

**DISCOURSES ON
THE DOCTRINES OF
CHRISTIANITY**

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Discourses on the Doctrines of Christianity by William G. Eliot

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WILLIAM G. ELIOT

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BY

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INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS.

THERE are two popular errors concerning Unitarians, as a body of believers, which I am desirous of removing from the minds of all who read this book. First, it is supposed that we deny the existence of *Mystery* in religion, and that we refuse to receive any doctrine which we cannot perfectly understand. I should doubt if human presumption ever went so far, if I had not read somewhere the words of a philosophical believer, who said, "Where *Mystery* begins, *Religion* ends." In all departments of human inquiry we find *mystery*, that is, something hidden from us and beyond our present reach, and it would be strange if religion were an exception to the general rule. All the subjects of which it treats are, by their nature, beyond our perfect comprehension. We may learn something of them, we may obtain glimmerings of the infinite truth, enough for present guidance and comfort and encouragement, and that is all. God, Eternity, Immortality, Redemption, Accountability, Judgment, — what infinite verities do these words convey, yet how completely are we overwhelmed in their contemplation! There is not one of them that we can perfectly explain. Our own souls are an unfathomable mystery to us, and how can we expect to comprehend the nature of

God and of Christ, and all the secrets of the spiritual world of which we form a part? We have no such expectation and make no such promise. We come to the study of religious subjects with reverential feelings, hoping to learn enough for our salvation, not expecting to know all. But what is distinctly revealed we do expect to know, and as far as we receive distinct ideas we expect them to be consistent with each other. Mystery and contradiction are very different things. The former is something beyond our sight, or seen imperfectly. The latter is plainly seen to be untrue. It may concern subjects of which we know very little, but of *every* subject we know enough to see that two contradictory statements cannot both be true. We know very little, for example, about electricity; but if any one were to say that it is a self-moving and independent power, and also an agent which never moves except by our will, we should answer, that, although the subject is one enveloped in mystery, the statement concerning it is manifestly false. Applying this to religious things: The union between God and Christ is a subject beyond our perfect comprehension — it is therefore a mystery; but as Christ has declared that he could “do nothing of himself,” — that he “spake not of himself,” but only “as the Father gave him commandment,” — we are prepared to see that those who assert that he was equal with the Father, and independent in his authority, are in error. The subject is mysterious, but the contradiction is plain. So when Christ asserts that he did not know of a certain future event (see Mark xiii. 32), the assertion that he was nevertheless Omniscient, is evidently a denial of what he said. The limits of his knowledge we cannot define, but he plainly asserts that some limits do exist, which is a distinct denial of Omniscience.

The second error concerning us is of a like kind. It is

often said that we set Reason in opposition to Revelation, or above it, and that therefore we do not come to Scripture with a teachable spirit. This is not true, nor is any thing like it true. We do indeed think that the Unitarian system of Christianity is more rational than what is commonly called Orthodoxy at the present day, and this is one argument for its truth ; for, as Reason and Revelation are both of them God's work, there cannot be any real opposition between them. If we are sure of any doctrine that it is irrational or self-contradictory, we may be equally sure that it is not a revealed truth. Revelation may tell us a great many things which are beyond our discovery, and which we can but imperfectly understand ; as when it tells us that God answers prayer, or that " he works within us both to will and to do of his good pleasure." It makes us feel that the Truth is *above us*, and that, however earnestly we may reach upwards, we cannot perfectly attain it. But at the same time it develops, enlarges, and strengthens our rational nature, while commanding us to believe. Christianity never tells us to stop thinking, but to " prove all things and hold fast what is good." We are not commanded to receive any doctrine without inquiry, but to " search the Scriptures daily to see " what is true, and of ourselves " to judge what is right." We ask no charter of freedom greater than this ; but this charter we do claim, not only as rational beings, but as Christians.

The outcry against reason, made by many religionists, is not only unwise, but inconsistent with their own practice ; nor are there any Christians who adhere more closely to the plain and direct meaning of the Bible than Unitarians. The doctrine of the Trinity is nowhere plainly taught in Scripture, nor can it be stated in Scripture words ; it is a *doctrine of inference*, built up by arguments, and depend-