



# THE FUNDAMENTAL TRUTHS OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

*Sixteen Lectures delivered in the University  
of Berlin during the Winter Term 1901-2*

BY

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*Translated from the 4th Revised German Edition*

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*Edited, with an Introductory Note*

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## PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

THE present volume consists of a series of sixteen lectures which I delivered in the University of Berlin, before students of all Faculties. From the fourth German edition the work has been translated into English by a former hearer of mine, Rev. George E. Thomson, Aberdeen. In its new dress and among new people, I wish the book as attentive readers as it has found in Germany, for the task it sets itself is certainly worthy of the reflection of all. Everywhere in our day we are confronted by the great task of preserving Christianity to the modern mind. This can be accomplished only if the modern world can be brought to the consciousness

that even at the present day the deepest wants, needs, and problems which move man find their answer in the Gospel, and that the Gospel need fear no progress of science and culture. But for this purpose no pains must be spared in translating the thoughts of the Christian revelation into the speech and modes of thought of our own time. No element of real Christianity may thereby be surrendered, yet the particular way of stating the problem raised by the spirit and need of our time must receive minute attention. The old truth is to be taught in new wise.

Such an attempt is made in the present book. It is not addressed to any particular Church party, but is meant to stir up educated readers in all sections of the Church to examine their faith, and to show them that precisely in modern life they may again rejoice in it. The task which the book sets itself is thus, on the one hand, a religious, on the other hand a theological one. Theologically educated readers will easily discover

in the book the framework of a new dogmatic system, and will be in a position to interpret and supplement the thoughts—however lightly they are often touched upon—in accordance with the system as a whole. The thought of a new “modern positive theology,” as it has been present to my mind for years (*cf.* my *Kirche Deutschlands im 19<sup>ten</sup> Jahrhundert*, 2 ed., 1904, p. 302 ff.), has been, at least in its fundamental ideas, sketched in the present book. Theologians who wish to obtain more precise information about this question and the varied discussions which have been raised through it in German Theology, I refer to the thorough and luminous work of Prof. Beth in Vienna, *Die Moderne und die Principien der Theologie* (Berlin).

So may this little volume go forth and bear witness to English Christendom of the truth and power of our religion.

R. SEEBERG.

BERLIN, 18th May 1908.



## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

As this is the first volume of Professor Seeberg's which has been translated into English, and as his name is not yet familiar to the English-speaking public, I have deemed it advisable in editing this little work to append a few preliminary words respecting the author of it. Dr Seeberg was born little less than half a century ago, and is therefore still in the maturity of his powers. After completing his preliminary education at Reval he commenced the study of theology, first at Dorpat and afterwards at Erlangen. In 1889 he became a professor of theology at Erlangen, and nine years afterwards he was called to occupy a chair of systematic theology at the University of Berlin. He has done a great deal of literary work, much of it contributed to reviews and encyclopædias. His

principal publications are:—*A History of Christian Doctrine*; *A History of the German Church in the Nineteenth Century*; *The Holy Communion in the New Testament*; “A Sketch of Protestant Ethics” in the *Kultur der Gegenwart*; *Die Theologie des Duns Scotus*; *An Introduction to the History of Dogma*; and the volume which is now placed before the English public.

Professor Seeberg is rightly regarded among his own countrymen as one of the most thoughtful of contemporary theologians, and he exercises a wide influence on the modern German church. It will be seen from the present volume that he is more conservative in temper than some of the contemporary German theologians whose works have appeared in such a series as the Theological Translation Library. But he approaches the burning questions of religion and theology in a modern frame of mind. It is for this reason that his volume on *The Fundamental Truths of the Christian Religion* has gone through so



many editions in Germany; and it is to be hoped that it will be equally successful in its English dress.

Hitherto, Dr Seeberg's publications have been mostly of an historical character; but his exhaustive and penetrating studies in historical theology have all been written with the object of shedding light upon the religious problems of the present. His studies of ecclesiastical dogma have led him to the conclusion that dogma is only the form in which the Christian society expresses its knowledge of the saving truths of faith. But these truths are quite capable of being separated from the historic forms in which they have found expression in the past. The theologians who have exercised the greatest influence on Professor Seeberg are Schleiermacher, Baur, and Hofmann; he is also in sympathy with Ritschl, but is out of touch with the developments of Ritschlianism as it is exhibited in the Ritschlian school. He blames them for an anti-metaphysical agnosticism and historicism; he considers their

history too modern and their thought not modern enough. He objects to the Ritschlian principle of isolating theology from the other sciences, especially from metaphysics. Theology must be presented in the form of a general conception of the world; it is therefore impossible for it to attempt to dispense with metaphysics. On the other hand, he is at one with Ritschl and his followers in emphasising the practical character of the Christian religion. Religion, in Dr Seeberg's view, is the will of God ruling and directing the will of man; or, regarded from the human standpoint, it is the will of man attempting in the spirit of faith and love to realise the supreme purposes of God. But when the essentially practical character of religion has to be presented theoretically as a doctrinal system—and, in Dr Seeberg's opinion, it must, even for practical purposes, be embodied in a doctrinal system—a metaphysical background to this doctrinal system becomes a matter of necessity.

W. D. M.

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I

THE TRUTH OF  
THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION



by any authorities, but exhibits a system of historical hypotheses. But to wander with the seven-league boots of possibility through the ocean of the possible, affords but uncertain prospect of landing on the shore of reality. There are many objections to this representation, though as yet the attempts to clear it out of the way have been unsuccessful. The history of religion in no way affords us only phenomena which witness to a straight line of progress, but marks of retrogression as well. Fetishism and spirit-worship, magic and superstition, are not wanting even at the height of development, but they show that a further development is not possible. Likewise it is difficult, according to this theory, to comprehend how present-day races that can look back over a long period of existence can do homage to this Fetishism, if it came at the very beginning. Have these races experienced no evolution at all? This would not agree with what missionaries tell us of the presence of higher ideas among them, which witness to

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the belief in an all-powerful Deity. One has but to think, for example, of the "Great Spirit" of the Indians; and similar and clearer ideas occur among quite crude negro races. They are called fossils, and that may be right; but fossils are witnesses to a once organic life. And finally, even here it is not at all clear how out of these spirits striving with each other, which were created after the image of man, arose the God who created man after His image.

The question as to the origin of religion is not answered. It is identical with that other as to the origin of the thought of God. We cannot see how the thought of God could be the result of man's contemplation of the world, of his dim consciousness of laws and order in it. We have no analogy for this; we may watch the development in the stream of the spirit-life, and nowhere in its course does it wash up this pearl upon the bank. On the contrary, always and everywhere comes the thought of God before us as a



presupposition of the thought and interpretation of the universe. God stands over against the world; there is a world above (Überwelt) which is not world, which combats the world and is combated by it. Above the world there is a something which mankind in dim surmise and recognition apprehends with fear and joy. It is inconceivable how from the world or from his own soul man should produce this thought which, in its historical realisation, ever presents itself as a gift from above. Imagine the primitive man moved by that awe before the universe that lays hold of our soul when we stand lonely over against the All; or think of his soul inspired by that breath of longing after the fountains and breasts of the All. Perhaps he came thereby to the dream of such as he in the murmuring fountain, the shady tree, the fruitful mould; but that is not God. It remains severed by an endless distance from the thought of God.

Our conceptions grow out of observations

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and experiences. The world is the scene of action of these observations. But out of the mazy hieroglyphics of the world-phenomena the thought of God cannot be deciphered. Then it must be given to man from outside; from outside as the content of his soul in general comes to him from outside.

There is an old suggestive story which has the object of explaining how that happened. In the still evening hour, when the wind rustled mysteriously in the tree-tops, God walked in the garden where the first-created dwelt. The story is not history in our sense, but it gives us a solution of the problem before us in childlike, pious legend. Mankind received the thought of God, and therewith religion in that God made Himself sensible to them. There happened something external and sensuous which made necessary man's thought of the invisible God. It may be called the original revelation. Nothing more definite can be said about it, but it is not impossible, provided an operative God is assumed.

But never would mankind have found the thought of God from this experience, whatever the nature of it was, unless the spirit of man had been predisposed to this thought. "Man comprehends only what is in conformity to his nature," said Goethe once; otherwise expressed, there can be no religion unless man is capable of subjective religiousness.

We call a sum of conceptions and dogmas, of moral rules and institutions, of forms and formulæ, religion. But religion lives only where men experience all this as power and content of the soul. The moment a religion becomes purely objective, and this subjective element becomes extinct, the religion is dead. Religions have always died when they became purely objective—religion without religiousness.

But it can come to religiousness only if religion—above all, the thought of God—is in "conformity" with the mind. If religion were something irrational or unintelligible, it

would not exist. What points of connexion has it, then, in the nature of man?

Man's relation to the world is twofold. He perceives the world as something operative and himself as purely operated on. Man, as he thinks and feels, is the last effect of that vast system of causes and effects which we call world. He is passive, absolutely dependent on the compact surrounding mass of the world-system. But, on the other hand, he stands active over against the world, setting up ends for himself and turning all that meets him to means for the realisation of those ends. He is not only operated upon, but he himself operates. As free mind he stands over against the universe and masters it. Blind action, the colossal weight of the existing, all splendour and all magnificence, all enigmas and all objects of terror—these serve for the realisation of the purposes of mind. It is precisely in our own age, an age of vast, undreamt-of mastery of the powers of nature by mind, that we understand with immediate vividness this posi-

tion of man. Man as he stands over against the world, is at each moment its alpha and its omega, beginning and end. He is the result of its effects, and he is the originator of quite new effects. Such is man in his loftiness and in his lowliness: Prometheus with the fire, Prometheus with the chain!

But now the soul that feels itself dependent on what lies far below it, cries after dependence on something that is above it. And the soul that feels in itself the impulse to make tracks through the primeval forest of reality for fixed ends, strives after a very great, stable, and sure end. The soul does not find satisfaction in any kind of dependence; what it wants is to be dependent on something that lays the feeling of dependence in the deepest depths,—to be dependent on an ultimate personal Spirit. Nor is it content with all the possibilities of making roads in the primeval forest; it can do more and demands a sure goal. In the highest heights and at the furthest distance this goal must lie, if it is to

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bring contentment to the soul; that is, the whole impulse to action within must be released in action. Only when this has been done does the soul understand its own longing and striving thereafter; only when we know the truth do we comprehend that our unrest before was the seeking after truth; only when there comes into us the life of the Spirit from above do we understand that the Spirit from above is necessary for us, because we are spirit.

And now there lays hold of the life of the soul a power which it feels immediately as the absolute power of spirit; and before the eye that looks searchingly into the distance there rises a goal gigantic yet perceptible, impossible yet possible, above our power yet ours. Man feels the power of God, and this authority sets and gives him a goal which releases the spiritual power in him, and strains it to the utmost, and which precisely on that account satisfies.

That is religion. It is always a gift and always a task. As the God, so the gift; and

as the gift, so the task. God gives the gift and with it the task. Their forms change, but the experience of the power of the Deity and the submission to it is common to all. There is a difference drawn between nature religions, moral or legal religions, and redemptive religions. It may be made clear on this customary division what we mean. In the nature religions the Deity is more powerful than man, but changeful and capricious as he; is operative in the production of purely natural gifts, such as fruitfulness and success in war, and sets therefore only such tasks as fall in the sphere of natural life. In the moral religion the Deity is overwhelmingly powerful, exalted above nature, just in character, giving men the moral laws, and thereby setting them the task of obediently fulfilling precepts, morals, rites and customs. In the redemptive religion the Deity is almighty, or is the all-operative power that out of love redeems mankind, that frees the soul from the pressure and service of the world, and thereby moves it

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to eternal tasks and ends above the world. The world above has laid hold upon the soul.

We have defined the nature of religion and understood that its nature corresponds to the nature of our spirit. Hence religion can become religiousness. The purpose of religion is not to lower, not to destroy and annul our free spirit-life, but to give us that life, or raise it to its perfection. Our spirit cries after religion; our nature needs religion.

But no religion without religiousness. Religiousness is the power and the life of religion.



## LECTURE II

### THE RELIGIONS OF MANKIND AND THE ABSOLUTE RELIGION

THE results of the former lecture may be gathered up in a few short sentences. Religious thoughts, above all the conception of God, are not innate in the mind of man. But the human mind is naturally capacitated for religion, because it is made for religiousness: in the first place, so far as it requires a supernatural, spiritual, and almighty Being in whom the disposition to dependence finds satisfaction; and secondly, in so far as it needs a final supramundane goal for the exertion of its activity. The conception of God ennobles the dependence of man, and the supramundane goal regulates the impulse towards an end.

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It lies quite beyond the scope of the present course to follow the various phases which religion and religiousness have gone through in the course of a long and excessively complicated development.

The human mind assimilates new thoughts only when it relates them to its former mental content. In general, the observation may be shown to be well founded in religion too, that the human mind was striving to bring the thought of God given to it into the closest relation to the system of the universe. Both from wish and of necessity a point of connection with the known must be found. In proportion as the vivacity of the consciousness of God disappeared and man perceived the knowable and the unknowable in the world, God was drawn into the world ; whether it was that men looked on the shining stars as gods, or that they endeavoured to find the Deity in the changing life of nature—in the tender awakening of spring, the iron reign of winter, the magnificence of the starry sky or the

regularity of its movement—or that they chose single objects of nature and raised them to be bearers of the divine life ; or finally—here the evolution reached its height — that they felt the world-order to be divine and represented the Deity as world-spirit. But amid all these changes the consciousness remained—however much the Deity was drawn down into the world—that the Deity is not the world, but in some way or other leads an independent supramundane life, possessing powers and gifts that the world does not have. There was, finally, always a feeling of God that contained more and went deeper than the worldly symbols which were made use of to express the conceptions of the divine and represent the gods.

Along with this development there naturally took place a variety of formation in the religious life and in the moral ideals.

The process we have been considering is a marvellous one. Everywhere there is a vast increase and expansion of religious con-

ceptions and orders. There are always new gods being found, always new means of grace being discovered, always new modes of serving the Deity coming in. These creations have an extraordinary persistence. Once there they can be eradicated only with difficulty. This fact sets one thinking that in the Christian Church no dogma has really died out.

But this enormous increase in religious matter is not seldom met in history by another movement, namely to reduce the mass to simple fundamental forms, to separate the main points from the side issues and to secure their authority. Every reformation in religion—and almost every religion that has a history experiences reformations—has such a simplification in view. When the tree in full vigour grows to the height, the old branches below often wither and die.

It was not our purpose to speak of the history of religion ; still, a few words must be devoted to the close of the ancient evolution. We speak of the “fulness of the times.” By

this biblical expression we understand the age in which the world had become ripe to receive Christianity. We have to do with the Græco-Roman world of culture, which represents at the same time the result of the religious development of the old humanity. It is well known from history what a mixed multitude of religions bore sway at this time. But with the positive religions there contended, as is not seldom at the end of an epoch of culture, the philosophic religion of the Enlightened. Think, for example, on the eclectic philosophy of a Cicero, or the Stoic ideas of an Epictetus and a Seneca. In them the feelings of the best and the tendencies of the advancing spirits found support and foundation. They laboured to save the universal in religion, while they rejected the positive. But with the positive sank also the power of religion.

Neither the flood of ancient superstitions nor of brand-new mysteries, nor yet philosophic ideas, afforded the heart what it sought, the spirit and power, motive and goal, *peace and*

*active energy.* A terrible fear, a restless longing and striving, goes through the time. In the ages which precede the great epochs of history the poor soul arises to make a journey through the universe. Literature voices its impressions in affecting tones. The soul had gone forth to seek after the first and the last, after God and the goal of existence. And the soul travelled from god to god, from faith to faith, from goal to goal, but what it found was not its God and not its goal.

It is not a question of "conceptions," of "doctrines," or of "systems," nor of forms and formulæ in such ages of soul hunger, but of a new attitude, and a new and living content, of the soul. In the chaos of real life that surrounds it and tears its own life with it into the whirlpool, the soul wants to attain to a firm stand where a well of living water and bread of life are to be found. It seeks a traversable path through the wall of mist before it. *It is life that the soul demands.*

And the soul could not live from what the

age offered. The age was dominated by the spirit of Greece. Plato had taught to recognise the reality of the world in a cosmos of transcendent Ideas. Speculative meditation on these Ideas, spiritual contemplation of the first causes of being, was the highest meaning of life. Alongside there stood from the beginning a world of small and near ends. To do what was required by the law, the state, the order of life and piety, or particular systems of virtue, was the task of life. It is remarkable how small the world of ends of the ancients was when measured by the compass of their ideas. They had ideas, but they were poor in ideals. The highest conceptions of thought are ideas, the highest conceptions of action are ideals. Even to-day we live from the ideas of the ancients; our ideals, on the contrary, come almost entirely from Christianity.

The ideas lay far off in the transcendent fields of metaphysics: the highest point of the metaphysical pyramid was the thought of God

wrapped in the mountain mists of absolute distance, lifeless, unreal. And the ideals lay so near, were so small and petty in relation to that giant pyramid of ideas, living and real, it is true, but only for the commonplace life.

But the soul needs a near God and far off ideals. The nearer the spiritual life of a person advances to us, the more powerfully are we sensitive of it, the more easily is our receptivity, the disposition to spiritual communion and inner dependence, to spiritual reception satisfied. The further the ends lie, the longer the chain of means needed for their realisation, the more powerfully and the more conformably to nature are the active powers of our soul exerted. The old world led the opposite way. God was afar off, but the ends near. Receptivity remained unsatisfied and activity retained unreleased in itself a surplus of restless, just because unexerted, powers. The soul remained fettered; the Spirit from above of which it dimly dreamt did not loose the fetters.



That was the "fulness of the times," the end of the ancient religions. When the poor soul marches through the world, then the foundations of the temples and the images of the idols on the altars, the pyramids of metaphysics and the thresholds of current morals tremble. To the "gods of Greece"<sup>1</sup> the soul put the question about life. They could give no answer. It was the "end of the gods of Greece."

It was at this time that a religion came forward asserting a claim which no other religion has made with such pointedness. The claim of absoluteness belongs to the very nature of religion, and is therefore wanting in none. Therewith religion always founds its claim to be the world above as against the world. But the Christian religion put forward the claim to be the *absolute religion* in opposition to all the other religions of mankind.

To realise the weight of this claim we

<sup>1</sup> "Die Götter Griechenlands," title of a poem by Schiller

must keep in mind a historical fact. In the Pantheon of the Roman state all religions found a place and all religions tolerated one another. Each passed for an authoritative expression of the Absolute. The Roman state was highly civilised. It did not persecute arbitrarily the confessors of religions; it was tolerant, but in spite of all tolerance it persecuted the Christians, and it did so because they asserted that they possessed the one absolute religion.

We are carried further. The question is to test the significance of this claim. It could be expressed in different forms. It could be taught that no man knows God except he to whom Christ reveals Him, or that only in the name of Jesus is there salvation for all that are on the earth or under the earth. It could be said, the gods of the heathen are demons, heathen religion and morality are immoral. Christianity could be praised as the single "sure and useful Philosophy." It was possible to teach "outside the Church no salvation,"