



NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

THE DIVINE

INTERPRETATION OF

SCRIPTURE:

A REPLY TO CARDINAL MANNING.

BY



Saladin,
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and Rational tares. The mentation and the aspiration of the fifteenth century were not identical with those that actuate the nineteenth. The floods of human folly have worn other channels, the currents of human tendency have torn their way through other rocks and over other shoals. The old battle-fields are deserted, and only through the mists of departed time can we descry them, with their rank grasses, broken and shapeless weapons, half-obliterated trenches, and dull mounds marking more or less dishonoured graves. The battalions have reeled and surged into other fields, and there, with other weapons and other battle-cries, the often-changing but never-ending tide of human conflict ebbs and flows. Guns are yet planted on the roof, and there is a rattle and blaze of musketry from the windows of the old half-way house between Rome and Rationalism ; but the shot and shell fall wide of the mark. Formerly, the old house was in the centre of operations ; now it is on the extreme left flank, and miles away the real conflict rages. The half-way house is tottering to its fall. The emergency to meet which it was built has passed away. Its giants are dead, its heroes are no more ; its *prestige* is over, and ICHABOD is inscribed over its gateway. A shabby despotism, three centuries ago, it modified a terrible despotism, and thereby justified its existence ; but now, Why cumbereth it the ground? Hardly taking it into account in military strategy, up on the side of the windy hill the banners wave and the troops are ranking, the forces of Rationalism and Rome, and with them and no other rests the balance between victory and defeat in the Armageddon of these latter ages.

Everywhere now Ecclesiasticism howls against "the spread of Infidelity," and everywhere Romanism is active, from

New York to Birmingham. In the latter town, the other day, a church dedicated to St. Anne was opened by his Eminence, Cardinal Manning, with all the august ceremonial of pontifical High Mass. In his subtle and able dedicatory address, his Eminence is reported to have said: "They believed all that God had revealed, unwritten and written, the old Divine traditions of the Church from the beginning—every jot and every tittle. But why did they believe this? The 'Word' in the text did not mean the Book, and they who would draw their Christianity out of the written Scripture had proved for centuries the inefficiency of that rule of faith by the multitudinous contradictions and ever-increasing diversity of the interpretation that had been put upon that Word. Without Divine certainty they could not have Divine faith, and, therefore, the wisest human critic could give him no definite certainty of the meaning of the Holy Scripture; the most learned scientific historian could not fix for him the meaning of the Word of God. No one, however pious or good; no minister of religion or priest of the Church, apart from the Divine authority of the Church itself, could venture to interpret that written word by his own light or his own discernment."

I am a soldier in the ranks of those who would face untold fatigue and peril to flesh their blades in the heart of Rome; but I heartily endorse the utterance of his Eminence in regard to the "wisest human critic" being unable to express any "definite certainty of the meaning of the Holy Scripture." So far, I, a Rationalist, am in exact accord with a Romish Cardinal. But when the learned Cardinal proceeds to say that, although the esoterics of Holy Writ are too deep for human learning, too mystical for human wisdom, they can be infallibly interpreted by "the Divine authority

of the Church itself," I join issue with him, and oppose him foot to foot and hilt to hilt. I positively and emphatically deny that the Church has, in the past, shown that it could interpret Scripture more successfully than the mere "human critic" could. Nay, my Lord Cardinal, I will refer you to only one example—*e.g.*, of how your Church interpreted a certain Scripture passage; but the example I will give is such a striking, picturesque, and conclusive one as should be able to explode forever your Church's monstrous pretensions to divinely-inspired hermeneutics. It is unfortunate, your Eminence, for you and yours that our more modern times have laid the intellectual wealth of the world's yesterday at the feet of men who have neither post nor pension from your Church. It is unfortunate for you and yours that there are men of my type, who will read and study for many years in obscurity, anxious only to find out what is true, and never once asking what is profitable; studying for no profession, hoping for no preferment; poor, but aspiring to no gain, no crozier, no cardinal's hat; but freely giving learning and time and life to the most thankless of all causes—to a cause that for independence gives you poverty, for celebrity gives you infamy. What a pity you have not still your *Index Expurgatorius* to prevent such as I from misusing the best years of their life in toiling over volumes the perusal of which can only be inimical to your hierarchy! How lamentable that you cannot now arrest pens like mine by giving those who wield them a twinge of the thumbscrew, or make the blazing fagots at the stake reduce the hand of the writer to ashes! Like its God, your Church is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever. Among the calcined bones of the mighty you would honour me by mingling those of this humble Scottish heretic and rebel, but that Protestantism

held you at bay till the party that I in some imperfect way represent grew strong; and now an enemy infinitely more terrible than Protestantism confronts you.

Your Church, my Lord Cardinal, has alone the true interpretation of Holy Scripture, has it? We shall see. You should have ceased to make such assertions when it became possible for men like me to unearth and decipher the works of such writers as Glaber, Abbo of Fleury, Gennadius, and Corodi. You will, no doubt, my Lord Cardinal, have heard of the Millenarian insanity of the tenth century, although you would undoubtedly rather that such as I had never heard of it. How excellently the "Divine authority of the Church" interpreted Revelation xx. 2-3! The binding of Satan for a thousand years your Church alleged began at the birth of Christ; so, of course, at the expiry of a thousand years from that date, Satan was to be let loose, and unutterable calamity, if not absolute annihilation, be visited upon the world. In the tenth century your Church was in full swing, with its Divine interpretations and all the rest of its monstrous jugglery; and not even one solitary bark of a heretic dog resounded through the caverns of your ecclesiastical Avernus. You had, or your annalists belie you, a perfect plethora of dirt and piety and plague and pestilence. Like rotten sheep, your ignorant and filthy dupes died off in tens of thousands; while the half-naked, vermin-eaten, and nasty—but ignorant and holy—survivors crowded into your abbeys and churches and implored God to have mercy upon them; but he would not. You showed them relics, and they wanted a bath; you treated them to the Mass, and they wanted soap; you incited them to godliness, and they wanted cleanliness. So much attention was given to dying and to seeking the kingdom of God that the wheat and corn

and barley remained unsown, or were allowed to be destroyed by blight and mildew ; and the survivors of the plague, for wild roots, had to burrow in the ground like pigs, eat rats and other vermin, and regale themselves upon diseased human flesh from the corpses of their plague-stricken dead.

In this state of affairs what did your Divine and Scripture-interpreting Church do? What wine and oil and bread and consolation did it give to the scared and famished remnant plague and pestilence had left? Your holy Bernhardt of Thuringia turned to the twentieth chapter of Revelation and preached the immediate end of the world. As the clock struck midnight on December 31st, 1000, the Devil would break his chains, and, with blood and fire and misery, make a prelude to the Day of Judgment. The clergy of your Church took up the cry of Bernhardt. It was howled from every abbey ; it was thundered from every cathedral ; and frantic monks, with cope and stole and cord, appealed in town and village and hamlet to a still more frantic populace. Portent and miracle, wraith and apparition, dark shadows on earth and blood-red signs in heaven, bore evidence to the near advent of the Day of Doom. Europe was all but ruined ; but what mattered that?—your “divine Church” was enriched. Kings and nobles rushed to the sanctuary to endow it with lands and wealth which they had won by carnage and fire. With the sword they had gained place and power by doing the work of the Devil, and now they devoted all to the service of God, since they should have to part with everything, anyhow, by the time the clock struck twelve, ringing in the awful millennium and ushering in the end of the world. Kings and nobles, whose pastime was slaughter as regarded men and lust as regarded women, in spite of the dominance of the Church, grew

suddenly penitent, and flung away the sword for the missal and abandoned the couch of the voluptuary for the monk's shirt of air. William of the Long Sword, Duke of Normandy, was fain to abandon his ducal rank and take shelter in the monkish cell. Hugh, Duke of Burgundy, was anxious to throw up all to find shelter in the monastery against the terrors of the Day of Doom; and Hugh, Count of Arles, was like-minded. The Emperor, Henry II., crownless and unkinged, presented himself at the abbey gate of St. Vanne, howling piously from the psalms: "This shall be my rest forever; here will I dwell, for I have a delight therein." Numbers of nobles left lands and castles and all to the Church and hastened to the Holy Land, barefooted, ragged, and penniless, in the cunningly Church-inspired hope that those who, at the crack of doom, were found in the sainted clime in which the Redeemer had died would have certain immunities from the horrors and terrors about to be wrecked upon the rest of the human race. Others stubbornly and desperately remained in their doomed castles and on their estates, left to barrenness and weeds, and did not impiously attempt to propitiate the vengeance of God. But the altars were loaded with, and the church floors strewn with, legal instruments, venerable parchment, and dusty vellum, representing gifts to the Church of some of the noblest estates in Europe, and thousands upon thousands of serfs and vassals. The Church took them all, just as if the Day of Judgment had not been so close at hand. The monks, Cardinal Manning, were themselves the conveyancers, and the deeds of conveyance began with the stereotyped words: "Seeing that the end of the world is now approaching, and that every day accumulates fresh miseries, I, Baron ——, for the good of my soul, give to the monastery of ——," etc. The last day of

the world was the harvest-day of the Church, and the twentieth chapter of Revelation was, for the time being, worth more than all the remainder of the Book of God. And gloriously your Church interpreted it, my Lord Cardinal, in the interests of your order. The nobles you had under your thumb by this divine gift the Church has for putting the correct meaning upon Scripture texts; and, as for the common people, they forgot all the instincts of human nature in their abject terror. They wallowed in ignorance, filth, and vermin. An eclipse of the sun became visible to the Emperor Otho's army on their march. They at once recognised in it one of the apocalyptic "signs in the sun." They were paralysed with fear. They dropped their weapons, broke their ranks, and such of the screaming and disorganised rabble as terror did not render motionless fled to the mountains, literally calling to the rocks to hide them and the hills to fall upon them.

On dragged the awful weeks—coming nearer and still nearer to the instant when heaven and earth should pass away. At length, at the end of the most terrible December the world has ever seen, came the last week of the year 1000 A.D. Then there were such agonising suspense, such paralysing fear, and such abandoned phrenzy as never before or since have cursed such masses of the race of man. Your Church, my Lord Cardinal, had indeed vindicated its claim to be "the divine interpreter of Scripture." You took up the twentieth chapter of Revelation, and, by your interpretation thereof, exalted the hierarchy and well nigh ruined the world. During this terrible week the work of the world was utterly suspended. For the ring of the anvil there was the yell of the maniac; for the whirr of the shuttle there was the shriek of the madman. Drearly rose

the sun, and drearily set in the last few wintry days before his light was to be extinguished forever. Men held their very breath in terror. Blanched white were the dark-brown locks that so lately shaded the smooth and open brow of youth. In the halls of luxury, where the arras was of the richest, where the patines were of gold, and where the air was heavy with odours, now lay the dead and dying commingled, no sexton to bury, and no thief to steal the vessels of gold, and where the air had been heavy with odours were now the filth of the living and the putrescence of the dead. Beauty was beautiful no longer, heroism was extinct, and valour was no more. The deer and the boar roamed in the greenwood unscathed. No household fires were lighted to shed a warmth through the wintry air. The wine cask was unbroached and meals were no longer prepared. Men, women, and children, of all ranks and classes, lay huddled together, clutching each other convulsively in imminent expectation of the crashing of chains that would herald the release of Satan and of the trumpet blast that should signal the end of the world. Love was banished, hate was forgotten, and terror was master of all. The thread upon the distuff remained unwound, and the sword lay rustling on the floor. Revelation xx. 3-4 had conquered. Your divine-interpreting Church, Cardinal Manning, had driven Europe frantic that her riches might be purloined as she lay in delirium.

All vocations were dead, save that of the priest. With husky voice, haggard mien, and supernatural wildness of gesticulation, the monk harangued in the market-place, and around him surged all that Terror and Death had spared. Nearer, nearer, and nearer came the end of the year, till only a few hours intervened between mankind and the Day

of Judgment. Then the remnant of human beings crushed into the churches till they were filled to suffocation. Thousands clamoured in vain for admission at the gate of convent, cathedral, and abbey. Resolved that it would be better for their souls should they perish among the ruins of the house of God, they who could not obtain admission scrambled up to the roof, and mingled their chants and wails with the roll of the organ which ascended from within. Midnight on the 31st of December was the utmost limit given for the release of Satan; but it was held that the release might take place an hour or two before night's solemn noon. The great candles of the cathedral shone under groined arch and by fluted column over the pale and upturned faces of a convulsed and motley multitude. There were no clocks; but, at regular intervals, on the great candles metal balls were fixed by inflammable strings, and as, hour after hour, the flame reached each string in succession, the ball fell into a basin-shaped gong below, with a clang that, in the breathless suspense which waited upon the burning of each string, resounded to the loftiest turret, and reverberated among the graves under the flag-stones in the aisle. One by one, an eternity of suspense between them, fell the balls into the gong, and yet the end of the world did not come, and the winter morning dawned of the 1st of January, in the year 1001. The Holy Catholic Church had indeed interpreted the Scripture—interpreted it to replenish her own coffers and augment her own power. The world slowly slunk back into its old work-a-day ways, but without taking pains to resent its having been duped and hoaxed by the unscrupulous cunning of Rome. Shame, my Lord Cardinal! Remember, you are not addressing the illiterate vassalage of the Dark Ages. Your words reach those who can criti-

cise them without favour and reject them without fear. When you would speak of your Church being the only divine interpreter of Scripture, remember the twentieth chapter of Revelation and the year 1000 A.D., and be forever dumb.

Nay, my Lord Cardinal; the pretensions of your Church are going the way of all the earth. You yet manage to hobble along on two crutches—the mental apathy and moral credulity of mankind. But the earth swings round, and the gnome casts another shadow upon the dial of Time. A race arises that cares neither for your book nor your infallible interpretation thereof. Address, if you will, the present-day spawn of the bats and owls of mediævalism; but the beams of the true sun of righteousness have now broken through the gloom of your censor smoke and your windows, dim with the effigies of saints. The perdition which has overtaken Zeus and Isis is overtaking you. Untold opulence, the romance of history, the wealth of erudition, and the subtlety of intellect are yet on your side; and I admit that even I, the “Infidel,” immeasurably more pronounced than ten thousand “Infidels” you have tortured and burnt, have some feeling of sympathy with you as, girt with the cestus of the mighty memories of two thousand years of the irrevocable Past, you stand confronting your inevitable doom from the fiat of the merciless Future. Hater as I am of tyrants and tyranny, the tears have coursed down my face as I have figured my fathers at Culloden, amid ruin and rout, riven tartan and shivered claymore, perishing in the whirlwind that swept away the “divine right of kings.” Like sympathy I extend to you and your Church, Cardinal Manning, standing between the sunset of the world’s yesterday and the dawn of the world’s to-morrow.

defending the divine right of priests. But, like a spectre of the Brocken, your towers and citadels melt away into the viewless air. You have made a darkly-interesting chapter in anthropology; but the race rises to the level of new developments and new æons, and, ere a long time pass, your censor will smoke no more, your Jesus will have taken his place with the obsolete gods, and the candles upon your altar shall burn no more forever. The same sun in the heavens that has looked down upon the waning altar-fires of the faiths of the world's hoary yesterday shall yet look down upon your altars, cold, deserted, and desolate. The altar of the future will be the concave of the sky overarching in glory the everlasting hills. The worship of the future, irrespective of teleological dogma, will be the reaching forward to stronger brain, purer morals, and a happier world. To further the advent, my Lord Cardinal, of that nobler altar and grander worship, the Freethinkers of America are met to-day on the Cassadaga heights, and they permit me thus to shake hands with them over the "misty and mournful Atlantic," and add my feeble spark to the splendour of the coming day in a land where Romanism never had the mastery—on a continent of which your Jesus never heard.

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