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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

THE

CHRISTIAN SCHEME OF REDEMPTION.

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SECULAR SOCIETY.

It is taught by believers in orthodox Christianity that about 6,000 years ago Adam and Eve fell from a state of purity and perfection by an act of transgression. That act, it is urged, involved all races of men throughout all time in depravity and punishment. It was thought necessary, therefore, that some plan should be devised whereby "fallen humanity" should be redeemed from the consequences of the disobedience said to have been committed in the garden of Eden. To obtain this redemption the Christian scheme of salvation was originated. What this scheme is has been variously explained by different schools of theologians, all of whom, however, have professed to base their explanations on Bible teachings. The Augustinian school held that mankind were doomed to hell through the fall of Adam, and that Christ's death cancelled the sin committed, and thus saved them from being utterly lost. The Calvinists believe that God foresaw that Adam would fall, and that posterity would thereby be damned, and therefore selected a few termed the elect, to be saved, while the many will be lost. Before, however, this partial salvation could obtain, it was deemed necessary that Christ's life should be sacrificed as a vicarious punishment for the misdoings of our "first parents." This belief is so unjust and inhuman in its naked form, that those who still retain it have to modify it considerably in their advocacy. If it be true that God foresaw that Adam would fall, and that posterity would be damned, should he not as a beneficent, all-powerful being have prevented the calamity altogether? or, failing in this, have included the whole human race among the "elect?" The Evangelical Christians suppose that the vicarious sufferings of Christ obtained conditional pardon. In order, however, for persons to partake of the advantages of those sufferings, they must have faith that Christ died as a substitute, that is, that the innocent was punished for the guilty. This is justice peculiar to Christianity. The Roman Catholic, while teaching the fall of man and his salvation through Christ, also teaches that none will be saved unless they accept the authority of the Church and observe her rites. This of course is priestcraft, but then what religious sect is there which has not its priests? The difference between Catholicism and Protestantism upon this point is, that while the Catholic is honest and acknowledges the necessity of a priesthood, the Protestant is dishonest in denying its right, and at the same time practising its evils. The principle in both cases is

the same, it differs only in degree. The Universalists consider that no one is damned beyond his personal sin in this world. If he be ever so vile, all evil at death departs, and he is ushered into heaven, pure and spotless. It must be very gratifying to the immoral and licentious hypocrite thus to believe that his career of debauchery will be no barrier to his admission into the celestial city. The Unitarians, rejecting all the above theories, regard the object of Christ's life, rather than his death, to be the reconciliation of man to God. Relying on such Biblical statements as "Every man shall die for his own sin;" "To punish the just is not good;" "In burnt-offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure;" they consider the popular views of the atonement fallacious. This diversity of opinion in the Christian world as to the nature and object of the scheme of redemption, indicates its perplexing character. Apart from sectarian interpretations, the Bible plan of the atonement appears to be that nearly 6,000 years ago, an all-wise, all-powerful, beneficent God created the world, and then set man in the midst of a scene, surrounded by temptations it was impossible for him to withstand; God implanted in man's breast certain desires which, as God, he must have known would produce man's ruin. A tree is then placed by God near Adam, bearing the very fruit which God must have been aware would meet those desires which he had just planted in the mind of Adam. God, all good, then makes a serpent of the worst possible kind, in order that it might be successful in tempting Adam to eat. After this, God commands Adam not to eat of the fruit under the penalty of death, knowing at the same time that Adam would eat of it and not die. God allows the serpent to succeed in his plan, and then curses the very ground for yielding the tree which he (God) had caused to grow. Not content with this, the Almighty dooms both man and woman to a life of pain and sorrow; further, he assures them that their posterity shall feel the terrible effects of their doing what it was impossible for them to avoid. At length the unchangeable God changes his mind, he will no longer commit wholesale injustice. He determines to send his Son, who is as old as himself, and therefore not his son, to die, but who is invested with immortality and therefore cannot die, to atone for wrongs which had never been committed, by people who had never been born, and who consequently could not very conveniently commit any error. As a conclusion to the whole, this all-merciful being has prepared a material fire of brimstone, to burn the immaterial souls of those who fail to see the necessity and justice of this jumble of cruelty and absurdity.

Such is the Christian scheme of redemption. And the first objection to it is that it is opposed to the attributes Christians ascribe to God. They believe, or think they believe, that the God-head is composed of three persons of one substance, power, and

eternity. On this supposition, the first person could have no virtue not possessed by the other two. Admitting, then, that infinite justice demanded that an atonement should be made to God the Father, a like plea could be urged for atonement to God the Son, and atonement to God the Holy Ghost. For as the three persons are indivisible, the "transgression" was made against all equally. But we do not read of any sacrifice being made to the last two persons in the Trinity; the redemption is therefore incomplete. Again, the three persons being one in substance, could a part be wrathful and a part merciful? The New Testament speaks of God's wrath; and it was from this that the atonement was to save us, according to the teachings of Christians, including such writers as Flavel, Wesley, and Dr. Watts. If God and Christ, however, are not distinct, the one could not be vengeful and the other forgiving at the same time. Thus this scheme robs the Trinity of the virtue of forgiveness. And really this is so. The first person demands payment before granting pardon; the second exacts belief as the condition of salvation; and the third refuses forgiveness for sin against himself under any circumstances. The same difficulty is manifested in the death of a part of the indivisible Godhead. If Christ alone died and remained lifeless in the grave for three days, he was not equal in eternity to his father; if on the other hand the whole of the Deity expired, then we have the spectacle of a dying and dead God, and the world for a time subsisting without a God to govern it. To say that it was only the manhood of Christ which suffered, is to advance another difficulty by allying humanity with divinity, thus adding a fourth part to the Trinity, and destroying the perfection of the whole. For where the human element is, there cannot be perfection. And, moreover, on the Christian theory, a mere human death was not adequate to redeem all humanity; for this, the suffering and death of a divine being were required.

It will be seen that there were two principal causes which were supposed to render the scheme of redemption necessary. First, the alleged sin on the part of Adam, and secondly the enmity between God and man which is stated to have resulted from the partaking of the fruit. Now, were these causes real? Was there any sin in the case, and did enmity exist? Samuel Taylor Coleridge says, "Sin must be a state originaunt in the will of the actor, entirely independent of circumstances extrinsic of that will." Evidently there was no such sin as this on Adam's part, for the Bible shows that he was not independent of external circumstances, but rather that it was by the force of those circumstances that he was impelled to do what he did. Can it be deemed sinful to do that which cannot be avoided? As to enmity, if God exists and he created man, he either created the enmity or else man acquired it apart from him. God could not have created it; for being infinitely good, how could he have implanted that

which was bad in his children? Man could not have acquired it apart from God, inasmuch as there is nothing but what is from God.

It may here be suggested that if this act of redemption was necessary, it should have been made immediately after Adam's transgression, so as to have prevented a single generation going to the grave with the curse of original sin unremoved. But according to Bible chronology, God was not disposed to show his fatherly care too soon. He allowed 4,000 years to elapse, and numbers of generations not only to live and die, but to run riot in all descriptions of ignorance and iniquity, ere the tardy reparation was made. Why was this? Did it take God—to whom consideration of time is said to be as nothing—4,000 years to determine how to get out of the difficulty which he himself had created? This cannot be, for according to the Bible, God had the whole plan of the atonement arranged before Adam's fall. Was it that Christ hesitated to obey his Father's decree? If no man could be saved except those who believed in Christ, what has become of those millions of human beings who passed away prior to his birth? and what will be the fate of those now living, who have never heard and never will hear the name of Jesus of Nazareth? Were the former saved by anticipation, and will the latter be excused on account of their ignorance? If so, where was the necessity of the atonement at all? If men could enter heaven without the crucifixion, then Christ need not have suffered at any period. His sorrow, agony, and bloody sweat, might all have been avoided, and numbers of saints might have died quietly in their beds, instead of enduring tortures at the stake or on the rack. Besides, if ignorance of this scheme will save from damnation, is it not useless and cruel to send missionaries to the heathens with the "glad tidings?" Let them not know of it, and they cannot be punished for rejecting it; inform them of it, and their eternal happiness becomes at least doubtful, for their diversity of organization and education ensures that not all can accept it as true. As already stated, if the death of Christ was absolutely necessary to redeem the world, it was unjust upon the part of God to permit 4,000 years to elapse before the people had the benefit of his atoning blood. If on the other hand, the crucifixion of the Saviour was not required to restore a lost race, then it was a most cruel and unnatural act for a father to give his son to a rabble mob to be tortured and executed, amidst the exultation of a disappointed and fanatical people. Again, if it was desirable and praiseworthy upon the part of God to send his Son to save the world from eternal damnation, how is it that when he did arrive, so many nations were kept in ignorance of his mission and purpose? Even the Jews, God's peculiar people, had no knowledge whatever that incarnate deity was about to expire on the cross. If the regeneration of the world was really the object of Christ, how much better

would it have been if, instead of ascending to heaven to sit at the right hand of his Father, he had remained on earth, preaching practical truths, and showing by constant personal example how the world could be rescued from that moral and intellectual darkness and despair, to which 4,000 years of a corrupted theology had reduced it. This would have been the *true* salvation, the *best* redemption, and the *only* atonement necessary for the welfare and progress of mankind.

The scheme of redemption is also objectionable, because of its essential injustice in teaching that the innocent was made to suffer for the guilty. Justice has been defined to "consist in rendering to every one according to his moral deserts; good if he be good, and evil if evil; for the purpose of promoting goodness and discouraging guilt." If Christ, therefore, was without sin, as stated in the New Testament, was it not unjust to punish him for the misdoings of others? Suppose a parent who has seven children, six of whom are bad, and the seventh good. Would it be deemed right on the part of this parent to punish his innocent child because the other children were disobedient? Such injustice would ensure for its perpetrator emphatic condemnation. If a judge, knowingly, were to sentence to death an innocent man as the substitute for a criminal, his judicial position would be forfeited and his conduct regarded with horror and detestation. No government would retain the confidence of the people of this country, if it were to introduce a measure enacting that all priests should die a lingering death in prison, simply because their predecessors, in outbursts of religious fury, violated the law of right and equality, and defiled the earth with human slaughter. Recognising this indignant condemnation by human nature of one of the leading principles of the atonement doctrine, can we consistently ascribe an act to God which his creatures would blush to perform? Besides, the doctrine manifests cruelty in proclaiming that, although we had no control over the deeds of Adam, still we are all "born in sin and shapened in iniquity." The moment we enter this life, in our infantile helplessness, our childish simplicity, our youthful innocence, we are the victims of the wrath of God. Granting that in the earliest period of the world's history a sin was committed, will that justify a wrong being wrought upon us? are we on that account to be banished from eternal bliss, to be condemned to eternal agony? If so, the conduct of God to man is fiendishly cruel and unjust; and we, though unable to resist his power, must rightly scorn and detest his evil nature.

It is frequently asserted by defenders of the atonement doctrine, that in this world, in the course of nature, the innocent suffer for the guilty. As for instance, in the case of drunkards and debauchees, who transmit disease and debility to their offspring. The assertion, however, is groundless. The children referred to do not suffer *for*, but *through* the vices of their parents. Moreover, in

such suffering, there is no punishment. The children of criminal parents are not charged with guilt simply on account of their birth. But, according to orthodoxy, Christ was punished for the sins of the world, which were expressly imputed to him.

The inconsistency of this scheme of redemption is as palpable as are its cruelty and injustice. We are told that the death of Christ was ordained before the foundation of the world; and we are likewise told that man was created perfect and immortal. The inconsistency here is so glaring, that it is really marvellous how it can pass undetected. If it was ordained that the Son of God should die for the redemption of the world, the transgressions of Adam and Eve were only a part of God's plan, and certainly did not merit any curse but rather a blessing. To urge that man had a free will does not remove the difficulty. If man had any choice in the matter, and supposing he had chosen differently, God's plans would have been thwarted. The scheme implies that man was so made, that he could follow but one course, the course which should ultimately lead to the sacrifice of Christ. Thus the fourth Gospel tells us that Christ knew from the beginning that Judas would betray him. Further, if the mission of Christ on earth would have been fruitless unless he was crucified, then, instead of denouncing unfortunate Judas, he should be considered by Christians as a hero worthy of having a monument erected to his memory. Now, if the death of Christ was pre-ordained, so also was "the fall of man" for the one depends upon the other. "For as in Adam all died, so in Christ shall all be made alive." If this be true, it was impossible for man to be created perfect. But the very fact of man's "falling," or giving way to temptation, must be a proof of his imperfection. Again, notwithstanding that Christ is represented as having made a full and complete satisfaction for all sin, that we may secure a share of what Christ died for, we are to lead a life of sacrifice and penitence, whether it agrees with our honest opinion or not. If Christ *did* pay the debt for our sin, why should we be called upon to make a second payment? Another inconsistency is to be found between the statement that God sent his Son to save the whole world, and the conduct of Christ while on earth. If universal salvation was the object of Christ's advent among men, his mission has been a decided failure. Christ, however, never attempted to achieve this result. While thousands were dying without the knowledge of the Messiah, he, instead of going among the vast heathen nations, imparting what information he had, remained hurling bitter reproaches at the Pharisees in his own insignificant country. But Christ did not come to save the whole world; his own words clearly and unmistakably deny the supposition. His mission was to the Jews and the Jews alone. And even among them his labours were not crowned with success. Following Christ to the close of his career, have we not a "sorry sight" in beholding the culmination of inconsistency as manifested in the garden

of Gethsemane? Here we see a man, who all his life had preached the utility of a faith, which it was said not only afforded consolation through life, but was also capable of robbing death of its terrors; yet when the hour of death approached, when the period had arrived for him to prove to the world the efficacy of this faith, we find him tortured with agony and racked with fear. In that scene, which was not only to rivet the attention of an amazed multitude, but also to consecrate a life of divinity—a scene which was not only to be the great climax to the scheme of redemption, but was also to remain a lasting monument of love to a wondering people; at this moment when the hopes of his believers were about to be sealed, when he should have maintained his position bravely and nobly, we find him weak, vacillating, and in bitter despair praying that the cup might pass from him. Where do we find consistency in this doctrine of atonement? Is it in the conduct of its hero, who came to die for man, yet when about to fulfil his destiny, implored to be allowed to evade the task? Is it in the assertion that finite man had committed an infinite offence against an infinite God, and that therefore an infinite atonement was necessary, while we nevertheless learn that it was only the manhood of Christ that suffered? If this be correct, it was after all but a finite atonement. Is it in teaching that Christ came as a voluntary sacrifice, yet was betrayed by man? Is it in condemning the majority of mankind because they are fulfilling the decree of their God? Is it in beholding a God of love and kindness inflicting unnecessary torture upon his sensitive Son? Is it in our being informed by the voice of Christ that by asking he could obtain any amount of assistance from his Father, while yet we find that his fervent supplications were unheeded and his dying prayers unanswered? Finally, is it in contemplating the mercy of a God, who having placed his Son on a felon's cross, allows that Son to yield up a sorrowful life, after uttering unavailing reproaches in those memorable words, "My God! my God! why hast thou forsaken me?"

Of what use has the Christian scheme of Redemption been to man? Has it abolished the supposed effects of Adam's fall? Has it improved the condition of the people? Have we less pain and misery, less folly and ignorance, less crime and injustice through the advent of Christ? Are Christians more valiant and virtuous than were the ancient Romans? Has the erection of the Cross frightened the miscreant or appalled the tyrant? Has the voice from the height of Calvary reached the captive, and set the slave free? Has it destroyed error and cemented truth? Has it dethroned wrong and established right? In short, has it abolished ignorance, crime, and oppression, and made knowledge, virtue, and justice permanent? Has it produced such conditions of society as render it impossible for man to be depraved or poor? In the powerful words of the great Frenchman: "Two thousand

years have passed, during which entire nations have knelt before a gibbet, adoring in the sufferer who gave himself up to death—the Saviour of mankind. And yet what slavery still! What lepers in our moral world! What unfortunate beings in the visible and feeling world! What triumphant iniquity, what tyranny enjoying at its ease the scandal of its own impunity! The Saviour has come—whence comes salvation?”

Once impress the minds of the people with the idea that this scheme of Redemption is true, and they are then made ready recipients for a gloomy faith. If we lament the poverty and wretchedness we behold, we are told that Deity has pronounced that “the poor shall never cease out of the land.” If we seek to remove the sorrow and despair existing around us, we are reminded that they were “appointed curses to the sons of Adam.” If we work to improve our condition, we are taught that we should learn to be content, to remain “in that state of life in which it has pleased God to call us.” When we endeavour to improve our minds, to cultivate our intellects, we come in contact with the statement, that “we are of ourselves unable to do any good thing.” If we seek to promote the happiness of others, we are assured that faith in Christ is of more importance than labour for man. Talk of redemption!—what can redeem us from all this wrong, all this misappropriation, and all this folly? For nearly 1800 years have Christians preached “Christ and him crucified” to a mis-guided and wronged world. We of the nineteenth century have but a vague idea of the extent of the influence this doctrine once exercised over the minds of its believers. Although this erroneous faith is now giving way, there are still thousands and myriads who, despite all its inconsistency and injustice, sincerely believe that man’s eternal happiness depends upon the belief in the efficacy of the blood said to have been shed on Mount Calvary. This is the doctrine which has so permeated the minds of orthodox Christians, stifling their reason and perverting their judgment, till they cherish the forlorn delusion that the reasonings of philosophers, the enchantments of poets, and the struggles of patriots, are all worse than useless unless purified by the “atoning blood of the Lamb.” It is against such delusions that we protest. It is this doctrine which fosters the erroneous and retarding belief, that every thought which does not aspire to the throne of Christ, every action which is not sanctioned by his “scheme of salvation,” every motive which does not proceed from a love to the “Saviour of the world,” should be discouraged as antagonistic to our real progress in life.

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