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François-René de Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity  
or the Spirit and Beauty of the Christian Religion* (1856).

## PREFACE

In 1798, while the author of this work was residing in London, exiled from France by the horrors of the Revolution, and gaining a subsistence by the productions of his pen, which were tinctured with the skepticism and infidelity of the times, he was informed of the death of his venerable mother, whose last days had been embittered by the recollection of his errors, and who had left him, in her dying moments, a solemn admonition to retrace his steps. The thought of having saddened the old age of that tender and religious parent who had borne him in her womb, overwhelmed him with confusion; the tears gushed from his eyes, and the Christian sentiments in which he had been educated returned under the impulses of a generous and affectionate heart: "*I wept and I believed.*" But the trouble which harassed his mind had not entirely vanish, until he had formed the plan of redeeming his first publications by the consecration of his splendid abilities to the honor of religion. Such was the origin of the *Genius of Christianity*, in the composition of which he labored with "all the ardor of a son who was erecting a mausoleum to his mother."

When this work made its appearance, in 1802, infidelity was the order of the day in France. That beautiful country, whose people had once hold so prominent a rank among the Catholic nations of Europe, presented but a vast scene of ruins, the fatal consequences of that systematic war which impious sophists had waged against religion during the latter half of the eighteenth century. The Revolution had swept away in its desolating course all the landmarks of the ancient society. Churches and altars had been overthrown; the priests of God had been massacred, or driven into exile; asylums of virtue and learning, had been profaned and laid waste; every thing august and sacred had disappeared. In the political and social sphere the same terrific destruction was witnessed. After a succession of convulsions, which had overthrown the Bourbon dynasty, and during which the passions of men had rioted amid the wildest anarchy and the most savage acts of bloodshed, the chief authority became vested in a consul whose mission was to reestablish social order, and whose efforts in that direction were gladly welcomed by the nation, grown weary and sick, as it were, of the dreadful calamities that

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had come upon them. It was an auspicious moment for the fearless champion of Christianity, to herald the claims of that religion whose doctrines constitute the only safe guide of the governing and the governed. But, among a people who to a great extent had conceived a profound antipathy to the theory and practice of religion, by the artful and persevering efforts of an infidel philosophy to render the Christian name an object of derision and contempt, a new method of argument was necessary to obtain even a hearing in the case, much more to bring back the popular mind to a due veneration for the Church and her teachings. It would have been useless, when the great principles of religious belief were disregarded, when the authority of ages was set at naught, to undertake the vindication of Christianity by the exhibition of those external evidences which demonstrate its divine origin. Men had become deluded with the idea that the Christian religion had been a serious obstacle in the way of human progress; that, having been invented in a barbarous age, its dogmas were absurd and its ceremonies ridiculous; that it tended to enslave the mind, opposed the arts and sciences, and was in general hostile to the liberty of man and the advancement of civilization. It was necessary, therefore, in order to refute these errors, to exhibit the intrinsic excellence and beauty of the Christian religion, to show its analogy with the dictates of natural reason, its admirable correspondence with the instincts of the human heart, its ennobling influence upon literature and the arts, its beneficent effects upon society, its wonderful achievements for the civilization and happiness of nations, its infinite superiority over all other systems, in elevating the character, improving the condition, and answering the wants of man, under all the circumstances of life; in a word, to show according to the design of our author, *not that the Christian religion is excellent because it comes from God, but that it comes from God because it is excellent.*

For this purpose, he passes in review the principal mysteries and tenets of Christianity, draws a comparison between Christian and pagan literature, displays the advantages which painting, sculpture, and the other arts, have derived from religious inspiration, its accordance with the scenes of nature and the sentiments of the heart, describes the wonders of missionary enterprise, the extensive services of the monastic orders, and concludes with a general survey of the immense blessings conferred upon mankind by the Christian Church. In displaying this magnificent picture to the contemplation of the reader, the author employs all the resources of ancient and modern learning, the information derived from extensive travel and a profound study of human

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nature, and those ornaments of style which the loftiest poetry and the most glowing fancy can place at his command. In turn the philosopher, the historian, the traveller, and the poet, lie adopts every means of promoting the great end in view, —to enamor the heart of man with the charms of religion, and to prove that she is eminently the source of all that is "lovely and of good report," of all that is beautiful and sublime. Among all the works of Chateaubriand, none, perhaps, is so remarkable as this for that combination of impressive eloquence, descriptive power, and pathetic sentiment, which imparts such a fascination to his style, and which caused Napoleon I. to observe, that it was "not the style of Racine, but of a prophet; that nature had given him the sacred flame, and it breathed in all his works."

The publication of such a work at such a time could not but enlist against it a powerful opposition among the advocates of infidelity; but its superior excellence and brilliant character obtained an easy triumph over the critics who had attempted to crush its influence. In two years it had passed through seven editions; and such was the popularity it acquired, that it was translated into the Italian, German, and Russian languages. In France, the friends of religion hailed it as the olive branch of peace and hope—a messenger of heaven, sent forth to solace the general affliction, to heal the wounds of so many desolate hearts, after the frightful deluge of impiety which had laid waste that unfortunate country. On the other hand, the wavering in faith, and even they who had been perverted by the sophistry of the times, were drawn to a profitable investigation of religion, by the now and irresistible charms that had been thrown around it. It cannot be denied that the *Genius of Christianity* exerted a most powerful and beneficial influence in Europe for the good of religion and the improvement of literature. The eloquent Balmes has well said: "The mysterious hand which governs the universe seems to hold in reserve, for every great crisis of society, an extraordinary man... Atheism was bathing France in a sea of tears and blood. An unknown man silently traverses the ocean... returns to his native soil."... He finds there "the ruins and ashes of ancient temples devoured by the flames or destroyed by violence; the remains of a multitude of innocent victims, buried in the graves which formerly afforded an asylum to persecuted Christians. He observes, however, that something is in agitation: he sees that religion is about to redescend upon France, like consolation upon the unfortunate, or the breath of life upon a corpse. From that moment he hears on all sides a concert of celestial harmony; the inspirations of meditation and solitude revive and ferment in his great soul;

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transported out of himself, and ravished into ecstasy, he sings with a tongue of fire the glories of religion, he reveals the delicacy and beauty of the relations between religion and nature, and in surpassing language he points out to astonished men the mysterious golden chain which connects the heavens and the earth. That man was Chateaubriand."

The eloquent work here referred to must, we may easily conceive, be productive of good in any age and in any country. Although the peculiar circumstances that prompted its execution and proved so favorable to its first success have passed away, the vast amount of useful information which it embodies will always be consulted with pleasure and advantage by the scholar and the general reader; while the "vesture of beauty and holiness" which it has thrown round the Church cannot fail to be extensively instrumental in awakening a respectful attention to her indisputable claims. One of the saddest evils of our age and country is the spirit of indifferentism which infects all classes of society; and the question, among a vast number, is not what system of Christianity is true, but whether it is worth their while to make any system the subject of their serious inquiry. Such minds, wholly absorbed by the considerations of this world, would recoil from a doctrinal or theological essay with almost the same aversion as would be excited by the most nauseous medicine. But deck religious truth in the garb of fancy, attended by the muses, and dispensing blessings on every side, and the most apathetic soul will be arrested by the beautiful spectacle, as the child is attracted and won by the maternal smile. Among unbelievers and sectarians of different complexions, who discard all mysteries, who consult only their reason and feelings as the source and rule of religious belief, who look upon Catholicism as something *effete*, and unsuited to the enlightenment of the age, this work will be read with the most beneficial results. It will warm into something living, consistent, and intelligible, the cold and dreamy speculations of the rationalist; it will indicate the grand fountain-head whence flow in all their fervor and efficiency those noble sentiments which for the modern philosopher and philanthropist have but a theoretical existence. It will hold up to view the inexhaustible resources of Catholicism, in meeting all the exigencies of society, all the wants of man, and triumphantly vindicate her undoubted claims to superiority over all other systems in advancing the work of true civilization.

It was to establish this truth that Balme composed his splendid work on the *Comparative Influence of Protestantism and Catholicity*, and Digby described the *Ages of Faith*, and the *Compitum*, or *Meeting of the Ways*. These productions are of a kindred

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class with the *Genius of Christianity*, and the former embraces to a certain extent the same range of subject, having in view to display the internal evidences of Catholicity, as derived from its beneficial influence upon European civilization. But Chateaubriand was the first to enter the field against the enemies of religion, clad in that effective armor which is peculiarly adapted to the circumstances of modern times. Without pretending in the least to question the necessity or detract from the advantages of theological discussion, we are firmly convinced that the mode of argument adopted by our author is, in general, and independently of the practical character of the age in which we live, the most effectual means of obtaining for the Church that favorable consideration which will result in the recognition of her divine institution. "The foolish man hath said in his heart, there is no God." The disorder of the heart, arising partly from passion, partly from prejudice, shuts out from the mind the light of truth. Hence, whoever wins the heart to an admiration of the salutary influences which that truth has exerted in every age for the happiness of man, will have gained an essential point, and will find little difficulty in convincing the understanding, or securing a profitable attention to the grave expositions of the theologian and the controversialist.

Such were the considerations that led to the present translation of the *Genius of Christianity*. The work was presented in an English dress for the first time in England; and the same edition, reprinted in this country in 1815, would have been republished now, if it had not been discovered that the translator had taken unwarrantable liberties with the original, omitting innumerable passages and sometimes whole chapters, excluding sentences and paragraphs of the highest importance, those particularly which gave to the author's argument its peculiar force in favor of Catholicism. Such, in fact, was the number and nature of these emissions, that, with the introduction of occasional notes, they detracted, in a great measure, from the author's purpose, and gave to a latitudinarian Christianity an undue eminence, which he never contemplated. With these important exceptions, and various inaccuracies in rendering the text, the translation of Mr. Shoberl has considerable merit. In preparing the present edition of the work, we have furnished the entire matter of the original production, with the exception of two or three notes in the Appendix, which have been condensed, as being equally acceptable to the reader in that form. Nearly one hundred pages have been supplied which were never before presented to the public in English. In rendering in the text, we have examined and compared different French editions; but there is little variation between that of 1854 and

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its predecessors. Where the sense of the author appeared obscure or erroneous, we have introduced critical and explanatory notes. Those marked S and K have been retained from Mr. Shoberl's translation; those marked T were prepared for this edition. In offering this translation to the public, we take pleasure in stating that we have made a free use of that to which we have alluded, especially in the latter portion of the work. We have also consulted the translation by the Rev. E. O'Donnell, which was issued in Paris in 1854. In that edition, however, nearly one-half of the original production has been omitted, and the order of the contents has been entirely changed.

In conclusion, we present this work to the public with the hope that it may render the name of its illustrious author more extensively known among us, and may awaken a more general interest in the study of that religion which, as Montesquieu observes, "while it seems only to have in view the felicity of the other life, constitutes the happiness of this."

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Source: Chateaubriand, François-René de, *The Genius of Christianity or the Spirit and Beauty of the Christian Religion* (c1856), trad. par Charles I. White, New York, Howard Fertig, 1976, p. 5-14.