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HUMANITY'S
GAIN FROM
UNBELIEF

CHARLES
BRADLAUGH



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HUMANITY'S GAIN FROM UNBELIEF

and Other Selections
from the Works of
CHARLES BRADLAUGH

WITH PREFATORY NOTE
BY HIS DAUGHTER
HYPATIA BRADLAUGH BONNER

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**HUMANITY'S GAIN
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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THROWN on his own resources as a boy, with every man's hand against him, my father was both essentially and by force of circumstances a man of action, and his writings were usually inspired by the need of the time. His pen and his tongue were servants to be used to further the causes he had at heart: weapons with which he sought to overcome the dragons of intolerance and superstition. Most of his writings appeared in his weekly journal, the *National Reformer*, or were issued in pamphlet form. There are, unfortunately, few books to his credit; for these demanded more time than he was able to give.

The essay, "Humanity's Gain from Unbelief," which gives the title to the present selection, was prepared at the request of Allen Thorndike Rice for the *North American Review* of March, 1889. Although written less than two years before his death and when disease had already begun to sap his fine physique, the paper shows no sign of failing vigour in style or argument. In the opening sentences, commenting on the continuous modification in the

dogma and practice of religion, he used the phrase, "None sees a religion die," which has been quoted again and again down to quite recent times. While acknowledging the good done by individual Christians, he contended that the special services rendered to human progress by these exceptional men were not in consequence of their adhesion to Christianity, but in spite of it, and in direct opposition to Biblical enactments.

This essay was immediately reprinted in various parts of America and Australia as well as here in England, and at once gave rise to a storm of controversy. Sermons were preached in refutation, and discussions took place in the provincial press. The *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, in particular, opened its columns to a lengthy discussion of the subject; and, as a consequence, in the following June Mr. Bradlaugh received an invitation from the Rev. Marsden Gibson, a Newcastle vicar, to substantiate in debate the statements he had made. This debate took place in September, and caused much excitement in and around Newcastle. People came from long distances to hear it, and the hall proved too small to accommodate the crowds who desired to attend, so that large numbers were turned away on each of the two nights. Years afterwards some pitmen in a Durham mining village, talking to me of that occasion, recalled with pride and delight how they had clubbed together to hire a break to

take them to Newcastle and back, and how they never went to bed that night but stayed up going over the points raised in the debate until the hour of their morning shift came round. Such was the enthusiasm of yester-year.

The word "Atheist" has always been used as a term of obloquy by Christians, even by educated Christians who have not the excuse of ignorance. Misapprehension and deliberate misrepresentation of Atheism have been constant, and indeed are not unknown at the present day. In the late seventies of last century my father wrote "A Plea for Atheism," a brief but careful examination of what Atheism really is and what it is not. He wrote this, he said, in the hope of removing some of the many prejudices against Atheists. In comparing Atheism with Theism he gave special consideration to the Baird lectures upon Theism, then recently delivered by Professor Flint.

The "Doubts in Dialogue," of which some are included in this selection, were written from time to time between 1884 and January, 1891—the month in which my father died. The "Doubts" dealt with were either put to him personally by letter or by spoken word, or were suggested by some book he had been reading. They represent the opinions upon religious questions held by him up to the very hour of his death.

Just recently the Rev. R. J. Campbell declared

that "it is not Romanism, but secularism, that is the most dangerous enemy of true religion to-day." What "true religion" is is a perennial matter of dispute, among religionists, but I presume that at the time of writing the Rev. R. J. Campbell believed it was to be found in the Church of England. In any case, these selections from the works of my father are issued in order that they may play their part in promoting the cause of "secularism" in the future as they have done in the past. Now, as always, the open discussion of questions which concern the welfare of humanity is a fundamental principle of Rationalism.

HYPATIA BRADLAUGH BONNER.

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HUMANITY'S GAIN FROM UNBELIEF

AS an unbeliever, I ask leave to plead that humanity has been a real gainer from scepticism, and that the gradual and growing rejection of Christianity—like the rejection of the faiths which preceded it—has in fact added, and will add, to man's happiness and well-being. I maintain that in physics science is the outcome of scepticism, and that general progress is impossible without scepticism on matters of religion. I mean by religion every form of belief which accepts or asserts the supernatural. I write as a Monist, and use the word "nature" as meaning all phenomena, every phenomenon, all that is necessary for the happening of any and every phenomenon. Every religion is constantly changing, and at any given time is the measure of the civilization attained by what Guizot described as the *juste milieu* of those who profess it. Each religion is slowly but certainly modified in its dogma and practice by the gradual development of the peoples amongst whom it is professed. Each discovery destroys in whole or part some theretofore cherished belief. No religion is suddenly rejected by any people; it is rather gradually out-

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grown. None sees a religion die; dead religions are like dead languages and obsolete customs: the decay is long and—like the glacier march—is perceptible only to the careful watcher by comparisons extending over long periods. A superseded religion may often be traced in the festivals, ceremonies, and dogmas of the religion which has replaced it. Traces of obsolete religions may often be found in popular customs, in old wives' stories, and in children's tales.

It is necessary, in order that my plea should be understood, that I should explain what I mean by Christianity; and in the very attempt at this explanation there will, I think, be found strong illustration of the value of unbelief. Christianity in practice may be gathered from its more ancient forms, represented by the Roman Catholic and the Greek Churches, or from the various Churches which have grown up in the last few centuries. Each of these Churches calls itself Christian. Some of them deny the right of the others to use the word Christian. Some Christian Churches treat, or have treated, other Christian Churches as heretics or unbelievers. The Roman Catholics and the Protestants in Great Britain and Ireland have in turn been terribly cruel one to the other; and the ferocious laws of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, enacted by the English Protestants against English and Irish Papists, are a disgrace to civilization. These penal laws, enduring longest in Ireland, still bear fruit in much of the

political mischief and agrarian crime of to-day. It is only the tolerant indifference of scepticism that, one after the other, has repealed most of the laws directed by the Established Christian Church against Papists and Dissenters, and also against Jews and heretics. Church of England clergymen have in the past gone to great lengths in denouncing nonconformity; and even in the present day an effective sample of such denunciatory bigotry may be found in a sort of orthodox catechism written by the Rev. F. A. Gace, of Great Barling, Essex, the popularity of which is vouched by the fact that it has gone through ten editions. This catechism for little children teaches that "Dissent is a great sin," and that Dissenters "worship God according to their own evil and corrupt imaginations, and not according to his revealed will, and therefore their worship is idolatrous." Church of England Christians and Dissenting Christians, when fraternizing amongst themselves, often publicly draw the line at Unitarians, and positively deny that these have any sort of right to call themselves Christians.

In the first half of the seventeenth century Quakers were flogged and imprisoned in England as blasphemers; and the early Christian settlers in New England, escaping from the persecution of Old World Christians, showed scant mercy to the followers of Fox and Penn. It is customary, in controversy, for those advocating the claims of Chris-

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tianity, to include all good done by men in nominally Christian countries as if such good were the result of Christianity, while they contend that the evil which exists prevails in spite of Christianity. I shall try to make out that the ameliorating march of the last few centuries has been initiated by the heretics of each age, though I quite concede that the men and women denounced and persecuted as infidels by the pious of one century are frequently claimed as saints by the pious of a later generation.

What, then, is Christianity? As a system or scheme of doctrine, Christianity may, I submit, not unfairly be gathered from the Old and New Testaments. It is true that some Christians to-day desire to escape from submission to portions, at any rate, of the Old Testament; but this very tendency seems to me to be part of the result of the beneficial heresy for which I am pleading. Man's humanity has revolted against Old Testament barbarism, and therefore he has attempted to dissociate the Old Testament from Christianity. Unless Old and New Testaments are accepted as God's revelation to man, Christianity has no higher claim than any other of the world's many religions, if no such claim can be made out for it apart from the Bible. And though it is quite true that some who deem themselves Christians put the Old Testament completely in the background, this is, I allege, because they are out-growing their Christianity. Without the

doctrine of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, Christianity, as a religion, is naught ; but unless the story of Adam's fall is accepted, the redemption from the consequences of that fall cannot be believed. Both in Great Britain and in the United States the Old and New Testaments are forced on the people as part of Christianity ; for it is blasphemy at common law to deny the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be of divine authority ; and such denial is punishable with fine and imprisonment, or even worse. The rejection of Christianity intended throughout this paper is therefore the rejection of the Old and New Testaments as being of divine revelation. It is the rejection alike of the authorized teachings of the Church of Rome and of the Church of England, as these may be found in the Bible, the creeds, the encyclicals, the prayer book, the canons and homilies of either or both of these Churches. It is the rejection of the Christianity of Luther, of Calvin, and of Wesley.

A ground frequently taken by Christian theologians is that the progress and civilization of the world are due to Christianity ; and the discussion is complicated by the fact that many eminent servants of humanity have been nominal Christians, of one or other of the sects. My allegation will be that the special services rendered to human progress by these exceptional men have not been in consequence of their adhesion to Christianity, but in

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spite of it, and that the specific points of advantage to human kind have been in ratio of their direct opposition to precise Biblical enactments.

A. S. Farrar says¹ that Christianity "asserts authority over religious belief in virtue of being a supernatural communication from God, and claims the right to control human thought in virtue of possessing sacred books, which are at once the record and the instrument of the communication, written by men endowed with supernatural inspiration." Unbelievers refuse to submit to the asserted authority, and deny this claim of control over human thought; they allege that every effort at freethinking must provoke sturdier thought.

Take one clear gain to humanity consequent on unbelief—*i.e.*, in the abolition of slavery in some countries, in the abolition of the slave trade in most civilized countries, and in the tendency to its total abolition. I am unaware of any religion in the world which in the past forbade slavery. The professors of Christianity for ages supported it; the Old Testament repeatedly sanctioned it by special laws; the New Testament has no repealing declaration. Though we are at the close of the nineteenth century of the Christian era, it is only during the past three-quarters of a century that the battle for freedom has been gradually won. It is scarcely a quarter of a century since the famous emancipa-

¹ Farrar's "Critical History of Free Thought."