

*Christianity has retarded
the Woman's progress*



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[The work under review is from the pen of “Saladin,” pseudonym of William Stewart Ross (1844–1906).¹ It was published in two volumes by W. Stewart & Co., London, 1894. H.P. Blavatsky had a very high respect and admiration for the writer. As the two volumes of this work appeared at some interval from each other, her separate reviews were published at different times. We reprint them together, for the sake of completeness. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

Review of Vol. I

The title of the above work is scarcely suggestive of Anti-Christian polemics, despite the fact that it emanates from the pen of so determined an iconoclast as Mr. Stewart Ross. The casual reader might expect to meet with some eulogy of the fair sex, dissociated from theological considerations. Such, however, is not the case. The neat volume before us contains one of the most powerful attacks on the practical ethics of Christianity which it has ever been our lot to peruse. Mr. Ross is clearly of the opinion that a tree must be judged by its fruits, and in demolishing the romantic and chivalrous aspect of the history of woman in Christendom by the hard reality of fact and logic, he unhesitatingly condemns the whole fabric of orthodox theology as hopelessly rotten. Taking as his text the well-known, and perhaps reprehensible, statement of [173] Archdeacon Farrar² to the effect that Christianity →

¹ [William Stewart Ross was born in Kirkbean, Kirkcudbrightshire, into a Presbyterian family. At the age of 20, he began studying at Glasgow University, with the intention of entering the Church. However, he became more interested in literature, particularly the works of Robert Burns and Thomas Carlyle, and moved to London where he managed the Thomas Laurie bookshop.

In London, in 1872, Ross established his own publishing company, W. Stewart & Co., and for some years primarily issued educational works and magazines. But he also became a leading advocate of freethought, agnosticism, rationalism and secularism, and served as president of the Lambeth Radical Association.

In 1882 Ross served as co-editor with the elder Watts on the *Secular Review*, and two years later he became its sole editor and proprietor, penning many essays on secularism using the pseudonym “Saladin.” In December 1888, Ross changed the name of *Secular Review* to the *Agnostic Journal and Secular Review*, and shortly thereafter changed the name one final time to the *Agnostic Journal and Eclectic Review*. The last issue was published in June 1907, a few months after Ross’s death.

Ross wrote a number of books, including *The Flagellants* (1884), *God and his Book* (1887), *Roses and Rue* (1891), and *Woman: Her Glory and Her Shame* (in two volumes, 1894). He also penned several volumes of poetry, winning a gold medal for the best poem memorializing Robert Burns at the unveiling of a statue in 1879, and another for a poem describing a visit to the graveside of the revered Scottish poet. One of his poems, *Caractacus the Briton*, published in 1881, is noted for its refrain, “Caractacus the Briton, the bravest of the brave!”

In later years Ross was confined to bed with sclerosis, but continued to write and edit. He died in London at the age of 62 and was buried in Brookwood Cemetery, Surrey, England. — Cf. *Wikipedia*.]

² [Frederic William Farrar, 1831–1903, cleric of the Church of England, schoolteacher, and author. He was a pabbearer at the funeral of Charles Darwin in 1882. He was a member of the Cambridge Apostles secret society, the Archdeacon of Westminster from 1883 to 1894, and the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral from 1895 until his death in 1903.]

. . . has elevated the woman; it shrouds as with a halo of innocence the tender years of the child,

the author tests its validity by an appeal to church and secular history, exposing the abominations of priestly vice in the Middle Ages and ruthlessly unmasking the darker aspects of modern life. He rightly scorns to pander to a spurious sentiment of delicacy, and does not hesitate to penetrate into the very arcana of vice when the necessities of his task demand it. The prurience of the Christian Fathers, the debaucheries of Inquisitors, the shameless prostitution of “Religion” to depravity which is noticeable in ancient and even in modern times, the indirect manner in which unfortunate passages in the Bible — interpolations let us hope — have ministered to the lust of bigots and fanatics, the fatal effects of “faith” and emotionalism in worship, all these things, and many more, are dealt with in a most forcible manner. The author’s facts are unimpeachable, his criticism scathing, but the general conclusions which he draws from them are not always of a nature to command the acceptance of even the most resolute of liberal thinkers.

In his anxiety to shift the whole burden of sexual depravity of Europe on to the back of Christianity, “Saladin” extends his generalisation too freely. For the ghastly immoralities of ecclesiastical history are chargeable to individuals, not to the system itself.

For instance, when he states that:

. . . the *essential essence* of Christianity is opposed to that deliberate and judicial self-restraint which forms the barrier against licentiousness (*p. 77*),

he is, in our opinion, carried too far by the vehemence of a just revolt against the moral atrocities which have rendered theology such a mockery in the past. The “faith” to which he alludes as so pernicious to mental stability has its darker side; but it has also illumined, however irrationally, the lives of thousands of noble men and women. Similarly, in his anxiety to shift the whole burden of sexual depravity of Europe on to the back of Christianity, he extends his generalisation too freely. It has been remarked by many writers that the ghastly immoralities of ecclesiastical history are chargeable *to individuals*, not to the system itself. Vice must have had its outlet somehow, and all it needed was — opportunity. Consequently Mill¹ and others have declined to regard the vices which spring up in the course of religious history as indicative of anything more than the necessary outcome of [174] human evolution. Nations mould their religion, not *vice versa*. With the ennobling of human ideas, a gradual metamorphosis of creeds must ensue.

¹ [John Stuart Mill, 1806–1873, English philosopher, political economist, and civil servant. One of the most influential thinkers in the history of classical liberalism, he contributed widely to social theory, political theory, and political economy.]

Christianity has done nothing to exalt Woman but has, on the contrary, retarded her progress.

Consequently, instead of holding that the degradation of woman by priests and religionists is in itself a condemnation of the creed they profess, it would be more correct to put the truth thus: Christianity has done nothing to exalt woman, but has, on the contrary, *retarded her progress*. Mr. Ross' position would be, then, very difficult to



assail. If, however, he ascribes her treatment in the earlier centuries to the influence of Christianity, to what does he attribute her gradual promotion in the social scale? To the same cause, or to the slow amelioration of human knowledge and culture since the Renaissance? We question very much whether creeds are responsible for all the horrors usually ascribed to their domination. Practical life and practical belief are rather *mirrors* of a nation's intellectual status than arbitrary facts which represent independent realities. Christianity has delayed human progress, rather than introduced a new noxious agency. It has, moreover, a distinctly fair side, *viz.*: — in largely contributing to render International Law possible by cementing together the peoples of Europe. Impartial Freethinkers, such as Lecky¹ and others, have shown clearly enough that the pros and cons are balanced after all. Today, of course, the system is out of date; it has served a certain beneficial end in the economy of life, and

achieved a reputation like that of Byron's *Corsair*:

Linked with one virtue, and a thousand crimes.²

It is this tissue of a "thousand crimes" which, in our author's words, makes his task:

A hideous one but I stand in desperate conflict against overwhelming imposture and a worldful of sham and cant and falsehood . . . you may count all the real writers on the fingers of one hand, who are striving to do what I am striving to do. My purpose is too tremendous . . . for me to bathe myself in perfumes, array myself [175] with ribbons, and with a debonair smile and a light rapier, parry with the dilettante grace of a fencing master. With both hands I grasp the hilt of a claymore notched with clanging blows upon helmet and hauberk and red with the stains of battle, and thrust straight at the throat of the Old Dragon, fenced around by a hundred thousand pulpits and armed to the teeth with a panoply of lies.

¹ [William Edward Hartpole Lecky OM PC FBA, 1838–1903, Irish historian, essayist, and political theorist with Whig proclivities. His major work was an eight-volume History of England during the Eighteenth Century.

Illustration: Caricature of Lecky by "Spy" (Sir Leslie Matthew Ward, 1851–1922), published in *Vanity Fair*, 27th May 1882, under "Men of the Day No 256." The caption read: "The eighteenth century."]

² [*The Corsair: A Tale*, Canto III, Stanza xxiv, last line.]

In conclusion we need only say that the student will find much of great value in Mr. Ross' book. It is sparkling, brimful of wit and interest, and interspersed with passages of the most eloquent declamation. Altogether the author has produced a contribution to aggressive free-thought literature well worthy of his great reputation, and still greater talent.

Review of Vol. II

Christian ethics and practice are exposed and satirized with merciless severity, and the reader is confronted with a vast array of facts which show the inadequacy of present creeds to grapple with the vices and brutality of man.

In the above volume Saladin prosecutes the campaign against Christianity to which he has devoted the larger part of his literary work. Readers of *Lucifer* will recall the recent review of the previous volume of the book in these columns, and the favourable criticisms which this brilliant writer then evoked. We have now simply to endorse that verdict, and, although unable to agree with the extreme conclusions occasionally arrived at by Mr. Ross, we cannot but see in the terrible indictment before us an impeachment of Christian morality which admits of no answer. Christian ethics and Christian *practice* are exposed and satirized with merciless severity, and the reader is confronted with a vast array of facts bearing on "modern civilization" which show the *total inadequacy* of present creeds to grapple with the vices and brutality of man. *Woman* is never dull; it is, on the contrary, so sparkling and versatile as to throw a charm even over the most plain-spoken passages where English impurity is brought to light. But let no reader of a pharisaical or fastidious turn of mind peruse his work. Saladin is a pure-minded and high-souled writer, but he stops at no revelation when he intends to prove his case. The annals of vice are deliberately sifted — from the *support* [176] and *legalization of prostitution* by the English *Christian* Government in the East down to the revolting secrets of "modern Babylon" at home. The exposure is not pleasant reading, it reads far worse than anything penned by Tacitus regarding Rome vice under the emperors, but it is unfortunately true. "And yet," writes the author, after unveiling one hideous sore, "the pulpit and the religious press are possessed of sufficient ignorance [?] and effrontery to declare that Christianity has exalted the status of woman and sweetened and purified the atmosphere of social and domestic life." To writers of this sort *Woman* will prove a very efficient eye-opener.



"Why women should avoid the Church like a plague," in the same Series. — ED. PHIL.