Such judgments are the creation only of feeling and of will; they are a subjective act. The false notion that the understanding can produce them is a heritage of that protracted epoch in which knowing and knowledge were expected to accomplish everything; in which it was believed that they could be stretched so as to be capable of covering and satisfying all the needs of the mind and the heart. That they cannot do. This is a truth which, in many an hour of ardent work, falls heavily upon our soul, and yet—what a hopeless thing it would be for mankind if the higher peace to which it aspires, and the clearness, the certainty and

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the strength for which it strives, were dependent on the measure of its learning and its knowledge.

