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WHAT DO YOU OFFER IN PLACE OF CHRISTIANITY ?

A Lecture delivered before the Free Thought Association of Denver, Colorado,

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“WHAT do you Offer in the Place of Christianity?” This question, on which your association has asked me to speak to-day, is very often asked, and it is supposed by many to be one which, from the inherent weakness, inefficiency, and entirely negative character of Liberal thought, admits of no satisfactory answer.

The question, as usually propounded, involves several fallacies. The first is the implication that Liberalism aims to destroy, arbitrarily and suddenly, the whole Christian system, and to substitute, as arbitrarily and suddenly, something in its place, when, in fact, any such change were utterly impossible, the facts of history attesting that no religion has ever been destroyed at once and immediately replaced by another.

All religions are gradual formations. In their growth they have necessarily assimilated much that is of value. Suddenly swept away, the effects upon society would be disastrous. No rational man expects the immediate destruction of that which is interwoven with the habits, the thoughts, the literature of a people, and the sudden replacement of it by something else. The change that we expect is, rather, the gradual disappearance of that which has lost or is losing its hold upon the people, and the gradual incorporation of our Liberal principles into so much of the old system as must be retained. No doubt the sudden destruction of any religion—Christianity, Mohammedanism, Buddhism, any old faith that has become intimately associated in the minds of the people with the principles of morality, with social order, with the foundation of the fabric of society and government—would be injurious in its consequences, because the people, deprived of the old motives by which they had been actuated to a considerable extent, and unable to adjust themselves to the new order of things, would for a time be in a state of intellectual and moral disorder.

Even the Protestant Reformation, which was by no means a sudden religious revolution, but one the beginning of which dated centuries back of Luther, was attended in some places by a temporary loosening of social and moral restraints; and it was one of the complaints of the Roman Catholic writers, when they commented on that great movement, that in France, especially, it led to a vast amount of immorality, vice and crime.