

**POSITIVISM AND THE
BIBLE: 3 LECTURES,
GIVEN IN NEWTON HALL**

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Positivism and the Bible: 3 lectures, given in Newton Hall by J. H. Bridges

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J. H. BRIDGES

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THREE LECTURES

GIVEN IN NEWTON HALL,

BY

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POSITIVISM AND THE BIBLE.

LECTURE I.

THERE are many reasons why Positivists should study the Bible. It is placed in our library amongst that class of books to which Auguste Comte has given the title of Synthesis; by which he means, books which we do not read merely for the sake of special knowledge, as is the case with the two divisions of Science and History, nor even for the exceeding delight which they give us, as we read the great poets, who carry us to a world of imagined and ideal excellence; but books which lead us to look on human life as a whole. In an earlier edition of the Catalogue, Comte entitles this class of books, Philosophy, Ethics, Religion. They may be called books of Construction, of Building-up, of Edification. In this collection the Bible occupies a prominent place. Two important works of Aristotle head this list, then comes the Bible, then the Koran. It includes, amongst other things, three works of St. Augustin, one of Saint Bernard, the Imitation of Thomas à Kempis, and three treatises of Bossuet. And, on the other hand, it includes the *Novum Organum* of Bacon, the Essays of David Hume, and three works of Diderot.

Each and all of these books are of a kind to occupy us usefully in this place. But there is another, and, for the moment, a more important reason for my choice of the present subject. The Bible holds in the Western world, and especially among English-speaking communities, a very special place. Amidst the infinite divergences of Christian sects in England and America, the respect for the Bible is the one link that preserves a certain unity. Half a mile from where we stand is a very large building, in which thousands of Bibles are printed yearly in every language under the sun, and sent to every part of the globe. We may smile at this enthusiasm, and think it ill-directed. Nevertheless, our business as Positivists is to recognise facts, to look them frankly in the face, and to see what they mean. Regarded

simply as a mine of material for a school of Comparative Philology, the operations of the Bible Society are of very considerable importance. There was much amusement, I remember, twenty-five years ago, at news reaching us from China that a hundred thousand copies of the Bible in Chinese had been scattered along the banks of the Great Canal, as though religion was a vegetable to be propagated by the sowing of seed. It was amusing enough certainly. But I suppose few who smiled, and I was of the number, were prepared for finding that what we thought so comic was a tragic thing enough. This Bible-sowing did very literally produce a crop, and one as terrible as the dragon's teeth sown by Jason. The leaders of the Tai-Ping rebellion, which devastated China for many years, had inspired themselves with Old Testament stories, choosing, of course, by preference those which dealt with the slaughter of the Canaanites by the chosen people. "Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum!" we may cry with Lucretius. So great a power for evil may religion be, like all noblest things distorted from their purpose!

Come nearer home, and think of the part that the Bible has played, and still plays, in English life; its influence on English language, on the poetry of Milton, Byron, Swinburne; think of the influence it has exercised in the Puritan Commonwealth, in the formation of Scotch character, in the formation of the American Republic. Coming to our own time and place, remember that the half million of children now being taught by the London School Board listen to no other teaching on the highest things of life beyond a chapter of the Bible without note or comment. You will want, I think, no further proofs that we are bound to form for ourselves an estimate of this Book. We may end by finding that its working is partly for permanent and unchangeable good; that in part it is of temporary and diminishing value; that many portions of it have long since grown obsolete; that some portions perhaps are positively hurtful to the highest progress. In this case, our work will be to sift what is better from what is worse, reject the dross, and reverently store up the pure metal in our treasure-house.

Before we begin our study, let us consider for a moment what precisely is the change which the Positive method has introduced into our ways of looking at historical events, and especially at such events as the rise of the great religions of the world. We start from the general principle that the Positive Philosophy introduces the conception of Law as

opposed to the conception of an arbitrary change brought about by a superhuman will. This, and nothing but this, is the source of the stupendous revolution which has been going on for the last few centuries in the world of thought, in which all the great thinkers of modern times have borne a part, but the full significance of which Auguste Comte was the first to appreciate, because he first consciously and systematically explained the bearing of this revolution on the facts of human life.

Still, this is too vague; and I ask again: How does the conception of Positive Law work when we apply it to such facts as the growth of the Jewish or the Christian Church?

There are different kinds of laws, varying with each branch of study. They resemble one another in being all certain and definite, otherwise they would not be laws at all; but the degree of definiteness varies very greatly. In mathematics we can take a principle on axiom, and calculate with perfect accuracy a very long series of consequences that follow from it; so that, for instance, when we know the actual length of one straight line, we are able to measure the path of a planet, and weigh it in the balance. In Physics we can manipulate the phenomena of heat or electricity to our liking, by changing the conditions under which they show themselves. But with the facts of human life we cannot do this. All we can do here is to see how they grow, and to compare them with other facts of the like kind. In a word, the laws that we look for in man's life and history, are laws of Evolution.

Many years before the speculations of Darwin or Spencer had appeared, Auguste Comte had said two things, which with him were not mere isolated sayings, since a large part of his work consisted in showing what followed from them.

The first was, that in the present time the idea of Creation had been irrevocably superseded by the idea of Evolution. The second, which is a special corollary of the first, is that the principal feature of the nineteenth century was the application of the historical method in our judgment and interpretation of all social institutions.*

* "The distinctive characteristic of the present century will be the importance it assigns to History; by the light of which, Philosophy, Politics, and even Poetry, will henceforth be pursued. This universal preference for the historical point of view is at once the essential principle of Positivism and its general result. True Positivity consists, above all things, in substituting the Relative for the Absolute; its ascendancy, therefore, is completely established when we learn to see that the orderly change already recognised in the Outer World extends also to Humanity itself, the variations of which thus govern our conceptions of every kind."—Pos. Polit., vol. iii. p. 1. See also vol. ii. p. 37.

We no longer believe in sudden miraculous changes. When we are told that once on a time figs grew upon a thorn-tree or grapes upon a thistle, we are all disposed to say with Hume, It is easier to believe that the writer of the narrative was mistaken, than that these things happened. And what Hume said, was confirmed half a century afterwards by Comte, who has shown us that there is a time in the growth of men and of nations when it is natural for them to believe in these arbitrary changes, due to the will of a superhuman power. Hume said the narrators of miracles were probably mistaken; Comte showed that the mistake was the natural result of the stage of Evolution which they had reached: that it depended on the working of a natural law.

To watch how man's beliefs and institutions grow from the germ to the shooting-forth of branch and bud, and the final bearing of the fruit—such, then, is the Positive mode of looking at them as contrasted with the old mode of regarding them as sudden supernatural revelations of the Godhead.* Our plan is to compare these beliefs with one another; to see how, amidst all their varieties, they follow the same law of gradual growth, just as we see the oak tree and the thorn-tree, the violet and the wheat plant, germinate and bear leaf and bud, and take in substance from the air and soil, and grow and bear fruit, all in the same way, though all in very diverse shapes and modes. We watch these processes, to some extent we can foretell them; but we have to beware against the fatal folly of supposing that we can ever fully explain them. Here lies one of the great and essential differences between Comte and other students of Evolution, both before his time and since. Descartes dreamed, and smaller men than Descartes have dreamed in our own time, that by the aid of two or three mathematical principles they could explain the Evolution of the Universe, and show how everything round us must have happened in this way and in no other. Comte systematically and from the first repudiated the possibility of performing any feat of this kind. Forming a far more modest view of human faculties, knowing their limitations even in such a simple field as that of Geometry, he was well aware that all attempts to explain the higher facts of life by the operation of two or three elementary

* That having got hold of these convictions, we should see that we set up to them—this, too, is an essential part of Positive, as of theological teaching, much transcending the other part in importance. But we are dealing for the moment with the intellectual aspect of life. Concord here remains as necessary as ever, being the condition of united social action.

principles must result in waste and failure. He was content, therefore, to watch the process of Evolution, so far as it came within human ken, to examine how it worked; even within narrow limits to foretell its future working.

This frank and full recognition of the limitations of our faculties lies at the root of the Positive mode of regarding Nature and Man. And thus it comes about that, though miracle be gone, the boundless ocean of wonder remains. If the poet could find—

. In the meanest flower that blows,
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears,

is it likely that in the life and death of men and nations, such thoughts will not abound more fully and penetrate far more deeply? In the aloe tree year after year the green leaves grow and multiply with almost monotonous uniformity, then after half a century the spike of blossom suddenly uplifts itself. This is no miracle, but it is a wonder. So in the life of nations, is the uprising, after long years of waiting, of the great Priest, or Poet, or Deliverer. The precise play of vital forces that led to his appearing we shall never know. We look up to him as a power above us: we accept what he brings: we thankfully commemorate his service.

This, then, is the answer to the question I asked a little while ago: What change has the Positive method brought into our ways of looking at the great events of the world's history, as contrasted with the old ways of our forefathers? The answer is, that the Positive method, rightly understood, is the meeting point of Free Thought and Piety. It is the substitution of reverent wonder for miracle: it is the change from the blind instinctive submission of the child to his parents into the clear-sighted and affectionate devotion of the grown-up man.

There are three ways of regarding the Bible, the Church, or any other institution held sacred by men. The first is inspired by the state of blind superstitious admiration of those who believe the book, or the revelation, whether it be the Bible or the Koran, to have come direct from heaven, and to be in no way comparable with any words or actions of ordinary men.

Then, when this particular phase of belief has served its turn, and is no longer in harmony with the conditions of the time, and begins to be obstructive to progress, men pass into the second stage—that of violent reaction, opposition, denial,

iconoclasm. In the sixth century B.C., a very remarkable Greek thinker, Xenophanes, went about denouncing the polytheistic legends of Homer, because they were not true. Plato followed him in the next century, and in his scheme of a republic systematically excluded Homer as a forbidden book. When Christianity became the official religion of the Western world, there was a vast destruction of Greek and Roman books and statues, because they were inspired by a worn-out creed.

Exactly the same state of mind exists in Europe now, and has existed for a hundred and fifty years. The Catholic Church, by the end of the seventeenth century, had become everywhere, but especially in France, intolerably oppressive: a vile instrument of tyranny, spiritual and temporal. In the eighteenth century broke forth the violent reaction of the Iconoclasts, the Image-breakers, with Voltaire at their head. No one can say their work was not needed. It has cleared the air like a hurricane. It has given us two inestimable blessings, freedom and toleration. But, like the hurricane, the Voltairean onslaught was indiscriminating, and swept away, or would have swept, had not stronger influences prevailed, rotten branch and sound wood together. Voltaire's attacks on Dante or Moses were as iniquitous as those of the primitive Christians on Homer or Æschylus; as they raised the cry, Down with Idolatry and false gods! so he raised as loud a cry, Down with Superstition and Priestcraft! a cry which still echoes through the world, in France and Germany especially, and which makes large masses of men wholly unwilling to believe that the founders of Christianity were anything but designing deceivers, playing on the credulity of the ignorant.

From this dismal doctrine, that the whole past history of the world is a record of successful imposture, the teaching of Auguste Comte has at last come to deliver us. I call it his teaching, not for a moment wishing to deny or depreciate the countless currents of thought which during the whole of the present century have been tending in the same direction. But he was the first consciously, explicitly, and systematically to explain that great law of development which shows that the old fictitious beliefs followed a natural law of growth; that they contained, in primitive shape, profound and permanent truths, and that they were proclaimed with the most absolute and entire sincerity by their founders;—further, that the revolt against these beliefs followed also the same natural law of social growth; and that the principles on which the revolt was founded contained also permanent truth, though