

# **A CENTURY'S CHANGE IN RELIGION**

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A Century's Change in Religion by George Harris

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**GEORGE HARRIS**

**A CENTURY'S  
CHANGE IN  
RELIGION**



**By George Harris, D.D., LL.D.**

A CENTURY'S CHANGE IN RELIGION.  
MORAL EVOLUTION.  
INEQUALITY AND PROGRESS.

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY  
BOSTON AND NEW YORK

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IN RELIGION**

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IN RELIGION

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## INTRODUCTORY

How much or how little have religious beliefs been affected by modern knowledge of the universe and of human nature? That those beliefs have undergone some change is certain. Have they been diminished or even undermined? Have they been rationalized and strengthened? At times there has been alarm when new theories of creation and evolution, of the origin and the constitution of man, of the sacred writings, have been advanced. There are some who say we are all at sea; we do not know what to believe. To others it seems as though a flood of light had been shed on obscurities, as though doubts and difficulties had been removed and faith enlarged.

Is it not true that our deepest interest in the extension of knowledge is in respect to its bearing on religious beliefs? While knowledge of the forces of nature has given modern improvements, has utilized invisible currents to increase the material welfare of man, has multiplied the wonders of discovery, yet the final question strikes at belief in God and the destiny of man.

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Religion is conservative. Vital beliefs grounded in human nature are not greatly influenced by changing outward conditions. Knowledge of the universe and of man's constitution and development does not make man other than he is. Yet beliefs are rooted in the actuality of the universe and of human nature, and must be determined to some degree by profounder knowledge of those realities.

Can we not measure the influence that modern discovery has exercised on faith by comparing the religious opinions and practices of earlier periods with the beliefs and practices of to-day? I propose in this writing to recognize the effects of modern excursions of knowledge into the realm where religion dwells, taking for review especially the last century, from the close of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century; to compare the beliefs and lives of Christians of one hundred years ago and of the following decades with the beliefs and practices of intelligent Christians of to-day, indicating various discoveries and tendencies which have affected religious faith. I shall consider these changes as they are disclosed in American life and thought. The influence of modern knowledge upon religious beliefs has been world-

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wide, it is true, yet the atmosphere of a democracy and the separateness of Church from State gave America a peculiar advantage in respect to freedom of thought.

A hundred years ago beliefs were sharply defined. It was a theological age. Creeds were long and explicit. A Christian must be sound in the doctrines. The leading church in New England was called the Orthodox Church. Heterodoxy was a term of reproach. Religious practices were as sharply defined; Sabbath observance, social life, amusements, family life, religious experience were precisely indicated. Moreover these beliefs and practices were an inheritance, but slightly altered, from the Reformation. The Westminster Confession of Faith drawn up in 1647 was the generally accepted standard. Calvinist, Lutheran, Reformed were names commonly applied to evangelical churches in the first part of the nineteenth century. The Reformation itself was a revolt more distinctively against the abuses than against the doctrines of the Church. Our question might be: In what respects have the beliefs generally held from the early centuries of Christianity been changed in the last century?

I select this period also because a large part of