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Speech of
James M^r Parlour Thompson

on
The effect of the doctrines of Christianity
on the progress of Philosophy

Delivered July 19th A.D. 1838
Carlisle.

Inquiries concerning the origin and government of the world, the nature of mind, and the moral constitution of man appear to have occupied the attention of society in its earliest stages of civilization. - This statement is founded, on sketches of traditional history, which have come down to us from the most remote periods of which we have any knowledge. - The history of philosophy may be properly divided into three distinct periods or ages. - viz. The ancient the scholastic and the modern. - Each marked by the peculiar state of society which existed at their respective periods. - I will not permit us to go into a definite detail of the peculiarities of these three systems. - Nor would it be necessary in the discussion of this subject to give a detail which would only weary some, and afford but little profit to others. - That the progress of philosophy has been slow is known to most if not all of us. If we cast our eyes back to the course -

ment of the sixteenth century what shall we see
worthy the existence of man, through a space of
about six thousand years. And yet his investiga-
tions upon these subjects have been continued
throughout the whole of this time. - Previous to the
promulgation of the Christian religion, philosophy
had made considerable advancement. The prin-
ciples on which its investigations had been con-
ducted, in many instances, were correct; And
had fair scope to open to the long deluded and
darkened mind of man, the path which should
lead him into a knowledge of those sciences,
which none but they who know can fully app-
reciate; and which places men and nations
high on the tablets of fame. - But these happy
improvements were doomed to destruction and
place given to a new system, which to us is as
incredulous as it is frolics. - This was the
commencement of the scholastic age in which
sober reason was disregarded and a loose rein
given to the wildest fancies and most imag-
inative speculations. - Theories were projected,
laws were made, and principles sought to

conform to them. - And man, originally created
after the image and likeness of God himself,
we find groping his way in darkness for a
thousand years. - Yet can this check to the
onward course of philosophy be attributed to
the doctrines of christianity? By no means.
If they had been applied, and produced
these results, then such a reverse could with
some propriety be laid to their charge. - But
was this the case? Was it not rather a per-
version of those doctrines that brought about
so unhappy state of society? Christianity
was not intended to answer for the depravity
and wilful ignorance of man, but as a
restraint which being applied should
curb and remove them. - Other causes
came in to dissipate and destroy these adv-
ancements in science. - The Roman government
which by the power and terror of its arms had
x subjected almost the whole known world,
was now through the corruption and indolence
of its citizens fast falling into decay. - And
by invasions from the north was soon reduced

to a state of semibarbarism. - Hence learning was neglected, and the quiet pursuits of philosophy despised. - Thus far, we have shown that the true doctrines of christianity have had little or no bearing on the investigations of science. - It now remains to be shown who has been their influence in later times. - Travel back two hundred years, we behold a world of terror, confusion and ignorance. A religion pure, and holy, and perfect, as the Lord that gave it, darkened with the blackest crimes and cloaking the direst infamy. The very names of learning and science scattered to the winds of heaven, and their seats no longer known on earth. In the midst of this universal ruin, we see the solitary Luther emerging from his narrow and cloistered cell, with the bible in one hand, and reason in the other, and an eloquence, powerful as the rushing torrent, proclaiming to man his inalienable rights and the injustice of the oppression under which he groaned. - Then it was that philosophy received a new impulse. - And after the strong barriers which superstition had erected were leveled by the plain truths of the book

of God: experiment was adopted as the test of philosophy, and on its laws were founded. And this Dogma has formed the theme of modern contentions. Many minds wishing to cling to the old exploded systems, or unwilling to receive the simple doctrines of Christianity ~~of Christianity~~ as their rule of life, sought by means of their own puny efforts to establish a more perfect system, and induce man again to cast away the anchor of his hope.

Many objections have been skilfully urged on the apparent discrepancy of experience and the Christian doctrines, and unfortunately receive but too ready credence from the depraved, the ignorant and the thoughtless. But to whom is man indebted for all those great advantages enjoyed by civilized society? Those ingenious works, the product only of saturnian spirits. Is it to the infidel, is it to the caviler of the bible? In the whole catalogue of names, which have risen above the common level of man, and stood forth as the bright luminaries of the human mind, there is not one to be found who having excluded the precepts of Christ from

philosophy has ever benefited society one jot.
It is true and we hesitate not to avow it, that there
are in some of the branches of philosophy princi-
ples apparently conflicting with statements of
the bible, and cavilers have not failed to ~~ex-~~
~~pose~~ seize and enlarge upon them. One instance
will suffice to show how shallow such objections
are, In the science of Geology, the most sub-
lime to which modern times have given birth
one difficulty arises, and but one - And although
perhaps of minor importance in itself, it has
shook the faith of many most eminent spirits.
It is this. The investigations in geology have proved
beyond the doubt of any save the most confirmed
sceptic and bigot, that the time occupied in
the formation of the earth, must have been very
much greater, than that popularly received,
as the time, from the Mosaic account - But
by more minute investigations into all the prin-
ciples which are involved in this subject even
this difficulty is in a great measure, if not,
wholly removed. And the book comes in but
to sanction experience -

Again, Who are they, who have made the most
useful discoveries in science? They are the
professed believers in a revealed religion. Those
who have been schooled in the doctrine of christi-
-tianty, and afterward made them their rule
of life - Men, whose names shall descend to
posterity coupled with the most enviable
-associations -

Commencement Oration of James McFarlane Thompson, Class of 1838
Transcribed by Sarah Skalak, June 2008
Edited by Tristan Deveney, July 2008

The Effect of the Doctrines of Christianity on the Progress of Philosophy

Inquiries concerning the origin and government of the world, the nature of mind, and the moral constitution of man appear to have occupied the attention of society in its earliest stages of civilization. This statement is founded, on sketches of traditional history, which have come down to us from the most remote periods of which we have any knowledge. The history of philosophy may be properly divided into three distinct periods or ages. Viz. The ancient the scholastic and the modern. Each marked by the peculiar state of society which existed at their respective periods. Time will not permit us to go into a deffinite detail of the peculiarities of these three systems. Nor would it be necessary in the discussion of subject to give a detail which would only weary some, and afford but little profit to others – That the progress of philosophy has been slow is known to most if not all of us. If we cast our eyes back to the comme-

ncement of the sixteenth century what shall we see worthy the existence of man? Through a space of almost six thousand years. And yet his investigations upon these subjects have been continued throughout the whole of this time. Previous to the promulgation of the christian religion philosophy has made considerable advancement. The principles on which its investigations had been conducted, in many instances, were correct; And bid fairs soon to open to the long deluded and darkened mind of man. The path which should lead him into a knowledge of those sciences, which none but they who know can fully appreciate; and which placed men and nations high on the tablet of fame – But these happy improvements were doomed to destruction and place given to a new system, which to us is as incredulous as it is foolish – This was the commencement of the scholastic age in which sober reason was disregarded and a loose rein given to the wildest fancies and most imaginative speculations – Theories were projected, laws were made, and principles saught to

conform to them. And man, originally created after the image and likeness of God himself, we find groping his way in darkness for a thousand years – Yet can this chick to the onward course of philosophy be attributed to the doctrines of christianity? By no means. If they had been applied, and produced these results, then such a reverse could with some propriety be laid to their charge – But was this the case? Was it not rather a perversion of those doctrines that brought about so unhappy state of society? Christianity was not intended to answer for the depravity and wilful ignorance of man, but as in restraint which being applied should curb and remove them – Other causes came in to dissipate and destroy these advancements in science. The Roman government which by the power and terror of its arms, had subjected almost the whole known world was now through the corruption and indolence of its citizens, fast falling into decay – And by invasions from the north was soon reduced

to a state of semibarbarism. Hence learning was neglected, and the quiet pursuit of philosophy dispised. Thus far we have shown that the true doctrines of christianity have had little no learning on the investigations of science – it now remains to be shown what has been their influence in later times – Travel back two hundred years, we behold a world of terror, confusion and ignorance. A religion pure, and holy, and perfect as the Lord that gave it, darkened with the blackest crimes and cloaking the direst infamy. The very names of Learning and Science scattered to the winds of heaven, and their seats no longer known on earth. In the midst of this universal ruin, we see the solitary Luther emerging from his narrow and cloistered cell with the bible in one hand, and reason in the other, and an eloquence, powerful as the rushing torrent, proclaiming to man his inalienable rights and the injustice of the oppression under which he groaned. Then it was that philosophy received a new impulse – And after the strong barriers which superstition had erected were leveled by the plain truths of the book

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