

**LAST ESSAYS ON
CHURCH
AND RELIGION**

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Last essays on church and religion by Matthew Arnold

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MATTHEW ARNOLD

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Qu'on fonde la foi profonde!

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ON
CHURCH AND RELIGION

BY
MATTHEW ARNOLD

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PREFACE.

THE PRESENT VOLUME closes the series of my attempts to deal directly with questions concerning religion and the Church. Indirectly such questions must often, in all serious literary work, present themselves; but in this volume I make them my direct object for the last time. Assuredly it was not for my own pleasure that I entered upon them at first, and it is with anything but reluctance that I now part from them. Neither can I be ignorant what offence my handling of them has given to many whose good-will I value, and with what relief they will learn that the handling is now to cease. Personal considerations, however, ought not in a matter like this to bear sway; and they have not, in fact, determined me to bring to an end the work which I had been pursuing. But the thing which I proposed to myself to do has, so far as my powers enabled me to do it, been done. What I wished to say has been said. And in returning to devote to literature, more strictly so-called, what remains to me of life and strength and leisure, I am returning, after all, to a field where work of the most important kind has now to be done, though indirectly, for religion. I am persuaded that the transformation of religion, which is essential for its perpetuance, can be accomplished

only by carrying the qualities of flexibility, perceptiveness, and judgment, which are the best fruits of letters, to whole classes of the community which now know next to nothing of them, and by procuring the application of those qualities to matters where they are never applied now.

A survey of the forms and tendencies which religion exhibits at the present day in England has been made lately by a man of genius, energy, and sympathy,—Mr. Gladstone. Mr. Gladstone seems disposed to fix as the test of value, for those several forms, their greater or lesser adaptedness to the mind of masses of our people. It may be admitted that religion ought to be capable of reaching the mind of masses of men. It may be admitted that a religion not plain and simple, a religion of abstractions and intellectual refinements, cannot influence masses of men. But it is an error to imagine that the mind of our masses, or even the mind of our religious world, is something which may remain just as it now is, and that religion will have to adapt itself to that mind just as it now is. At least as much change is required, and will have to take place, in that mind as in religion. Gross of perception and materialising that mind is, at present, still disposed to be. Yet at the same time it is undeniable that the old anthropomorphic and miraculous religion, suited in many respects to such a mind, no longer reaches and rules it as it once did. A check and disturbance to religion thence arises. But let us impute the disturbance to the right cause. It is not to be imputed merely to the inadequacy of the old materialising religion, and to be remedied by giving to this religion a form still materialising, but more acceptable. It is to be imputed, in at least an equal degree,

to the grossness of perception and materialising habits of the popular mind, which unfit it for any religion not lending itself, like the old popular religion, to those habits ; while yet, from other causes, that old religion cannot maintain its sway. And it is to be remedied by a gradual transformation of the popular mind, by slowly curing it of its grossness of perception and of its materialising habits, not by keeping religion materialistic that it may correspond to them.

The conditions of the religious question are, in truth, profoundly misapprehended in this country. In England and in America religion has retained so much hold upon the affections of the community, that the partisans of popular religion are easily led to entertain illusions ; to fancy that the difficulties of their case are much less than they are, that they can make terms which they cannot make, and save things which they cannot save. A good medicine for such illusions would be the perusal of the criticisms which *Literature and Dogma* has encountered on the Continent. Here in England that book passes, in general, for a book revolutionary and anti-religious. In foreign critics of the liberal school it provokes a feeling of mingled astonishment and impatience ; impatience, that religion should be set on new grounds when they had hoped that religion, the old ground having in the judgment of all rational persons given way, was going to ruin as fast as could fairly be expected ; astonishment, that any man of liberal tendencies should not agree with them.

Particularly striking, in this respect, were the remarks upon *Literature and Dogma* of M. Challemeil-Lacour, in France, and of Professor de Gubernatis, in Italy. Professor de Gubernatis is perhaps the most accomplished man in

Italy; he is certainly one of the most intelligent. M. Challemeil-Lacour is, or was, one of the best, gravest, most deeply interesting and instructive, of French writers. His admirable series of articles on Wilhelm von Humboldt, which I read a good many years ago in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, still live as fresh in my memory as if I had read them yesterday. M. Challemeil-Lacour has become an ardent politician. It is well known how politics, in France, govern men's treatment of the religious question. Some little temper and heat are excusable, undoubtedly, when religion raises in a man's mind simply the image of the clerical party and of his sworn political foes. Perhaps a man's view of religion, however, must necessarily in this case be somewhat warped. Professor de Gubernatis is not a politician; he is an independent friend of progress, of high studies, and of intelligence. His remarks on *Literature and Dogma*, therefore, and on the attempt made in that book to give a new life to religion by giving a new sense to words of the Bible, have even a greater significance than M. Challemeil-Lacour's. For Italy and for Italians, says Professor de Gubernatis, such an attempt has and can have no interest whatever. 'In Italy the Bible is just this:—for priests, a sacred text; for infidels, a book full of obscurities and contradictions; for the learned, an historical document to be used with great caution; for lovers of literature, a collection of very fine specimens of Oriental poetic eloquence. But it never has been, and never will be, a fruitful inspirer of men's daily life.' 'And how wonderful,' Professor de Gubernatis adds, 'that anyone should wish to make it so, and should raise intellectual and literary discussions having this for their