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THE SUCCESS OF CHRISTIANITY

BY PROF. J. B. BURY, LITT.D., LL.D.,

Author of "History of the Later Roman Empire," "History of Greece," "History of the Eastern Roman Empire," "A History of Freedom of Thought," etc.

THE title which I have given to the following observations might easily be taken as ironical at the present time—I happen to be writing in August, 1914—when the power of the God of battles is being displayed on such a vast scale that, if it had been the professed mission of the Churches to abolish the morality which is claimed as specifically Christian, his triumph could hardly have been more insolent and impressive. But by the success of Christianity I do not mean success in realizing the ethical ideals which are proposed in the New Testament, and to which the Old Testament supplies a drastic antidote so often convenient. I mean success in a common worldly sense, as when we speak of the success of a politician who has entered the Cabinet and risen to the position of Prime Minister, though he should never have accomplished the project of reform by which originally he made his reputation.

Before I came to years of discretion, a well-meaning preceptor supplied me with an argument to prove the supernatural origin of the Christian revelation. It amounted to this: if Christianity had been a human invention, it could not have lasted for nineteen centuries. This is an admirably simple proof, easily within the mental range of young and ignorant persons. No serious apologist would use it, not perhaps because it belongs to the same class of fallacy as *quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*, but because it so obviously proves too much. For it would establish the divine origin of Buddhism; it would establish the divine origin of Confucianism; and it would establish for Fetishism an origin still more divine. Or why confine its validity to religions? Roman Law, which in its way has had as wonderful a vitality as Christianity, would be entitled to claim superhuman inspiration.

But although of all conceivable arguments this argument is possibly the worst, as assuredly it is the most naive, it merely states explicitly and crudely a consideration which, I venture to think, has still much surreptitious influence. I suspect that many minds, tempted to question the truth of revelation, are intimidated by the fact that Christianity confronts them with the authority of the ages. I suspect that, with some of the great majority who are not prepared to follow at all risks "whither the argument leads," the fact of Christianity's success weighs heavily in their subconscious thought.

Christianity has been a success—a worldly success. This is admitted by those who are not its friends; and it is affirmed by impartial critics. No one will question the statement, but what exactly does it mean? For "Christianity" is ambiguous, and success has different degrees.

If Christianity meant the body of doctrine found in the Gospels, and if that sum of doctrine, neither increased nor diminished nor altered, constituted the creed which Christians profess to-day, then the inference of a non-human origin might be urged with force. For the phenomenon would be a genuine mystery; it would be more miraculous than any miracle related in the Gospels. It would have contradicted throughout nineteen hundred years all that experience teaches us of social development; it would be a magnificent violation of the laws of human nature. Anyone might reasonably argue that if there is a doctrine which has acted powerfully on society for fifty or sixty generations, and, resisting all the reciprocal action of other ideas, has remained exactly what it was at the beginning, it cannot be a human invention or belong to the same order as other human ideas.

Christianity is not such a doctrine. Nothing is more obvious and nothing more persistently ignored than that the ideology of the Gospels is separated by as vast a gulf from the Christianity, or rather from the various Christianities, of to-day as these systems of ideas are separated, let us say, from Islam. Precisely like all human ideas, the ideas ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth¹ have undergone a continuous transformation. The transformation began immediately. No orthodox

¹ For the purpose of the present observations it is unnecessary to touch on questions connected with the origin of Christianity. The argument is equally relevant on the old and on any new theory of the New Testament.

scholar would pretend that if the Pauline Epistles had not survived he could produce the Pauline doctrine from the Gospels. Ecclesiastical history tells us the further sequence of transformation by the Fathers and the Councils, by Popes and Reformers; and in recent times science and criticism are continuing the process. The story of Christian doctrine is the same as that of all socially effective ideas. Change has been the condition and the manifestation of its life.

Take Christian ethics. If the morality taught in the Gospels, in its spirit and full compass, had been consistently applied, what would have become of Christianity? Suppose Constantine the Great and his successors had acted literally on the precepts of Jesus, their religion would soon have disappeared from the globe along with their empire; the application of the Sermon on the Mount would have meant the ruin of the Church. The exigencies of the workaday world were incompatible with the realization of the ethical teaching of Christ; and if Christian morality means no less than that teaching, can it be said that Christian morality has been a conspicuous success? Allowing for all that the Christian religion has done in spreading the ideal of philanthropy—which Christ did not originate—can it be denied that, viewed on its ethical side, the Christianity of to-day, as practised by governments and the vast majority of individuals, differs as entirely from the Christianity of Christ as the Christian dogmas of to-day differ from whatever elementary dogmas may be discovered in the Gospels?

The success of Christianity has depended upon the transformation of the original doctrines, and upon the character and strength of the Christian organization. That organization is unique. The history of the Church is unique. So was the Roman Empire; so is the British Empire, and so are many other things. None of them is miraculous, or else they are all miraculous. And if they are all miraculous, Christianity ceases to be privileged, and the argument from its success disappears. The existence of the Roman Empire was a condition of the growth of the Church and of its strength. The Empire rendered possible both its diffusion and its organization. The particular nature of the process by which the Empire made way, in Western Europe, for the German nations brought about the conditions which enabled the spiritual power to acquire a preponderant authority. The process of its growth

can be traced step by step, and it is not astonishing. But how long did the spiritual power, when it was full grown, enjoy supremacy? Little more than two hundred years. We may mark it by the pontificates of Gregory VII and Boniface VIII. Comte commented on the brevity of this period, the crowning result of such a long preparation. If, viewing the Church simply as a social phenomenon, the panegyrist of Catholicism thought the measure of its supreme success as a world-power remarkably limited, it can hardly be claimed that this success points to the presence of a supernatural factor.

On the Protestant view the case is different. At the time when the spiritual power associated with the name of Christ was strongest and faith was most intense, the basis was false and the spirit of the original creed was corrupted. Only after a long interval of dark centuries, the pure religion of the New Testament was revived in the smaller part of Christendom. And from the time of its revival systematic Rationalism has been undermining the pure as well as the corrupt faith. Can it be said that history, from the Protestant point of view, signalizes a success that demands a supernatural explanation?

But viewed modestly, as a great social phenomenon, Christianity has had a distinguished and instructive history. It answered social needs; it embodied an ideology satisfactory to the Western mind at a particular stage; it was in intimate touch with social development. Its efficient organization gave it the means of exerting its social activities to their fullest extent—activities both good and evil. The nature of its metaphysical doctrines enabled it to adapt and adjust itself to new phases of thought in a way which was not open to rigid polytheistic cults. Like all human systems, it began to decline when it ceased to be fully adequate to the needs of the time and to correspond to all the tendencies of progress. The decomposition, like the growth, can be traced step by step.

The organization survives. That is true; and it is still invested with the shadow of its prestige. The organization of the Holy Roman Empire survived till the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Churches have evidently a long period of activity before them still. We may remember that, while the educated Greeks of the third century B.C. were generally Rationalists, Greek polytheism survived for six or seven centuries, and then yielded to the force, not of reason,

but of another religion. That is worth remembering by Rationalists, if they sometimes feel impatient at the persistence of superstitious doctrine. The rate of the world's life is now accelerated. But it would be optimistic to hope that three hundred years hence Western civilization will have dispensed entirely with theological dogmas.

The gradual decline of the social influence of theology is a patent and leading fact in modern history. But it is a fallacy, as Comte pointed out, to confuse a continuous decrease with a tendency to total extinction. And the course of the decline may be marked by signal oscillations. War is a case in point. It is a commonplace that a decline of militarism has accompanied the growth of industrialism. Comte, writing about 1842, committed himself to the unhappy prediction that there would never again be a great war among the leading civilized nations. We know far too little still about the process of civilization to enable us to draw any but the most general conclusions from the observation of tendencies; and this is true of theological beliefs as well as of all other social facts.