

THEOLOGICAL PRESUMPTION.

AN OPEN LETTER

TO

THE REV. DR. R. F. BURNS, OF HALIFAX, N.S.

—BY—

CHARLES WATTS

Editor of "Secular Thought."

Author of "Teachings of Secularism Compared with Orthodox Christianity," "Evolution and Special Creation," "Secularism: Constructive and Destructive," "Glory of Unbelief," "Saints and Sinners: Which?" "Bible Morality," "Christianity: Its Origin, Nature and Influence," "Agnosticism and Christian Theism: Which is the More Reasonable?" "Reply to Father Lambert," "The Superstition of the Christian Sunday: A Plea for Liberty and Justice," "The Horrors of the French Revolution," &c., &c.

In this Letter the following subjects are dealt with: 1. Why do the Clergy Avoid Debate? 2. The Position of Agnosticism Toward Christianity. 3. Freethought and Men of Science. 4. The Difference between Facts and Opinions. 5. Christ and Heroism. 6. Christianity and Slavery.

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THEOLOGICAL PRESUMPTION.

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE REV. DR. R. F. BURNS, OF HALIFAX, N.S.

REVEREND SIR:—In No. 1 of *The Theologue*, a magazine issued apparently under the auspices of the Presbyterian College at Halifax, N.S., you have published a lengthy article purporting to be a reply to "A Canadian Agnostic," although it is evidently intended to refer to myself. You commence by saying:—"For between two and three years past the Maritime Provinces have received periodical visits from the chief champion of Agnosticism in Canada." Is it not rather surprising that a reverend gentleman of your position, influence, and ability should have remained so long silent and allowed this "Canadian Agnostic" to have made his "periodical visits," and to have given utterance to what you are pleased to term "unsupported statements and pitiful perversions," without seeking to reply to him face to face, correcting the mischief which you suppose that he wrought upon the minds of his hearers? Is it not your duty as a Christian minister to "defend the faith" in the presence of those before whom it is attacked? Are you not aware that the Bible enjoins, and that your Master and his chief successor, St. Paul, set you the example, to "Debate thy cause with thy neighbour himself"? (Prov. 25 : 9). Do we not read in the "Word of God," "Come now and let us reason together" (Isaiah 1 : 18); also, that very early in his career Jesus was found in the temple in the midst of doctors, "both hearing them and asking them questions," and that St. Paul "disputed in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him, and spake boldly for the space of three months" (Acts 17 : 17 ; 19 : 8). Pardon me, Reverend Sir, for asking what reason you assign for avoiding the injunction of

your "sacred book," and the "sublime example" set you by Christ and St. Paul? Are we to regard such neglect upon your part as an illustration of practical Christianity? How many Secular halls have you gone into and "spake boldly" with Agnostics? Is your absence from these "temples and synagogues" to be ascribed to the fact that you have discovered that such "disputing" would not be profitable to your cause, or that for personal reasons you have found that in this, as in many other instances, it is not always wise for rev. gentlemen to attempt in this practical age to emulate their Lord and Master? While your discretion in thus "avoiding the enemy" may indicate your sagacity, it does not show that you have too much confidence in the faith you preach. Rest assured, Rev. Sir, that principles or systems that will not stand the test of honest criticism in fair and gentlemanly debate, have but little claim upon the intelligence of the present day.

Probably you may urge that you *have* come to the rescue of the Faith in the article you have penned in *The Theologue*. But surely that mode of warfare can scarcely be looked upon as being either very safe or very heroic. You virtually admit, in the article in question, that you base your comments upon mere hearsay of what your opponent is supposed to have said at periods varying from one to three years ago, and you deal with the "reports" of his statements where he is unable to correct or answer you. Moreover, the probability is that but few of your readers ever heard one of his lectures, and therefore they have only an *ex parte* account from which to judge. Now, does it not occur to you that it would have been far more heroic and "Christ-like" in you, and would have given greater satisfaction to the public, had you attended the "Canadian Agnostic's" lectures and availed yourself of the opportunity always afforded on such occasions to reply there and then? In that case, "the bane and antidote" would both have been offered to those present, allowing them to decide for themselves which was the bane and which was the antidote. If, however, for some reason this arrangement was not convenient to you, why did you omit to

accept his invitation, which was published more than once in the Halifax papers, to a public debate? Can it be that you fail to realise the force of Milton's opinion that truth will never suffer in its conflict with error? The policy adopted by the orthodox clergy of shunning public controversy may please the older members of the Churches, who unfortunately have been trained to accept their views upon trust, but it will never satisfy the young and intelligent minds seeking to know the reason why they should endorse the faith submitted to them. Blind belief and passive submission belong to the theological darkness of the past, not to the intellectual light of the present.

Your article appears to me to be remarkable for its theological presumption and groundless allegations. I wish you to particularly understand that I do not use the term presumption in any offensive sense whatever. It is not my custom or desire to knowingly initiate the very objectionable feature, too prevalent in some discussions, of unnecessarily wounding the feelings of those who differ from me. Such conduct too often inflames the passions but seldom wins the assent of reason. All controversy should be governed by intellectual discrimination, not by angry disputation. Truth should invariably be the goal in such conflicts, and the best and most dignified means of reaching it is calm and kind investigation. By applying the word presumption to your article I wish it to be understood that in it you make statements upon mere supposition and that you substitute opinions for facts. In no one instance throughout the article do you deign to make an effort to prove what you assert, but you urge with marvellous confidence your allegations as if they were beyond question. This, I regret to say, is a common practice with theologians; they seldom acquaint themselves with the real nature of the opinions or principles they assail, and thus they frequently mislead their hearers or readers with unfair conclusions drawn from false premises. You say: "Very pertinent and pointed was the reply of Sir Isaac Newton to the astronomer Haley when he spouted infidelity in his presence. 'Sir,' said that Prince of philosophers, 'you have never studied these sub-

jects and I have. Do not disgrace yourself as a philosopher by presuming to judge on questions you have never examined.'” If this anecdote is a fair reflex of Newton’s mind it is clear that his theology, which, by the way, was exceedingly small from an orthodox point of view, did not protect him from a fair share of egotism and conceit. This incident, however, which you have selected, has a most significant meaning in reference to your article in *The Theologue*, for, evidently, “you have not studied” with too great care the subjects upon which you therein write. For instance, where did you obtain from Agnostic philosophy a justification for your assertion that Agnosticism was “a system of accumulated negation,” and that it taught, “we are sure only of what is present and visible?” This, Sir, is a pure theological fiction, caused by an utter lack of knowledge upon the part of the assertor as to the facts about which he was writing.

You seem to entirely misunderstand our position as Secularists and Agnostics in reference to Christianity. It may, therefore, be of some service to inform you in a few words what that position really is. There are three principal modes of criticising the modern Orthodox pretensions set forth on behalf of popular Christianity. First, it is alleged such pretensions are entirely destitute of truth, and that they have been of no service whatever to mankind. This view we certainly cannot endorse. Many of the superstitions of the world have been allied with some fact, and have in their exercise upon the minds of a portion of their devotees served, for a time no doubt, a useful purpose. In the second place, certain opponents of Christianity regard it as being deserving of immediate extinction. This, in our opinion, is unjust to its adherents, who have as much right to possess what they hold to be true as we have to entertain views which we believe to be correct. Theological faiths should be supplanted by intellectual growth, not crushed by dogmatic force. The third and, probably, the most sensible and fair mode of dealing with Christianity is to regard it as not being the only system of truth; as not having had a special origin; as not being suited to all minds; as having fulfilled its original purpose, and as possess-

ing no claim of absolute domination. This is the true position of Secularism and of Agnosticism towards popular orthodoxy. Such a position is based upon the voice of history, the law of mental science, and the philosophy of the true liberty of thought.

Having dealt with these introductory points, the main issues in your article are reached, and here your "sins of omission and of commission" come glaringly to view.

Your "sins of omission" consist mainly in your not even making the attempt to prove what you so readily assert in your article, and not in any way verifying your numerous allegations. You reproduce old statements that have been refuted again and again, and leave your innocent readers to suppose that what is advanced are undisputed facts. Such an orthodox procedure may be expected from the pulpit, but it is sadly out of place in a magazine, particularly where you profess to answer an Agnostic opponent. You apparently penned the article under the impression that your Christian friends would be satisfied, without evidence of the correctness of your position, and therefore it is reasonable to suppose that your desire was to convince those who are adverse to your theological views. But surely you are not so oblivious of the intellectual activity of the times as not to recognise that for you to succeed in this laudable effort something more than vague assertion is necessary. This, Sir, is not an age of mere blind belief or of passive submission,—at least, it is not so outside the church. Facts are required, and evidence is necessary, when dealing with the Agnostic position, and it is your neglect in supplying these very essentials that constitutes, in my estimation, your "sins of omission."

You accuse "A Canadian Agnostic" of misapplying the term Freethought to certain "leaders in the departments of Science and Statesmanship, of Literature and the Arts," but you do not furnish a single verification of your charge. What "names" of "leaders" has the Agnostic claimed as belonging to the Freethought ranks who were not Freethinkers? You omit to mention one in support of your statement. True, you say, "Some

of the names noted, e.g., Darwin, Huxley, Martineau (both Harriet and James), cannot be included in the Infidel class." If, Sir, by the term "Infidel" you mean a disbeliever in orthodox Christianity, then undoubtedly the four persons whose names you mention were "Infidels" in the fullest sense of the word. Is it not a fact, when in 1859 Darwin published his "Origin of Species," and when in 1877 he issued his "Descent of Man," that he was branded by both the press and the pulpit as an "Infidel"?

Even such a high-class journal as the *Saturday Review* said of the assault Darwinism made upon religion:—"It tends to trench upon the territory of established religious belief," and the *Quarterly Review* exclaimed that the teachings of Darwin were "absolutely incompatible, not only with single expressions in the word of God on that subject of natural science with which it is not immediately concerned, but . . . with the whole representation of that moral and spiritual condition of man which is its proper subject matter." Dr. Andrew Dickson White, in his "Warfare of Science" (p. 149,) quotes Bishop Cummings, who wrote: "Christians should resist to the last Darwinism; for that it is evidently contrary to Scripture." The Dr. also refers (p. 147,) to the Rev. Dr. Hodge as saying, Darwinism "is a denial of every article of the Christian faith." In 1871 the Rev. W. Mitchell, Vice-President of the Victoria Institute, wrote: "Any theory which comes in with an attempt to ignore design as manifested in God's creation, is a theory, I say, which attempts to dethrone God. This the theory of Darwin does endeavour to do . . . So far as I can understand the arguments of Mr. Darwin, they have simply been an endeavour to eject out of the idea of evolution the personal work of the deity." Another amiable minister of the "Gospel of love" in 1882 went so far as to say that Charles Darwin, who had then recently died, "was burning in hell." Do you not know, Sir, that both Darwin and Huxley openly and frankly avowed themselves Agnostics? Professor Huxley was the originator of the term as it is at present understood, and he is now one of its ablest exponents. Freethought is an essential element in Agnosticism, and, there-

fore, was it not quite right to name these two scientists as Free-thinkers? You utterly ignore these facts, which either shows that you were not acquainted with them, or else that you purposely omitted to mention them. In either case the omission is not calculated to enhance your reputation as a trustworthy student and expositor of history.

You mention Sir Isaac Newton, Locke, Goethe, Carlyle and others to substantiate your views upon Christianity and the Bible; yet it is to be regretted that you make no effort to vindicate in what way either of those writers refutes the position taken upon these subjects by "A Canadian Agnostic." Surely you do not contend that those "burning and shining lights" regarded orthodox Christianity as being perfect or the Bible as an infallible book. The whole tenor of Locke's philosophy is based on knowledge, while theological teachings are founded on faith. Newton contended that the universe was guided by natural law, and not as your system alleges, by the alleged supernatural. As for Carlyle, Professor Tyndall and Moncure Conway have recently demonstrated beyond all reasonable doubt that the "Sage of Chelsea" was a thorough sceptic to the orthodox religion.

It is clear from your article that you are under the delusion that "A Canadian Agnostic" sees no good in the Bible, while the fact is that he recognises much in that book which is true and useful; but he also finds much therein that is erroneous, and which would, if acted upon, be injurious both to individual and national progress. Forgive me, Rev. Sir, if I am unable to accept the Queen of England, or "the dying words of Sir Walter Scott" as authorities upon the true value of the Bible. The English throne or a death bed are not the best places from which to obtain efficient and impartial evidence to justify claims that are contradicted by investigations made at the seats of learning by such men as Davidson, Jones, Westcott and the author of "Supernatural Religion," while they were in health and possessing mental vigour. It is upon the candid researches of scholars like these that Freethinkers rely for the facts as to the history, nature and worth of the Bible. If it be true that Walter Scott

whispered just before his death, "Bring me *the Book*," meaning the Bible, he did no more than probably a devout believer in the Vedas, the Zendavesta or the Koran would have done under similar circumstances. But, again, you omit to do the very thing which it was necessary you should have done in your case,—namely, to show in what possible manner such a request could prove that your Bible was superior to all other existing books.

You appear to attach too much importance to the opinions of eminent men without first ascertaining upon what grounds such opinions are formed. This is a grave omission upon the part of a rev. gentleman in your position. Of course every person has a right to entertain his or her opinion, but its real value can only be estimated by discovering its relation to facts. Moreover, when you cite opinions in support of your contentions it is due to the cause of truth that your citations should, so far as they affect the questions at issue, be given fairly and in full. This you have not done in your article. For instance, in reference to your testimony to the character of Christ, you only produce partial statements and thereby cause an erroneous conclusion to be arrived at. Take as an illustration of the truth of my charge the following passage from your article: "Men the reverse of friendly to Christianity, as we understand it, such as Strauss, Theodore Parker, Renan, and Rousseau, have endorsed Richter's judgment on Jesus, 'He is the purest among the mighty, the mightiest among the pure.'" Now, Sir, you ought to know that, as you have put these words, they are likely to mislead your readers. Not one of the four men you have quoted "endorsed" what you teach from your pulpit as to the character and mission of Christ. Why did you not state that Rousseau's "testimony" was put into the mouth of his "Vicar of Savoy," who subsequently adds in reference to the Gospel containing the supposed sayings and doings of Christ, "Nevertheless this same gospel is full of incredible things, things which contradict reason, and which it is impossible for any sensible man to conceive or admit." You might also have added that Renan in his "Life of Jesus" says that: Christ had "no knowledge of the general conditions

of the world" (p. 78); he was unacquainted with science, "believed in the devil, and that diseases were the work of demons" (pp. 79-80); he was "harsh" towards his family, and was "no philosopher" (pp. 81-83); he "went to excess" (p. 174); he "aimed less at logical conviction than at enthusiasm;" "sometimes his intolerance of all opposition led him to acts inexplicable and apparently absurd" (pp. 274, 275); and "Bitterness and reproach became more and more manifest in his heart" (p. 278).

I have now sufficiently supplied your omissions to enable a better opportunity for a just judgment to be formed as to the worth of the opinions of your witnesses upon the character of Christ. I would not have you mistake my objections to omissions. I grant that at times it may be right, nay necessary, to omit certain things, but the sin comes in when persons are misled by the omissions as to the facts of the matter under consideration. Such is the great drawback pertaining to a large portion of your article. It bears the semblance more of special pleading, than a candid statement of the whole truth. It reads like the production of the partial theologian, instead of the work of a just and equitable reasoner.

Your article is so replete with inaccurate statements, bold assertions and erroneous conclusions, that it would occupy more space than I have allowed myself to deal with all of your "sins of commission." A few instances, however, will suffice to show your lack of historical precision and logical deduction.

You say that George Washington declared, "It is impossible to govern the world without God," and you refer to him as if he were a Christian, whereas you should know that he was a Deist and did not in any way accept orthodox Christianity. The God in whom Washington believed was certainly not the Bible Deity, and his religion was far more Secular than it was theological.

You next insinuate that I slander the character of Christ. Now, Sir, to slander is to utter that which is false and malicious-which I have never done in reference to Christ. Judging from his alleged biographies, I admit that he possessed some excellent traits of character, and I applaud his strong denunciation of

certain evils of his day. Regarding him as one possessing but limited education, surrounded by unfavourable influences for intellectual acquirements, belonging to a family not very remarkable for literary culture, retaining many of the failings of his progenitors, and having but little care for the world or the things of the world, there is much to admire in the life and conduct of Jesus. But when he is raised upon a pinnacle of greatness, as an exemplar of virtue and wisdom, surpassing the production of any age or country, being equal to God himself, he is then exalted to a position which, in my opinion, he does not merit, and which deprives him of that credit which otherwise he would be entitled to. True, I cannot endorse your unsupported assertion that Christ was perfect and that he "died the death of a god," for if your teaching be correct, he came on earth with a mission to perform, a part of which was to die on the Cross; yet, when the time arrived for his destiny to be fulfilled, he sought to avoid his fate, and shrank from that death which was said to give life to a fallen world. So overwhelmed was he with grief and anxiety of mind, that he "began to be sorrowful and very heavy." "My soul," he exclaimed, "is sorrowful even unto death." At last, overcome with grief, he implores his father to rescue him from the death which was then awaiting him. If Christ knew in three days he should rise again; that his death was to be little more than a sleep of a few hours' duration; if he were conscious that ultimately he should triumph over death, wherefore all this trouble and mental suffering?

In reference to the statement of "A Canadian Agnostic" that Christianity is not original you exclaim: "He however took good care not to attempt showing it." If you will read my pamphlet on "Christianity: its Origin, Nature, and Influence," you will find that I *did* attempt to show it; and if you require additional proof it is only for you to accept an invitation, which I now offer you, to discuss the claims of Christianity either upon the platform or through the pages of *The Theologue*, where your article appeared, and in SECULAR THOUGHT.

In speaking of Christ you remark he "imperceptibly drew all

classes of men to him—lifted them up from the horrible pit in which they were imbedded, into heavenly places, till poverty gave place to comfort, intellectual degradation to intellectual development." This statement is almost an unpardonable sin upon the part of a scholar who should know that "all classes of men" never were drawn to Christ either in the past or at the present time. Even the Rev. Dr. A. Burns, of Hamilton, Ont., admits: "No dialectical skill, nor witchery of logic or rhetoric, can justify the attitude of the church toward the nine hundred millions who have yet to hear the first Christian sermon. On what principle can the Church affirm that Christianity is for the healing of the nations? Do Christians believe that? Could they make the sceptic believe that they were sincere?" As to your allegation that comfort and intellectual development replaced poverty and degradation under the influence of the church, history records the very opposite as being the fact; poverty and submission are the essential teachings ascribed to Christ, and during the greater part of seventeen hundred years of Christian rule the masses throughout Christendom were the victims of want, misery, ignorance, and mental degradation. If you read Professor Draper's "Conflict between Religion and Science," and "The History of European Morals," by Lecky, you will discover that for centuries, when Christianity was paramount and unrestrained, there was "A night of mental and moral darkness," as recorded by Lecky, who further adds: "Nearly all the greatest intellectual achievements of the last three centuries have been preceded and prepared by the growth of Scepticism. . . . The splendid discoveries of physical science would have been impossible but for the scientific scepticisms of the school of Bacon. . . . Not till the education of Europe passed from the monasteries to the universities; not till Mohammedan science and classical Freethought and industrial independence broke the sceptre of the Church, did the intellectual revival of Europe begin."

Equally reprehensible is it on your part to allege that the Church has been opposed to slavery and that "its complete sup-

pression is due mainly to the operation of Christian influences." It would be almost impossible for a more groundless assertion than this to be uttered; and if such reckless writing is to be taken as a fair sample of the historical knowledge possessed by the clergymen of Halifax, no marvel that they avoid debate and publish their perversions of facts where no correction can be given. It is thus that theological presumption thrives and orthodox errors are perpetuated. The truth is that slavery is a Bible institution, that while some professed Christians opposed the crime it was fostered by the Church, and many of those who condemned its cruelty and injustice were designated by Christians as "Infidels." Lecky and Gibbon have shown that the condition of slaves was, in some instances, better before than it was after the introduction of Christianity. Prior to Christianity many of the slaves had political power, they were educated, and allowed to mix in the domestic circles of their masters, but subsequent to the Christian advent the fate of the slave was far more ev ere; hence, Lecky observes, "The slave code of imperial Rome compares not unfavourably with those of some Christian countries." ("Hist. of Morals," Vol. I, p. 327.) The Council of Laodicea actually interdicted slaves from Church communion without the consent of their masters. The Council of Orleans (541) ordered that the descendants of slave parents might be captured and replaced in the servile condition of their ancestors. The Council of Toledo (633) forbade Bishops to liberate slaves belonging to the Church. Jews having made fortunes by slave-dealing, the Council of Rheims and Toledo both prohibited the selling of Christian slaves except to Christians. Slavery laws were also passed by the Council of Pavia (1082) and the Latern Council (1179). During all those ages, priests, abbots and bishops held slaves. The Abbey of St. Germain de Pres owned 80,000 slaves, and the Abbey of St. Martin de Tours 20,000. Let me suggest that you carefully read that excellent work: "Acts of the Anti-Slavery Apostles," by Parker Pillsbury, and "The American Churches the Bulwarks of American Slavery," by James G. Birney, and you will then learn how the Churches op-

posed the abolition of the slave trade. It is stated in "The Life and Times of Garrison" that at a convention held in May, 1841, Mr. Garrison proposed: "That among the responsible classes in the non-slaveholding States, in regard to the existence of slavery, the religious professors, and especially the clergy, stand wickedly pre-eminent, and ought to be unsparingly exposed and reproved before all the people." In a recent editorial in *Voice* (N.Y.) appears the following: "Even the powerful East New York M. E. Conference publicly reprimanded five of its members, one of whom was the late Rev. Dr. Curry, for the sin of attending an Abolition meeting addressed by Wendell Phillips! This is the way Mr. Phillips found it necessary to lash the hesitating, time-serving clergy of Boston in his speech on the surrender of Sims in 1852: 'I do not forget that the Church all the while this melancholy scene was passing [the surrender of the fugitive slave Sims] stood by and upheld a merciless people in the execution of an inhuman law, accepted the barbarity and baptised it Christian duty.'" Theodore Parker said that if the whole American Church had "dropped through the Continent and disappeared altogether, the anti-slavery cause would have been further on." (His Works, Vol. 6, p. 233). He pointed out that no Church ever issued a single tract among all its thousands, against property in human flesh and blood; and that 80,000 slaves were owned by Presbyterians, 225,000 by Baptists, and 250,000 by Methodists. Even Wilberforce himself declared that the American Episcopal Church "raises no voice against the predominant evil; she palliates it in theory, and in practice she shares in it. The mildest and most conscientious of the bishops of the South are slaveholders themselves."

Your identifying Secularism with "Robert Elsmere" and calling it the "Gospel of Despair" is evidence that you do not understand what Secular philosophy really is. It is not pretended that "Robert Elsmere" was a Secularist. Permit me to remind you that Secular principles enable a man to live a noble and a happy life and die a contented and peaceful death, with the belief that if there be another existence or a continuation of the

present one, he is safe to realise all its advantages. With the Secularist there is no despair, no fear of hell with its inhuman tortures, but the highest consolation born of confidence in the result of meaning well and of doing well.

I have now pointed out enough of your sins of omission and of commission to exhibit to the candid reader how recklessly you have written upon matters to which you clearly have not given much thought and attention. In conclusion allow me to express a sincere hope that in future you will seek to learn the facts of anything you oppose before hastily condemning it, and that thereby you may avoid violating the Bible command not to "bear false witness against thy neighbour."

CHARLES WATTS.

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