

## A landmark account of the publication and aftermath of “Essays and Reviews”

from White, A.D. 1896. *A history of the warfare of science with theology in Christendom*. New York: Appleton. (extracts from Chapter XX: From the divine oracles to the higher criticism) Full text available on-line at <http://www.human-nature.com/reason/white/contents.html>.

Down to the middle of the nineteenth century the traditionally orthodox side of English scholarship, while it had not been able to maintain any effective quarantine against Continental criticism of classical literature, had been able to keep up barriers fairly strong against Continental discussions of sacred literature. But in the second half of the nineteenth century these barriers were broken at many points, and, the stream of German thought being united with the current of devotion to truth in England, there appeared early in 1860 a modest volume entitled *Essays and Reviews*. This work discussed sundry of the older theological positions which had been rendered untenable by modern research, and brought to bear upon them the views of the newer school of biblical interpretation. The authors were, as a rule, scholars in the prime of life, holding influential positions in the universities and public schools. They were seven – the first being Dr. Temple, a successor of Arnold at Rugby; and the others, the Rev. Dr. Rowland Williams, Prof. Baden Powell, the Rev. H. B. Wilson, Mr. C. W. Goodwin, the Rev. Mark Pattison, and the Rev. Prof. Jowett – the only one of the seven not in holy orders being Goodwin. All the articles were important, though the first, by Temple, on “The Education of the World,” and the last, by Jowett, on “The Interpretation of Scripture,” being the most moderate, served most effectually as entering wedges into the old tradition.

At first no great attention was paid to the book, the only notice being the usual attempts in sundry clerical newspapers to pooh-pooh it. But in October, 1860, appeared in the *Westminster Review* an article exulting in the work as an evidence that the new critical method had at last penetrated the Church of England. The opportunity for defending the Church was at once seized by no less a personage than Bishop Wilberforce, of Oxford, the same who a few months before had secured a fame more lasting than enviable by his attacks on Darwin and the evolutionary theory. His first onslaught was made in a charge to his clergy. This he followed up with an article in the *Quarterly Review*, very explosive in its rhetoric, much like that which he had devoted in the same periodical to Darwin. The bishop declared that the work tended “toward infidelity, if not to atheism”; that the writers had been “guilty of criminal levity”; that, with the exception of the essay by Dr. Temple, their writings were “full of sophistries and scepticisms.” He was especially bitter against Prof. Jowett's dictum, “Interpret the Scripture like any other book”; he insisted that Mr. Goodwin's treatment of the Mosaic account of the origin of man “sweeps away the whole basis of inspiration and leaves no place for the Incarnation”; and through the article were scattered such rhetorical adornments as the words “infidel,” “atheistic,” “false,” and “wanton.” It at once attracted wide attention, but its most immediate effect was to make the fortune of *Essays and Reviews*, which was straightway demanded on every hand, went through edition after edition, and became a power in the land.

At this a panic began, and with the usual results of panic – much folly and some cruelty. Addresses from clergy and laity, many of them frantic with rage and fear, poured in upon the bishops, begging them to save Christianity and the Church: a storm of abuse arose: the seven essayists were stigmatized as “the seven extinguishers of the seven lamps of the Apocalypse,” “the seven champions *not* of Christendom.” As a result of all this pressure, Sumner, Archbishop of Canterbury, one of the last of the old, kindly, bewigged pluralists of the Georgian period, headed a declaration, which was signed by the Archbishop of York and a long list of bishops, expressing pain at the appearance of the book, but doubts as to the possibility of any effective dealing with it. This letter only made matters worse. The orthodox decried it as timid, and the liberals denounced it as irregular. The same influences were exerted in the sister island, and the Protestant archbishops in Ireland issued a joint letter warning the faithful against the “disingenuousness” of the book. Everything seemed to increase the ferment. A meeting of clergy and

laity having been held at Oxford in the matter of electing a Professor of Sanscrit, the older orthodox party, having made every effort to defeat the eminent scholar Max Miller, and all in vain, found relief after their defeat in new denunciations of *Essays and Reviews*.

Of the two prelates who might have been expected to breast the storm, Tait, Bishop of London, afterward Archbishop of Canterbury, bent to it for a period, though he soon recovered himself and did good service; the other, Thirlwall, Bishop of St. David's, bided his time, and, when the proper moment came, struck most effective blows for truth and justice.

Tait, large-minded and shrewd, one of the most statesmanlike of prelates, at first endeavoured to detach Temple and Jowett from their associates; but, though Temple was broken down with a load of care, and especially by the fact that he had upon his shoulders the school at Rugby, whose patrons had become alarmed at his connection with the book, he showed a most refreshing courage and manliness. A passage from his letters to the Bishop of London runs as follows: "With regard to my own conduct I can only say that nothing on earth will induce me to do what you propose. I do not judge for others, but in me it would be base and untrue." On another occasion Dr. Temple, when pressed in the interest of the institution of learning under his care to detach himself from his associates in writing the book, declared to a meeting of the masters of the school that, if any statements were made to the effect that he disapproved of the other writers in the volume, he should probably find it his duty to contradict them. Another of these letters to the Bishop of London contains sundry passages of great force. One is as follows: "Many years ago you urged us from the university pulpit to undertake the critical study of the Bible. You said that it was a dangerous study, but indispensable. You described its difficulties, and those who listened must have felt a confidence (as I assuredly did, for I was there) that if they took your advice and entered on the task, you, at any rate, would never join in treating them unjustly if their study had brought with it the difficulties you described. Such a study, so full of difficulties, imperatively demands freedom for its condition. To tell a man to study, and yet bid him, under heavy penalties, come to the same conclusions with those who have not studied, is to mock him. If the conclusions are prescribed, the study is precluded." And again, what, as coming from a man who has since held two of the most important bishoprics in the English Church, is of great importance: "What can be a grosser superstition than the theory of literal inspiration? But because that has a regular footing it is to be treated as a good man's mistake, while the courage to speak the truth about the first chapter of Genesis is a wanton piece of wickedness."

The storm howled on. In the Convocation of Canterbury it was especially violent. In the Lower House Archdeacon Denison insisted on the greatest severity, as he said, "for the sake of the young who are tainted, and corrupted, and thrust almost to hell by the action of this book." At another time the same eminent churchman declared: "Of all books in any language which I ever laid my hands on, this is incomparably the worst; it contains all the poison which is to be found in Tom Paine's *Age of Reason*, while it has the additional disadvantage of having been written by clergymen."

Hysterical as all this was, the Upper House was little more self-contained. Both Tait and Thirlwall, trying to make some headway against the swelling tide, were for a time beaten back by Wilberforce, who insisted on the duty of the Church to clear itself publicly from complicity with men who, as he said, "gave up God's Word, Creation, redemption, and the work of the Holy Ghost."

The matter was brought to a curious issue by two prosecutions— one against the Rev. Dr. Williams by the Bishop of Salisbury, the other against the Rev. Mr. Wilson by one of his clerical brethren. The first result was that both these authors were sentenced to suspension from their offices for a year. At this the two condemned clergymen appealed to the Queen in Council. Upon the judicial committee to try the case in last resort sat the lord chancellor, the two archbishops, and the Bishop of London; and one occurrence

now brought into especial relief the power of the older theological reasoning and ecclesiastical zeal to close the minds of the best of men to the simplest principles of right and justice. Among the men of his time most deservedly honoured for lofty character, thorough scholarship, and keen perception of right and justice was Dr. Pusey. No one doubted then, and no one doubts now, that he would have gone to the stake sooner than knowingly countenance wrong or injustice; and yet we find him at this time writing a series of long and earnest letters to the Bishop of London, who, as a judge, was hearing this case, which involved the livelihood and even the good name of the men on trial, pointing out to the bishop the evil consequences which must follow should the authors of *Essays and Reviews* be acquitted, and virtually beseeching the judges, on grounds of expediency, to convict them. Happily, Bishop Tait was too just a man to be thrown off his bearings by appeals such as this.

The decision of the court, as finally rendered by the lord chancellor, virtually declared it to be no part of the duty of the tribunal to pronounce any opinion upon the book; that the court only had to do with certain extracts which had been presented. Among these was one adduced in support of a charge against Mr. Wilson--that he denied the doctrine of eternal punishment. On this the court decided that it did "not find in the formularies of the English Church any such distinct declaration upon the subject as to require it to punish the expression of a hope by a clergyman that even the ultimate pardon of the wicked who are condemned in the day of judgment may be consistent with the will of Almighty God." While the archbishops dissented from this judgment, Bishop Tait united in it with the lord chancellor and the lay judges.

And now the panic broke out more severely than ever. Confusion became worse confounded. The earnest-minded insisted that the tribunal had virtually approved *Essays and Reviews*; the cynical remarked that it had "dismissed hell with costs." An alliance was made at once between the more zealous High and Low Church men, and Oxford became its headquarters: Dr. Pusey and Archdeacon Denison were among the leaders, and an impassioned declaration was posted to every clergyman in England and Ireland, with a letter begging him, "for the love of God," to sign it. Thus it was that in a very short time eleven thousand signatures were obtained. Besides this, deputations claiming to represent one hundred and thirty-seven thousand laymen waited on the archbishops to thank them for dissenting from the judgment. The Convocation of Canterbury also plunged into the fray, Bishop Wilberforce being the champion of the older orthodoxy, and Bishop Tait of the new. Caustic was the speech made by Bishop Thirlwall, in which he declared that he considered the eleven thousand names, headed by that of Pusey, attached to the Oxford declaration "in the light of a row of figures preceded by a decimal point, so that, however far the series may be advanced, it never can rise to the value of a single unit."

In spite of all that could be done, the act of condemnation was carried in Convocation.

The last main echo of this whole struggle against the newer mode of interpretation was heard when the chancellor, referring to the matter in the House of Lords, characterized the ecclesiastical act as "simply a series of well-lubricated terms--a sentence so oily and saponaceous that no one can grasp it; like an eel, it slips through your fingers, and is simply nothing."

The word "saponaceous" necessarily elicited a bitter retort from Bishop Wilberforce; but perhaps the most valuable judgment on the whole matter was rendered by Bishop Tait, who declared, "These things have so effectually frightened the clergy that I think there is scarcely a bishop on the bench, unless it be the Bishop of St. David's [Thirlwall], that is not useless for the purpose of preventing the widespread alienation of intelligent men."

During the whole controversy, and for some time afterward, the press was burdened with replies, ponderous and pithy, lurid and vapid, vitriolic and unctuous, but in the main bearing the inevitable

characteristics of pleas for inherited opinions stimulated by ample endowments.

The authors of the book seemed for a time likely to be swept out of the Church. One of the least daring but most eminent, finding himself apparently forsaken, seemed, though a man of very tough fibre, about to die of a broken heart; but sturdy English sense at last prevailed. The storm passed, and afterward came the still, small voice. Really sound thinkers throughout England, especially those who held no briefs for conventional orthodoxy, recognised the service rendered by the book. It was found that, after all, there existed even among churchmen a great mass of public opinion in favour of giving a full hearing to the reverent expression of honest thought, and inclined to distrust any cause which subjected fair play to zeal.

The authors of the work not only remained in the Church of England, but some of them have since represented the broader views, though not always with their early courage, in the highest and most influential positions in the Anglican Church.