



A Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations
Hannah Adams (1817)

Hannah Adams was a white intellectual who spent her life in Massachusetts. Religiously, she inclined to Unitarianism. In 1784, she published a pioneering one-volume encyclopedia describing religious movements from around the world, contemporary and historical, based on printed sources available to her. The work was expanded and retitled in subsequent editions; the selections presented here are from the fourth, and final, edition. While descriptions of Christian movements were predominant in every edition, the fourth edition included also articles on Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Sikhs; on traditional or indigenous religions of the Americas, Africa, China, Japan, and the Pacific islands; and on deists and atheists. In earlier editions, Adams had presented Christian movements first and separate from other religions; in the fourth edition, she arranged all the entries alphabetically, such that Christian and non-Christian movements were intermixed.

In the first selection below, taken from the book's prefatory matter, Adams explains how she has tried to accurately and impartially describe the various religious movements about which she writes. In the second selection, taken from an appendix at the end of the book, Adams speaks as a partisan for Christianity, anticipating a future day when other religions will have passed away and all peoples will have "become the subjects of Christ's universal empire."

The reader will be pleased to observe that the following rules have been carefully adhered to through the whole of this performance.

1. To avoid giving the least preference of one denomination above another, omitting those passages in the authors cited where they pass their judgment on the sentiments of which they give an account. Consequently, the making use of any such appellations as *heretics*, *schismatics*, *enthusiasts*, *fanatics*, etc., is carefully avoided.
2. To give a few of the arguments of the principal sects from their own authors, where they could be obtained.
3. To endeavor to give the sentiments of every sect in the general collective sense of that denomination.
4. To give the whole, as much as possible, in the words of the authors from which the compilation is made, and where that could not be done without too great prolixity, to take the utmost care not to misrepresent the ideas.

* * *

The diversity of sentiment among Christians has been exhibited in the preceding pages. The candid mind will not consider those various opinions as an argument against divine revelation. The truth of the sacred writings is attested by the strongest evidence, such as the miracles recorded in the New Testament; the accomplishment of the prophecies; the rapid spread of the gospel, notwithstanding the most violent opposition; the consistency of the several parts of the inspired pages with each other; the purity and perfection of the precepts of Christianity; their

agreement with the moral attributes and perfections of the Deity; and their benevolent tendency to promote the good of society and advance our present and future happiness.

Perhaps there may be as great a variety in the moral as in the physical world. From this diversity in mind, some may have a natural bias towards one religious system, and some to another. "The education of different persons," says Dr. Watts, "has a mighty influence to form their opinions and to fix their practices; and this, it must be confessed, is not in a man's own choice, but depends on the providence of the great and blessed God, the Overruler of all things." [...]

The wretched state of the world at the time of our Savior's appearance [...] evinces the necessity of the Christian dispensation. The gross superstition of the pagans, the degeneracy of the Jewish nation, the inconsistency of the ancient philosophers and their uncertainty respecting a future state, elucidate the apostle's declaration that "life and immortality are brought to light by the gospel."

It also appears [...] highly unreasonable to consider the various opinions among Christians as an objection to the truth of divine revelation. At the time of Christ's appearance, there was a variety of modes in the pagan worship and a great diversity of philosophical opinions. The Jews were divided in their opinions at the time of our Savior, and there are still some remains of the ancient sects. The preceding work further evinces that the pagan world still practice a variety of religious rites and that the Mahometans are as much divided as the Christians. Neither are those who reject revelation better agreed among themselves, for it appears that the greatest infidels which any age ever produced were divided and unsettled in their philosophical opinions. [...] Surely a difference of sentiment cannot reasonably be objected against Christians when we find the most celebrated infidels thus divided and inconsistent with themselves and each other. [...]

From the foregoing view of the various religions of the different countries of the world, it appears that the Christian religion is of very small extent, compared with the many and vast countries overspread with paganism and Mahometanism. This great and painful truth is further evidenced by the calculations which have been made of the population of the world* and the proportion of the principal religious denominations to each other.

In reviewing the history of the various denominations of Christians in past ages, humanity is deeply wounded by the intolerant spirit which has been so often exhibited by the dominant party. Till of late, attempting to suppress by persecution what were deemed erroneous opinions was judged lawful not by Catholics only, but by the Reformers, by Episcopalians, and almost all the different denominations of Dissenters. But such is the happy progress of religious liberty and toleration that, at present, almost all sects and parties of Christians disclaim the right of using coercive measures in the sacred concerns of religion.

Though the ends to be answered by divine Providence in permitting such a variety of opinions

* Mr. Cummings, in his *Geography*, estimates [...] that about one fifth part only of the human race have yet embraced the Christian religion in any of its forms.

[Footnote from the source publication. Adams is citing a popular textbook of the day, *An Introduction to Ancient and Modern Geography*, by J. A. Cummings.]

cannot be fully comprehended, yet we may be assured that they are under the direction of an all-perfect Being, who governs in infinite wisdom. [...] Why Providence has suffered the Christian religion to be hitherto confined to so small a portion of the globe is also a mystery which we cannot fathom. But we are encouraged by many prophecies in the sacred scriptures to expect a period when the gospel shall be universally extended and received with unanimity, when all superstition shall be abolished, the Jews and Gentiles unitedly become the subjects of Christ's universal empire, *and the knowledge of the Lord fill the earth, as the waters cover the sea.*

Source: Hannah Adams, *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations* [...], 4th ed. (Boston: James Eastburn & Co., 1817), unpaginated prefatory matter, 371-376, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89098851983>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Two footnotes in the source publication omitted. Paragraph breaks adjusted to keep thematically related material together. An additional sentence break inserted. Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and typography (italics) emended in line with modern American conventions. Words as words italicized; &c. spelled out as *etc.* The words *pagan* and *infidels*, inconsistently capitalized in the source publication, are consistently presented here in lowercase; *heretics*, *schismatics*, *enthusiasts*, and *fanatics* have likewise been downcased. *Christianity*, lowercase in the source, has been capitalized here for modernization and to match the source's capitalizing of *Christian*. One instance of *providence* that is lowercase in the source has been capitalized here on the premise that it is serving as a divine epithet (rather than naming a divine attribute).

This edited excerpts from Adams's book are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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