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THE ULTIMATE AUTHORITY

IN

MATTERS OF FAITH.



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THERE are few of us, who have ventured to think on matters of faith, that have not had to deplore the religious trammels and prejudices of our early religious education; if, indeed, that can be called education which most industriously stores the mind with unintelligible dogma, and the imagination with unnatural mystery; whilst it suppresses with utmost care the soul's longings for light, and forbids inquiry upon topics that most seriously affect our common humanity.

There ought to be no subject more enticing to pleasant and instructive colloquial intercourse than that which is most intimately interwoven with human duty and human happiness. Religion is the very core of life; and, however closely related may be the numberless subjects that awaken human interest, at best they are but collateral to this. Yet, whilst all other topics may be freely discussed without exciting angry passions, or personal hate, it is just here where discussion becomes painfully exciting, and difference of opinion intolerable. Perhaps there can be no severer condemnation of existing religious organisations than this common intolerance of all inquiry beyond a certain prescribed limit. Within a certain charmed circle you may walk freely; but any wanderings without this circle meet with religious, and social, and material penalties, designed to bring the offender back, and often effectual to this issue.

One would think that they who can so readily

unite to blacken an offending brother, would show the most loving unity among themselves—that all who call themselves after Christ would exhibit towards each other the gentleness and the love of their Divine Master! Yet “no combatants are stiffer.” The Unitarians say, “So unanswerably evident is the Unitarian scheme, that he who will not believe it does not believe the scriptures, and is a real infidel.” (Bible Christ.) “The Trinity (says Lindsey), is expressly contrary to above 2,000 texts in the Old, and above 1,000 in the New Testament.” Whilst Jortin says, “The Trinity is one of the clearest, as well as one of the most decisively scripture doctrines in the world; and that the famous Postel has shown that there are 11,000 proofs of the Trinity in the Old Testament.” Dr. South says, “The Unitarians are impious blasphemers, whose infamous pedigree runs back from wretch to wretch, in a direct line to the devil himself.” Lindsey says, “It is just as reasonable, and not so mischievous, to believe in Transubstantiation as to believe in the Trinity.”

Eusebius says, “The idea of a God-man is monstrous,”—and Belsham says, “The miraculous conception is a fiction as absurd as that of Jupiter and Danæ.” Yet the Protestant sects accept the former doctrine, and no one can be a Romanist unless he believe the latter.

Horne says “that the whole scheme of Redemption by Christ is founded upon the doctrine of the *fall of man*, and must stand or fall with it.” Fellowes and Wright call this doctrine “an impious, absurd, and unscriptural fiction; which impugns the perfection of the deity in the creation of man.”

Most sects declare the necessity of *some* sacraments; all denounce those which they reject. The Quakers accept none. To the Protestant, Romish worship is idolatry; and the Roman consigns the Protestant to hell. The excellent Gilbert Wakefield vindicated the

entire abandonment of public worship on scriptural principles. Sir Thomas More says, "the time will come when men will account no more of prayer than they do of their old shoes."

Archdeacon Jortin says of the Calvinists, "It is a system consisting of human creatures without liberty, doctrine without sense, faith without reason, and a God without mercy." Dean Close responds, "that Arminianism is delusive, dangerous, and ruinous to immortal souls." And a Unitarian discourse on Priestley declares both Calvinism and Arminianism "to be mischievous compounds of impiety and idolatry." Whilst Archbishop Magee denounces the Unitarian system as "embracing the most daring impieties that ever disgraced the name of Christianity," and declares that "if Unitarianism be true, Christianity is an imposture."

A little book, 'Divine Truth,' says the Methodists "are misled fanatics, alienated from all knowledge of the true God." A late Bishop of London ('Letters on Dissent') says, "Dissenters are actuated by the devil, and have the curse of God resting heavily on them all." Canons V. and VII. of the Church of England denounce all Dissenters "as accursed, devoted to the devil, and separated from Christ." And the dissenting 'Christian Observer' declares the Church of England to be "an obstacle to the progress of truth and holiness in the land; that it destroys more souls than it saves; and that its end is most devoutly to be wished for by every lover of God and man."

Bishop Magee—not to be outdone by his ancestors—says, "I say there are men now serving their term of penal servitude for fraud and conspiracy, who were guilty of less deliberate fraud, and less odious conspiracy, than the fraud and conspiracy of those men who make a merchandise of the cure of souls. This, I say, is a practice which makes the church stink in

the nostrils of many who might otherwise be her supporters."

Our church friends have now a newspaper to support each party in the church, and a weekly budget of very delectable extracts may be made from these papers, showing how, even in the same church, "*Christians love one another.*" There is only one point about which they can all agree, and that is to denounce and blacken, with every damning epithet they can devise, that advancing fraction, lying within and without our church organizations, who have thought themselves out of *all* dogmatic chains, and who can see in a righteous life the fulfilment of all claims, human and divine.

History has given us the successive appearance of religious reformers; and he who looks carefully at the teaching of these reformers will see a striking likeness pervades them all. The assumption of a special divine authority has necessarily given force to these teachings, and a foundation to the religious systems built upon them. And in the study of each it is interesting to note how gradually and apparently easily the various priesthoods, whose authority these teachings were designed to upset, have appropriated them to their own purposes, and overlaid them with a mass of their own dogmas, superstitions, and corruptions, until their original simplicity and truth have been all but lost. The fundamental tendency of nearly all religious reforms has been to counteract sacerdotal power, and whatever good they have done in the world has been by virtue of the simple truths they have taught, and in spite of the priestly influences that have beset them. And there are few thoughts sadder than the reflection, how much of the good, which these special revivals of divine light were designed to effect, has been checked and counteracted by priestly ambition, sacerdotal power, and dogmatic corruption.

The *Zend Avesta* of the Persians; the *Vedic Deva* of the Hindu; the Confucius of China; the Jesus of the Jews; the Mohammed of the Turks; and, after the suppression of light by Rome, our own Wycliffe, Huss and Jerome of central Europe, and Savonarola of Italy, the Reformers; and yet more recently, Spinoza, Swedenborg, and Wesley; have all claimed a divine commission or a divine sanction. And to each and all of them we may make like concessions—that all of Truth embodied in their teaching came from God. The mistake, partly theirs and partly ours, has been, to suppose that *all* they taught was true, and to corrupt and crystallize their teaching into a hard and fast code, to which, with more or less of subsequent distortion, or overlying dogma, we ask all mankind to bow down in humble submission. Nowhere else has the instinctive conservatism and ignorance of our nature—the co-agent of priestly and baronial ambition—been so mischievous as here.

The existing authorities for nearly all religious organisations are Sacred Books, either as interpreted by the church, or with more or less of private interpretation; and the direct authority of the church itself. But when we come to inquire as to what sacred books are canonical, we find these have all been fixed *by* the church; so that these become, after all, only another form of church authority. It is amusing to notice how different books of the Old and New Testaments have been proscribed by one council or decree, and restored by another; how obscure the origin of many books, and how slight the evidence on which their authority is based; how the council of Laodicea (340-50) differs from the councils of Carthage (397) and Florence (1439); how the canon of the Donatists (329) declares sundry Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles to be canonical, whilst Eusebius (340) pronounces them spurious; how many of the dogmas of the church have finally been declared true

and authoritative by the narrowest majorities. It is painful to read of the differences of religious opinion held by the different organisations of the Christian Church from the earliest days; of the pride, rivalry, hypocrisy, and schism, which largely incited the persecution of Dioclesian (284); led Constantine (324), after passing the Milan Edict, to strive by imperial patronage for something like uniformity; and drove the philosophic and excellent Julian (351) back into idolatry. And it is yet more painful to reflect that the religious writings of an obscure and barbarous age—writings which, however valuable, and they are so valuable that I would be the last to lose them: however beautiful; and they are some of them so beautiful that they claim our highest admiration, and excite our best emotions: which yet are so crowded with errors of fact and moral distortions, and so evidently belong almost wholly to legendary literature:— I say it is excessively painful and humiliating to feel that these have been vested with an authority which, although wholly human, and constituted by an intensely corrupt church, are made to thrust aside all future emanations of divine light; and are, by almost every church organisation in this enlightened age (!) declared canonical, and professedly made the chief basis of church union. One who thinks at all upon the foundations of his faith, is apt to think with contempt of the spiritual slavery and moral thoughtlessness which submits so willingly to these priestly assumptions; and to scorn the trammels of oligarchic assumption and insolence on the one hand, and the puerile servility of our churches and peoples on the other.

Grasping the fact that truth must be as invariable, as immutable, as the source whence alone it comes, and constituting themselves the judges of what *is* truth, dogmatic churches must needs be persecuting; and it could be easily shown that they have been persecuting, just as they have been dogmatic, and have obtained

civil power to enforce their dogmas. Without the aid of governments this persecution must needs have been limited to social and moral pressure; but with this aid it has been extended to property, liberty, and life, and the history of our *Christian Church* even—the church of Him who never taught a dogma, and whose fiercest denunciations were hurled against those who did—the church of Him whose religion was most emphatically a religion of peace, of love, of good works—the church which shamelessly takes His name even, has its history written in blood. It is absolutely shocking to feel that the most horrible crimes which stain the history of the Christian era have been perpetrated in the name of, and for the honour of, Christ. Thank God! the day is coming—perhaps quickly—when civil powers will no longer lend their aid to this persecuting tendency. And thank God also! the progress of science and the spread of knowledge promise sooner or later to emancipate society from the oppressive influences of dogmatic religious authority.

Is it *possible* to get rid of the difficulties and dangers that beset dogmatic religion? I think it is. The field of human knowledge is widening rapidly. We cannot prosecute inquiry into any part of this field without at once finding ourselves *vis-à-vis* with *Law*. Turn where we may, law reigns supreme, and demands from us unqualified obedience. Do we forget her claims, or attempt to thwart her? She smiles benignantly, and simply says—*suffer*. There is no escape here. All created matter, organic or inorganic, has sprung into existence by her mandate, and is ordered by her direction. Forces are in constant action, producing, modifying, decomposing, recomposing, in infinite variety; and yet all in exact legal order. So certain does the investigator in science feel of this, that should he discover any deviation

from expected results, he at once looks for the action of some unobserved force to account for it. Whether we lose ourselves in speculating on the infinitudes of space and time—marvel at the revelations of the telescope in astronomy—or gaze with intensest curiosity through the microscope at the perfection and beauty of the foraminifera, or diatomacæ, we everywhere note the impress of *Law*, and the absolute subjection of matter to her rule. Throughout the lower organised forms obedience is the sequence of an invariable instinct; and it would not be easy to show that any creature has been invested with the power to disobey, and with its consequent responsibility till we get to man. It matters little how man came into existence, whether by evolution or by a “*jump*.” But it does matter *where* he is, *what* he is, and *why* he is here. Placed in a world crowded with phenomena, which he alone of all organised beings has power to observe, to examine, to understand, and to enjoy; possessed of a mind capable of illimitable development, and of illimitable knowledge; inspired with an emotional nature, susceptible of the tenderest sympathy, unbounded benevolence, the strictest justice, and profoundest reverence; it is the most rational of thoughts that his mental and emotional being should find its highest exercise, its most refined enjoyment, in asking Nature to reveal her secrets; and in seeking to know what is his relation to them; and that he should look for that perennial happiness for which he is so admirably constituted, and for which he is so evidently designed, in yielding a *loving, reverential* obedience to those laws which affect his being.

Summarily, then, I lay down the following propositions as the basis of a scientific religion, *i.e.*,—a religion based on the knowable instead of the unknowable—a religion, therefore, that can no more admit of doubt than the science of astronomy, or of physiology—a religion of fact, the details of which

may be discussed with no more animosity than are those of geology, or philology—a religion that teaches the one grand lesson which Solomon taught of old, “that righteousness exalteth a nation.”

Before I state these propositions, it may help to a better apprehension of what is meant by the term Law, if I give the following definition from Mr. John Stuart Mill :—“All phenomena, without exception, are governed by invariable laws, with which no volition, either natural or supernatural, interferes.”

FIRST PROPOSITION.—*There is no authority but Law.* Law may be classified as follows :—

- (a.) Law is physical, affecting man in relation to external nature.
- (b.) Law is social, affecting man in relation to his fellow.
- (c.) Law is moral, affecting man in relation to the motives which govern his actions.

Whether or no there should be a fourth head—spiritual—I am unable to determine; but it seems to me that the third head (c), may be made to embrace all those phenomena of our being which are the noblest stamp of our humanity, and the source of our highest happiness;—which affect our inmost consciousness of a divine origin, and provoke the most ecstatic joy;—which arouse our warmest sympathies, and sanction our holiest affections. If these may not be included in the term moral, then I would range them under a fourth head—spiritual.

SECOND PROPOSITION.—*There is no religion but obedience.* Obedience may be ranged under the same three heads, thus :—

- (a.) Obedience to all the laws that affect our physical life.
- (b.) Obedience to all the laws that affect our social life.
- (c.) Obedience to all the laws that affect our moral or spiritual life.

THIRD PROPOSITION.—*There is no reward but the natural sequence to obedience.* Rewards may be classified under the same three heads as above.

FOURTH PROPOSITION.—*There is no punishment but the natural sequence to disobedience.* Punishments may be classified under the same three heads as above.

The readers of this paper must pardon the crude form in which these propositions are put before them. For many years I have held to the design of placing them more elaborately before the public, but the daily and imperious tasks of a laborious life have kept this purpose in abeyance. Nor would they now see the light in this form, but that they were thus hastily thrown together for discussion in a small social club, one of the members of which suggested that the paper should be placed in the hands of Mr. Scott. Should any of Mr. Scott's readers deem them worthy of criticism, I shall be pleased to receive such criticism, even if adverse; as I hold that the rectification of erroneous thought is best effected by knowing how our thoughts look to other minds.

T. W., F.G.S.

