

Second Edition, Revised and Enlarged.

THE
GLORY OF UNBELIEF.

—BY—

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"Bible Morality," "Christianity: Its Origin, Nature and
Influence," "Agnosticism and Christian Theism:
Which is the More Reasonable?" "Reply to
Father Lambert," Etc., Etc.*

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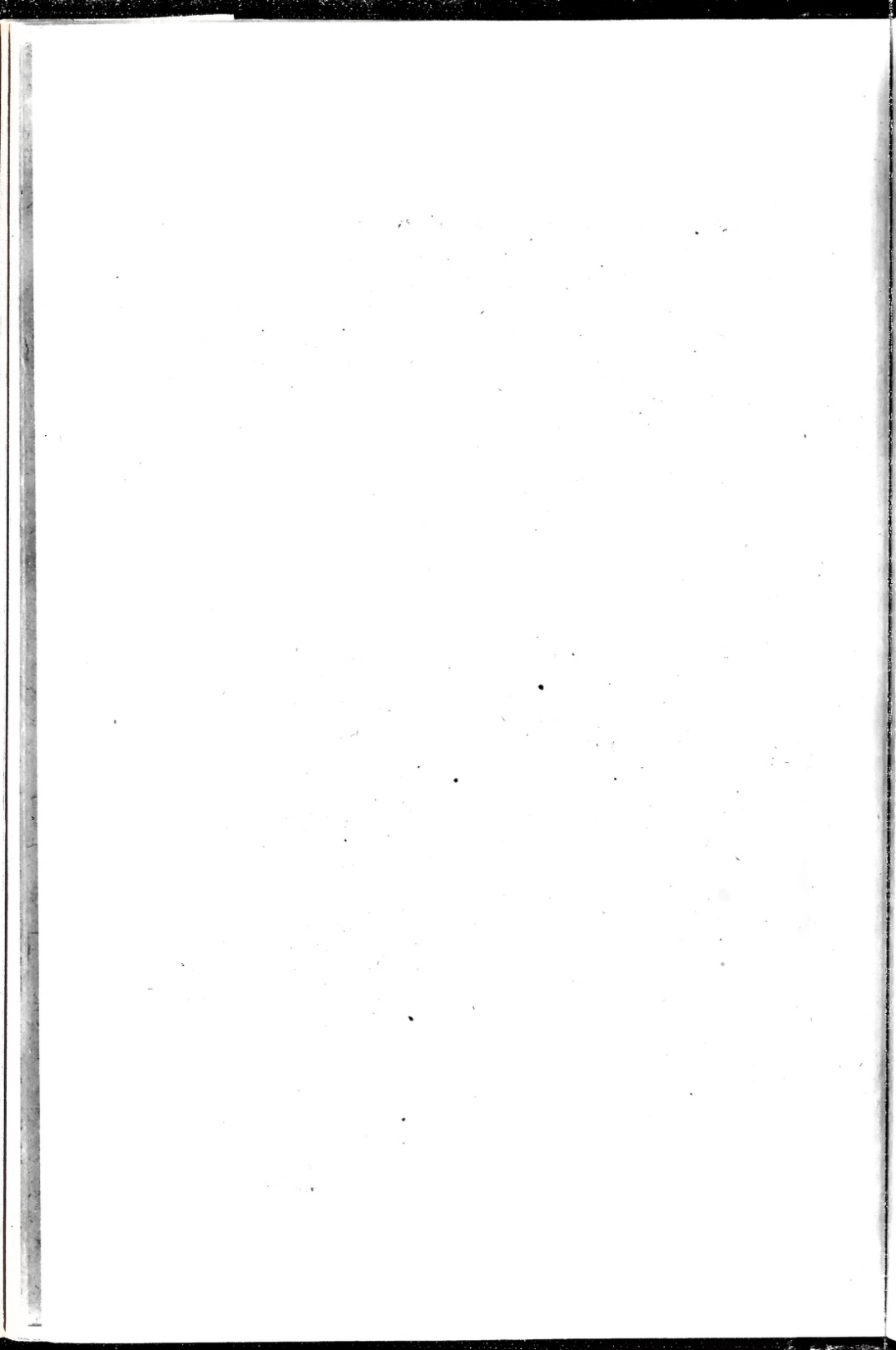
Wherein does the Glory of Unbelief Consist? Unbelief Wide-spread
amongst all Classes. What is Unbelief? Its True Nature Defined.
Can it be Dispensed With? The Advantages of Unbelief. What
It has Done for the World.

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THE GLORY OF UNBELIEF

THE Glory of Unbelief is a phrase the relevancy of which many persons will at first fail to recognize. It may be thought that but little glory can surround that which has too frequently been associated with obloquy and persecution. Yet a little reflection will bring to view the fact that, allied with unbelief, there have been a fidelity of conviction, a grandeur of conduct, and a brilliancy of action that add a splendour and a lasting honour to the fame of Unbelievers in all ages and in every clime. These are the reformers of the world who have aspired to the true glory spoken of by Pliny, which consists in having done something worth the writing, having written something worth the reading, and having made the world better and happier through having lived in it. The Glory of Unbelief consists in its being the emancipator of the human mind, the liberator of human thought, and the precursor of all advanced civilization.

Physical slavery, from its very nature, has been a curse to humanity, an injustice to the poor slave, and a disgrace to the upholders of the inhuman traffic. For centuries this crying evil was perpetuated through a devout belief that slavery was sanctioned by a divine providence. When the period of practical unbelief dawned emancipation followed, men condemned serfdom and refused to believe in its theological justification. A similar process has been observed in reference to intellectual bondage, which for ages proved a nightmare to the human mind, depriving society of the advantages of freedom of thought and liberty of speech. For generations the claims of ecclesiastical supremacy and priestly domination enslaved the intellect of the race, but with the advent of unbelief these chains were snapped asunder and proportionately mental freedom was the result.

Unbelief is the basis of all Secular philosophy. So long as people maintain a blind belief in the teachings of the past, so long as their minds are fettered by the decrees of Councils and the dogmas and creeds of the Church, so long will the development of Secular philosophy be retarded. Let, however, disbelief in ancient errors be supplanted by the belief in modern truth and Secular progress will thereby be promoted.

The fact that Unbelief extensively exists among all classes of society is beyond reasonable doubt. It is prominent in our politics, in our poesy, in our philosophy, and in the various scientific expositions of the present day. It dominates the press, it agitates the pulpit, and it permeates our national seats of learning. As the Rev. Daniel Moore in "The Age and the Gospels" admits (pp. 10-14): "The tendencies to scepticism at the present day show themselves more or less in every direction." And the Rev. Dr. Herbert Vaughan, in his pamphlet on "Popular Education in England," written in 1868, observes (p. 53):—

"The most thorough, the most logical, and the most distinct school opposed to us is that of the Secularists. It would be vain to close our eyes to the fact that their numbers are large and rapidly increasing."

Referring to the progress of Unbelief in the English Universities, the *Westminster Review* for October, 1860, remarks:—

"Few, perhaps, are aware how far the decay of belief extends beneath those walls. . . 'Smouldering scepticism,' indeed! When they are honeycombed with disbelief, running through every phase, from mystical interpretation to utter atheism. Professors, tutors, fellows, and pupils are conscious of this widespread doubt." "It must be a profound evil," continues the writer, "that all thinking men should reject the national religion." . . . "The newspaper, the review, the tale by every fireside, is written almost exclusively by men who have long ceased to believe. So also the school-book, the text-book, the manuals for study of youth and manhood, the whole mental food of the day; science, history, morals, and politics, poetry, fiction and essay; the very lesson of the school, the very sermon from the pulpit."

This testimony, recorded some years since, has been more than ever confirmed within the last two decades. Go into what society we may; move in what circle of life we will; Unbelief, either active or dormant, confronts us on every side. The clergy contemplate this sceptical progress, while they acknowledge their inability to "stem the tide of modern scepticism."

While there can be no reasonable doubt as to the rapid increase of unbelief in all phases of modern life, differences of opinion may obtain as to the nature and authority of this unbelief. For instance, it may be asked, Can unbelief have a philosophy? According to the majority of men who have been trained in what is termed orthodoxy, and who profess to accept the popular teachings of the Christian faith, the answer would be a most emphatic negative. But the impartial observer of the development of modern thought will doubtless think otherwise, and consider that he has ample reasons for the conclusion at which he has arrived. If there is a philosophy of belief, why should there not be a philosophy of unbelief? The one may be true and the other false, still both may be formulated in philosophic terms. Unbelief has been so long branded as a crime, and so persistently looked upon as a sin against God and as an enemy to all human society, that the world has come largely to argue that it has no philosophic basis. Ever and anon it is being declared from the thousands of pulpits in the land that unbelief is the great bane of the age, and that what mankind needs is more faith in dogmas, at which an orthodox preacher himself declared, "Reason stands aghast and Faith herself is half confounded." Unbelief is not only condemned as being a crime, but it is pronounced as the worst of crimes. The Rev. C. H. Spurgeon, who is deemed by most persons as being no mean authority on orthodox questions, exclaims in pious fervour: "Talk of decrees, I will tell you of a decree, 'He that believeth not shall be damned.' That is a decree and statute that can never change. Be as good as you please, be as moral as you can, be as honest as you will, walk as uprightly as you may; there stands the unchangeable threatening, 'He that believeth not shall be damned.'" This is a sample of orthodox teaching in Christian England in this glorious nineteenth century—this age of progress, of civilization and culture. The unbeliever is viewed as a man who voluntarily or wilfully rejects the light of truth, who clings to error knowing it to be evil, and who consequently deserves no mercy of any God, and no consideration on the part of his fellow man. The very name Unbeliever or Sceptic is looked upon as a byword or

reproach; and the term Infidel, with many people, has a more horrible meaning than that of thief or murderer. To quote again from Mr. Spurgeon: "Could you take murder and blasphemy and lust and adultery and fornication, and everything that is vile, and unite them into one vast globe of black corruption, they would not equal the sin of unbelief. This is the monarch sin, the quintessence of guilt, the mixture of the venom of all crimes, the dregs of the mine of Gomorrah; it is the A 1 sin, the masterpiece of Satan, the chief work of the Devil." Unbelief is a sort of intellectual bugbear by which the simple-minded are held in the worst kind of slavery—that of intellectual bondage. Whenever a man begins to think differently from the Church a hue-and-cry of "Infidelity" is raised against him, and many are compelled, if they would preserve their positions in business and retain the good opinion of their fellow men, to retrace their footsteps and enter again the fold of believers, where doubt comes not and where enquiry has no place. For let a man be guided by the dogmas of antiquity, declare that reason is a blind guide and logic a weapon of the Devil; let him denounce with all the power he can command the great and illustrious men of the earth who have doubted the various theologies of the world, and such a man's respectability is safe in this world, and his salvation is regarded as being secured in the next. "Only believe," says the poet of Methodism—

"Only believe, your sins forgiven;
Only believe, and yours is heaven."

No one can believe everything, and some must consequently be unbelievers in all that which does not fall within the range of his or her thought. Want of faith, therefore, so far from being criminal, is a necessary condition of the human mind. No one can escape it, do what he may. The Christian is an unbeliever to the Mohammedan, the Buddhist, the Parsee, and other religious devotees, as they are all unbelievers to him and to each other. The question here is not which of these systems, or whether any of them, is true; but the point to be observed is that the advocate of each disbelieves in the dogma of the other, showing that unbelief is a necessity, since the various faiths are all in

some respects antagonistic. The Agnostic is, of course, an unbeliever; but is any Christian minister in the world less so? As the great Lord Shaftesbury once remarked: "The best Christian in the world, who, being destitute of the means of certainty, depends only on history and traditions for his belief in these particulars, is at best but a Sceptic Christian." The fact is, both the Agnostic and the Christian disbelieve in what the other teaches. Why, then, does the Christian consider himself justified in applying to the Agnostic an epithet which is used in an offensive sense, and resent the same epithet when applied to himself? The Christian, no doubt, will reply that his opinions are true, and those of the Agnostic false. But that is just the point in dispute and has no right to be assumed; and besides, might not the Agnostic justify the use of the word in the same way?

Before unbelief, even in religion, can be dispensed with advantageously—and even then, perhaps, it could not rationally be discarded—three qualifications must be shown to be possessed by the believer who talks in the language of ordinary Christian men. First, he must be infallible; secondly, he must be strictly honest, for infallibility does not necessarily imply honesty, and thirdly, his system must be perfect. In the absence of any one of these, he may mislead those who listen to and follow his teaching. And no man can possibly have a right to proclaim a system, which he demands to have accepted under pain of penalties in this world, and worse penalties in some world to come, unless he is prepared with demonstrative proof that he and his system are possessed of these three qualifications. With regard to the first no man can profess seriously to claim infallibility but the Pope of Rome; and his claim is not only not attempted to be made good, but we are told that it must be accepted without any proof whatever. Besides, half the Christians themselves not only dispute this claim, but denounce it in language as strong as that which they apply to unbelievers. In fact, infallibility can only exist in connection with Omniscience, because to be certain that one could have made no mistake it is essential that he should have a perfect knowledge of everything that is in any and every part of the universe. If there be any one fact or circumstance with which

he is unacquainted, this very fact or circumstance may contain an additional truth not present to his mind, which, if known, would considerably modify existing views.

The Protestant, however, does not even pretend to claim infallibility, and, therefore, quite unconsciously, although very rationally, foregoes a great part of his authority. With him the certainty of being right is transferred to some extent from the individual to the system, and hence, although personally he lays no claim to being infallible, he still demands implicit faith in his teachings. Infallibility in his case is not in his own mind, nor in the head of the Church, but in his text-book. The Bible, he declares, cannot err, although he can. But, even if this claim were established, it would not be sufficient, since it is not required as a substitute for personal infallibility, but in addition to it. An infallible book would be of little value without an infallible interpreter, because a million different infallible minds will deduce a million different conclusions, nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine of them being erroneous—and, perhaps, the other one also—which multiplies the chances of error so extensively that the alleged infallibility disappears. But to claim infallibility for the Bible is really to claim it for the writers of the various books which make up that volume, and the same arguments hold good against its possession by them as by the Pope of Rome or any other human being. Even supposing that the infallibility of the original version of the Bible were conceded, nothing would thereby be gained, since such an infallible original is no longer in existence. The volume that we have is simply a translation from the Greek executed by fallible, erring men. Thus the first qualification necessary to the disposal of unbelief we find to be absent. The second is that such teachers must be honest. It is only stating a well-known truism to say that all men are not honest, particularly in theological matters. Insincerity is the great curse of the Church, too many of its members endeavouring to make people think they believe creeds and doctrines in which, in reality, they have no practical faith whatever. Unless, therefore, we could be quite certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, as to the conscientious honesty

of the infallible teacher, even his infallibility would prove of no avail. In business matters men always endeavour to act upon the principle that honesty is the most important element in life. They will not, as a rule, trust a dollar in the hands of another person, unless thoroughly convinced both of his honesty and of his capability to comply with the terms of the agreement made. Yet these same men will stake their all in what they term hereafter—the supposed eternal welfare of their souls—on the *ipse dixit* of a priest or minister, without any guarantee of his honesty or competence to perform his brilliant promises. Truly man is a remarkable being, and, under the influence of theology, his ways are marvellously strange and past finding out. The very course which he applauds in secular transactions he not only ignores in religious proceedings, but adopts the very opposite. And yet we are told that the two lines of conduct—secular and religious—are harmonious. In spite of all reckless condemnation to the contrary, unbelief is a necessity of the human mind, to escape which is altogether impossible.

There is but one state of mind in which it may be said unbelief can have but little or no place, and that is in a condition of total ignorance. Perfect knowledge would, of course, remove all unbelief of truth; but even with it there would be unbelief as regards error. But, as this condition is unattainable, it need not be discussed. Total ignorance does not disbelieve, because there is, in that case, nothing present to the mind in reference to which unbelief can be exercised. This will go a long way to explain the fact that, in times of supreme ignorance, unbelief was comparatively unknown. Priestcraft held its sway, mental stagnation obtained, and men and women were blind believers in, and followers of, the then prevailing errors. But the moment progress, from the condition of ignorance, commenced, new forms of thought became present to the mind, new opinions were perceived, new theories sprang up, investigation took place, and unbelief became a necessary consequent. And this belief will be sure to increase with increasing knowledge. In childhood the first impressions we receive we naturally enough imagine to be indisputably correct, whether in religion, in philosophy, or in the

ordinary commonplace affairs of life. The first impressions as to religion and to philosophy we receive from our parents or teachers, and hence tradition frequently deceives us. As Dryden says:—

“By education most have been misled,
So we believe because we so were bred ;
The priest continues what the nurse began,
And thus the boy imposes on the man.”

In the morning of existence theories in abundance crowd in upon the mind, the major part of them only to be subsequently dismissed as untenable, and we become, perforce of necessity, unbelievers to much that is presented to the mind. Each individual will probably accept some different theory to the others ; but all will be unbelievers in those notions which have been rejected. Much that comes before us has to be rejected as utterly untenable, and we are unbelievers, whether we will or no. We shall, of course, not all arrive at the same views ; but that will make no difference to the fact of our unbelief, since each will disbelieve that which does not accord with his own deductions ; and hence he becomes an unbeliever in all that is opposed to the conclusions at which he has arrived. This unbelief will deepen with increasing knowledge, because, the more we know, the greater the variety of the theories that will present themselves to the mind, and the larger, therefore, the number of these that will have to be rejected. It will follow, as a necessary consequence, that the unbelief will be commensurate with the knowledge possessed. It is quite possible that some truth may be rejected by a man as error ; but that does not affect the question under discussion. The real position is that unbelief in the abstract is a necessity of the constitution of the human mind, and the more the mind is instructed and cultivated, the more extensive will be the unbelief. Thus Scepticism arises from the very nature of things, and has its foundation in the universal mentality of the race ; and instead of deploring this fact, it is one that should be rejoiced at, because it is a safeguard against error ; it stimulates and enriches human thought, and ennobles the intellectual character of mankind. As Tennyson writes:—

“There is more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.”

Seeing that there is so much that must come before the human mind to be at once dismissed, and that so many various and conflicting theories will present themselves before the intellect of every person who thinks upon ever so limited a scale, the greater portion of which will doubtless have to be rejected, our duty in regard to the matter is as evident as the sun at noonday. Truth is a gem of which all men are professedly in search, and all are obligated to discover and take hold of as much of it as possible; and the only way in which this can be done is by rejecting the error,—or that which appears to the searcher to be such—for his own intellectual powers are the only tests which he can apply to ascertain what is truth and what is falsehood. Hence he must reject that which appears to him to be irrational, and thus so far he becomes an unbeliever. If it is said that this unbelief refers only to error, the question will arise, What is error? For is it not clear that, as no two minds are constituted alike, and as no two persons can possibly follow out, in every particular and in precisely the same manner, the same line of thought and investigation, the conclusions reached cannot be the same always in the case of different individuals? It is possible that all will discover some truth; but truth, like man, is many-sided; and, hence, some things which seem phases of truth to one man will be classed with error by another. Free-thought teaches the great fundamental truth—namely, that man has an absolute right to think freely, unfettered by tradition and uncontrolled by creeds and dogmas. This is the essence of all true thinking; for no one can think successfully in shackles, and truth can never be properly reached while thought is in chains. Protestantism boasts that it not only allows the right of private judgment, but that such right is its cardinal principle and watchword. Now, true private judgment means the right to arrive at any opinion which can be legitimately reached by the laws of thought and the canons of logic, or the term is a misleading misnomer. It was the violation of this principle that

made the conduct of the Protestant reformers so thoroughly inconsistent. They robbed private judgment of its real essence by compelling its conclusions to harmonize with their own, and thus limiting that freedom which is absolutely necessary to private judgment.

The Rev. George Armstrong once said of the Church of England, and the same statement is equally applicable to some other Protestant sects :—" I am allowed the right of private judgment on condition that I arrived at the opinions settled beforehand for me by the Church." And he remarks: " If I deny the right of private judgment, the Church calls me a Romanist; if I acknowledge it and act upon it, she brands me as a heretic." Such inconsistency as this is foreign to the genius of Free-thought. Unless a person's right to think at all is denied, he must be permitted the full right to arrive at any conclusion which may seem to him rational. Every man has a right to his views, even though he stand alone in their advocacy. Infallibility alone can possess the right to suppress any opinion, because only infallibility can declare for certain that an opinion is necessarily an error; and as, of course, infallibility does not exist, such right is not to be found. A strong presumption that the opinion sought to be suppressed is an erroneous one will not be sufficient; because, in the first place, strong presumption is not a proof, and, in the second place, very strong presumptions have existed in the past in favour of the falsity of certain opinions, which only a small minority held, but which afterwards turned out to be true. The Roman Catholic denies the right of private judgment altogether, and yet, strangely enough, he always makes an appeal to it when seeking to make converts. If a man says, I believe in the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore I deny that you have any such right as that of private judgment, I ask at once, " Why are you a Roman Catholic?" He will, no doubt, proceed forthwith to give his reasons, thereby admitting that he has exercised his own private judgment in the matter—the very thing which he refuses me the right to do. There is, and can be, no fixed standard of belief for all men, unless the right of private judgment be entirely given up; nor

scarcely then, as a matter of fact, for the standard itself will have to be accepted or rejected according to evidence.

THE Nonconformists who were persecuted even unto death, were, like all other believers in creeds and dogmas, unable to resist the temptation of oppressing others, when, by a turn of the wheel of fortune, fate gave them an opportunity of so doing. The love of rule and of lording it tyrannically over conscience is common to all theologies and all theologians alike—to those of old Paganism, mediæval Christianity, and that of Mohammedanism. The doctrine that a wrong belief, the holding of an erroneous creed, will lead to the consignment of the soul to eternal fire, “where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched,” prompts men (and seems to justify them in so doing) to exert all their powers towards preserving their fellow men from becoming a prey to Satan and from being irretrievably lost to God. Thus the bigot has been always found prepared to plead, in extenuation of his intolerance, his zeal on behalf of souls. Hence he has always been ready to—

“Deal damnation round the land
On each I deem thy foe.”

All persecution for unbelief is a crime and should be condemned as such. No man, or society of men, can have the right to impose any restriction upon the liberty of thought or speech. Whoever persecutes “for conscience’ sake” invades the dearest rights and privileges of the human race, and really endangers and imperils its highest and most cherished interests.

The Nonconformity of the present day appears to be ashamed of its opinions. Instead of boldly adhering to the true principle of private judgment, no matter whither it may lead, it adopts a policy of reservation. The modern Dissenter scarcely deems it worth his while to combat the errors of ecclesiasticism and sacerdotalism; he himself is half a Churchman; and he now comes forward as the antagonist and opponent of what he terms the “Unbelief of the age.” But what is this Unbelief of which we hear so much? Is it not a logical carrying out and application of those principles which gave the early reformers an excuse—a legitimate and valid reason—for endeavouring to subvert and overthrow

Romanism and its man-destroying superstitions and prostrations of the intellect to dogma and faith. The principle of free inquiry once given to the world, and once admitted by mankind, it is absurd and illogical for any new "minister" to attempt to forge new intellectual shackles, or to say to the human mind, "Thus far shalt thou come, but no farther!" Whoever is opposed to this right is an enemy to human freedom. As Milton has written:—

"This is true liberty, when free-born men,
 Having to advise the public, may speak free;
 Which he who can, and will, deserves high praise;
 Who neither can, nor will, may hold his peace:
 What can be juster in a State than this?"

But to disbelieve is not only a right, it is also a duty; for every man is under an obligation to deny and to do his best to destroy that which, after careful and deliberate examination, appears to him to be false. No doubt the orthodox believers fear the legitimate exercise of Freethought, simply because they are alarmed that their own views will not stand the test; but this really ought to be evidence to them that there is something unsound somewhere in their connections. There is a fashion in these matters, as in the cut of a coat, and the great masses of society do not like to be out of the fashion. But fashion will seldom stand criticism. "There is more power," said an old writer, "in an ounce of custom than in a ton of argument." Now, this is just the state of things that requires to be changed. Moreover, few will admit that they are guided by it, which is a tacit admission that even they hold that it cannot be defended. They profess to exercise their private judgments, to think and to investigate even when they are bound hard and fast in the chain of a despotic custom—which proves that they, too, recognize the right to differ, which is really the right of unbelief.

There can be no progress without unbelief, for disbelief in an old system must ever precede the introduction of a new one. Progress always implies change, and change is the outcome of unbelief in that which is old and no longer able to serve the world, added, of course, to what is considered to be a new truth.

Thus we find that those who oppose Scepticism are usually adverse to change of any kind; their motto is, "The same yesterday, to-day, and forever." Among such persons there exists a deep-rooted prejudice against everything that is new, and this stubborn clinging to the teachings of the past has sapped the very vitals of progress and perpetuated errors and hypocrisy to an unknown extent. The man who changes his views and embraces a conviction contrary to that which he was known previously to hold is usually stigmatised by all sorts of offensive epithets among his fellow men, and often he is regarded as being a very dangerous character. Now, change—assuming that it is in the right direction—is always desirable, and such change must of necessity arise out of unbelief. No man can trace the progress of human thought and opinion from the crude and unformed ideas of the ancients up to the brilliant discoveries and marvellous inventions of the present day, without feeling a thrill of joy run through his frame that his lot has been cast in these later times. First one erroneous notion and then another has been got rid of, until, although the old tree of error still stands, its branches are shrivelled, its trunk is decaying, and its root is loosening in the soil in which it stood so firmly rooted a few centuries ago. And every step in the world's advancement has been brought about by unbelief. This fact is fully demonstrated by Buckle in his "History of Civilization." This eminent writer, after showing that until doubt began civilization was impossible, and that the religious tolerance we now have has been forced from the clergy by the secular classes, states "that the act of doubting is the originator, or at all events the necessary antecedent, of all progress. Here we have that Scepticism, the very name of which is an abomination to the ignorant, because it disturbs their lazy and complacent minds; because it troubles their cherished superstitions; because it imposes on them the fatigue of inquiry; and because it rouses even sluggish understandings to ask if things are as they are commonly supposed, and if all is really true which they from their childhood have been taught to believe. The more we examine this great principle of Scepticism, the more distinctly shall we see the immense

part it has played in the progress of European civilization. . . . It may be said that to Scepticism we owe the spirit of inquiry which, during the last two centuries, has gradually encroached on every possible subject; has reformed every department of practical and speculative knowledge; has weakened the authority of the privileged classes, and thus placed liberty on a surer foundation; has chastised the despotism of princes; has restrained the arrogance of the nobles, and has even diminished the prejudices of the clergy. In a word, it is this which has remedied the three fundamental errors of the olden time—errors which made the people, in politics too confiding, in science too credulous, in religion too intolerant.”

Lecky, in his “History of European Morals,” tells us that “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 Moham- medan science and classical Freethought and industrial independence broke the sceptre of the Church, did the intellectual revival of Europe begin.” Thus the lesson of all history is that unbelief in the old has ever preceded the introduction of the new. Christianity itself came based upon the disbelief in Paganism, and the Pagans, feeling outraged at the proposed change, called the first Christians not only unbelievers, but even Atheists. Martin Luther disbelieved in the mysteries and mummeries of Roman Catholicism, and the result was what is called the Protestant Reformation. Copernicus and Galileo disbelieved in the Bible cosmogony, with its theory of the heavens; and this Scepticism gave birth to correct views upon the great science of astronomy. Modern geologists reject the Bible story of Creation, and the consequence is more faith in Nature’s records than in the absurdities of the Christian Bible. In philosophy the same thing has occurred over and over again, as also in the political world. Thus, unbelief has ever been the herald of change and improvement, while its enemy has always been that superstitious conservatism

that eschews all advancement, frowns down every new discovery, taboos all change, and keeps its anchor firmly fixed in the errors of the past. With such persons mildew is more sacred than sunshine, and decay preferable to the opening violet shedding its fragrance in the morning air.

Unbelief is always spoken of as though it were a mere negation, whose only mission could be to doubt and destroy. The consequence of this misconception is, that the Freethought party is denounced as being composed of members whose aim is to pull down, without having any desire to reconstruct. The pious orthodox believer looks upon the Sceptic as a sort of modern Goth or Vandal, dangerous to the well-being of society, and to be avoided by all who care for the public good. These are the wild fanatical notions, born of the theological delusion, which are held in reference to unbelievers. But such views are most erroneous, to say nothing of their injustice. Some of the greatest benefactors of the race who ever lived have been unbelievers, that is, they have rejected those creeds and dogmas which are clung to so tenaciously by the Church. "It is historically true," remarks J. S. Mill, "that a large proportion of Infidels, in all ages, have been persons of distinguished integrity and honour. . . . Persons in greatest repute with the world both by virtues and attainments, are well-known, at least to their intimates, to be unbelievers. . . . It can do truth no good to blink the fact, known to all who have the most ordinary acquaintance with literary history, that a large portion of the noblest and most valuable moral teachings has been the work, not only of men who did not know, but of men who knew and rejected, the Christian faith" ("On Liberty"). And Mill was quite right, for some of the noblest men and women who have adorned the history of their times, and given to the world a record of the most useful deeds, have been unbelievers. Lucretius, Spinoza, Goethe, Humboldt, Dr. Priestley, Newton, Voltaire, Paine, Robert Owen, Lyell, Darwin, Tyndall, Huxley, and Harriet Martineau are prominent in the Pantheon of the world's benefactors; and these were all unbelievers from the orthodox standpoint. In France, nearly all the scientific men are heretics;

and Germany—the most Philosophic land of modern days—is notoriously sceptical.

Unbelief is, of course, negative on the one side ; but there is always another aspect of it to be seen, if one will only take the trouble to look fairly for it. Unbelief in one thing means belief in the opposite, and it is quite possible that such opposite may be the more worthy of the two. This is another instance how the word unbelief is used in a sense that is most certainly not justifiable, because it conveys an idea of reproach, and almost of crime ; and those to whom it is applied are thereby singled out for ignominious attack and violent denunciation. It may probably be replied here that the word is only employed in this sense when it refers to disbelief in things which are infallibly true, and too sacred to be tampered with, and far too well established to admit of the possibility of doubt in regard to them. But the position here assumed is absurd, since things which can be demonstrated to be true beyond the possibility of doubt cannot be disbelieved. No sane man can disbelieve in a proposition of Euclid, or even the simple statement that two and two make four. The fact, therefore, of the very existence of unbelief in regard to any matter proves that it has not been demonstrated to be true. As to infallibility, that idea has already been disposed of. Now, to say that anything is too sacred to be tampered with, simply means that it is sacred in the eyes of those who accept it ; for it cannot be sacred to him who disbelieves it. To assert that I am not at liberty to disbelieve in any dogma or principle because some one else holds it to be sacred is to say that he is infallible, and that I must, therefore, defer to his judgment, surrender my own right to think at all, and take my opinions ready-made from any one who is arrogant enough to claim the right to dictate. Moreover, this view is self-destructive, because a half-dozen different bodies may each be claiming the same allegiance, and, as their views will probably be conflicting and irreconcilable, to believe the pretensions of the one would be to disbelieve the claims of the others. But, if a person disbelieves he also believes ; his disbelief is the negative side of his faith and his belief is the positive side.

Disbelief in an error, or in that which is held to be an error, by any man involves belief in the opposite of the error, which is truth, or at all events that which is recognized as such by him who receives it. To describe a man as an unbeliever without having regard to what it is that he disbelieves, and consequently what he believes as the opposite of his unbelief, is not fair to him, and is equally unfair to those who from this description learn to estimate his views. Unbelief and belief must run hand in hand, and cannot be separated. The most devout believer is equally an unbeliever with him whom the world calls "Infidel" and stigmatises with reproachful terms and epithets in consequence of his Scepticism. They differ, of course, as to the sphere of their faith and doubt; but the one has no more right to be called a believer *par excellence* than has the other. All of us claim to have some truth on our side, and in that truth we are firm believers. Our faith in it is the basis of our disbelief in error, and the mainspring of our actions in the advocacy of our views and the efforts which we make to bring others to our own way of thinking. We are only negationists so far as a pulling down and a clearing of the ground may be necessary to prepare the way for the new building that is to be erected. Just as Luther disbelieved in Romanism and sought to destroy it, in order to make way for Protestantism, so Secularists to-day disbelieve in the errors of the Church, and are thereby inspired to work for the establishment of greater and grander truths than theology ever recognized or the Church ever possessed. The old Church called Luther an unbeliever, and it was right so far; but a large portion of society came to recognize him as a true believer. His positive work was the outcome of his unbelief, and but for that it could have had no existence. Christianity owes its existence to unbelief. If Christ and St. Paul had not rejected many of the teachings of paganism and Judaism the religious change which it is alleged occurred two thousand years ago, would in all probability never have taken place. Thus unbelief has ever been the precursor of a newer and truer faith; it is the herald of progress, the forerunner of improvement, and the harbinger of coming good.

Unbelievers are supposed to have no right to the term sacred, whereas it belongs to them in a much higher sense than it does to the Church. What is truly sacred? The beautiful in art the true in philosophy, the noble and pure in human conduct—these are all sacred, because they are in harmony with the higher instincts of man, and tend to elevate and regenerate the race. True sacredness does not consist in supernatural power, priestly arrogance, or assumption of authority to our fellow-man. Things are made holy by the temper and conduct of him who uses them. Man is his own consecrator, whether in his home, at church, or in the temple of science. Where mind speaks to mind, either orally or in writing, and thus impresses for good: where intellect diffuses its choicest blessings abroad among mankind; where learning and thought rise into higher regions of light and truth; where poetry illumines and art charms; where liberty goes forth breaking asunder the chains of the captive; where knowledge dwells and love manifests its power; where virtue reigns supreme and justice bears the sway—there, and there alone, is true sanctification to be found, encircled in the temple of Reality and enthroned upon the pinnacle of Humanity.

Instead of regarding the term sacred as representing these great ennobling qualities and mental activities, the popular believers associate it with certain places, buildings, and theological ceremonies. For instance, Palestine is called the Holy Land, and is looked upon as sacred in consequence of the notion that it was the birthplace of Christianity. It is a most significant fact that if Palestine were sufficiently prolific to produce a religion, it has been comparatively barren in science, philosophy, and general education. A church is termed a sacred building, and is thought to be made so through some bishop or other ecclesiastical official performing a ceremony called consecration, in which prayers are offered and forms complied with of a strictly religious character, and thus the building becomes transformed into a holy temple totally unlike what it was before. The very stones are sacred now, and cannot be used for another purpose without profanation. Can anything in the world be more absurd? Is it not derogatory to man and an insult to human

genius? What possible effect upon bricks and stones and mortar and cement can the words of a bishop or any official have? And yet modern professors of theology stand aghast at the folly displayed by Pagan worshippers. It would be exceedingly interesting to have the *modus operandi* of this process of making such things sacred explained to us—to be told what is the nature of the conversion they undergo, and in what sense they differ after consecration from their condition before.

Worse still, the same piece of theological legerdemain is practised in our burial grounds. These, too, must be consecrated—that is, made sacred, or sacred bones, it is feared, could not rest in them. In cemeteries part of the ground is generally consecrated, and part left in its usual state. The physical difference—and there can be no spiritual, for it will not be maintained that mould is capable of spiritual impressions—that has been effected by this process is more puzzling than the Athanasian Creed. How deep down does the consecration extend? And does it cover any clods of earth that might afterwards be brought to the spot, but which were not there at the time the ceremony was performed? Is the grass that will hereafter grow also consecrated? And, if so, what will be the effect of the eating of the said grass upon the bodies of unconsecrated cattle? Shall we get, as a result, consecrated beef and mutton?

But, in all seriousness, what is consecrated ground? And what power has priest or bishop or pope, by the reciting of any form of words, to accomplish anything of the kind? One of our poets has well written, as a rebuke to these miserable superstitions:—

“ What’s hallowed ground ? ’Tis what gives birth
To sacred thoughts in souls of worth.
Peace ! Independence ! Truth ! Go forth
Earth’s compass round,
And your high priesthood shall make earth
All hallowed ground.”

This is the true consecration, the real making holy; for not by ridiculous ceremony, but by noble thoughts, is everything hallowed and made sacred on earth.

Unbelief leaves the mind free to receive new truths. The greatest opponent that truth has ever had to contend with is dogmatism. A black cloud hangs over the mind of the dogmatist, shutting out every ray of the bright and gladdening beams of the sun of truth, and encircling all his mental powers in the deepest darkness. To such an one improvement is nearly impossible, and advancement in intellectual growth is never to be dreamed of. His motto is always, "As you were," and his watchword, if he has any, is like that of which Mackay preaches, "Backward, ye deluded nations; man to misery is born." When a man dogmatically asserts that he has found all the truth which is capable to be found, and that his system contains perfect verity without any mixture of error, his views become stereotyped, and it is quite impossible that any change can take place in his opinions. His mind is not open to receive new light from any source whatever, and thought with him is a useless and vain operation and investigation the quintessence of folly. For him to receive any new truth would be to admit that what he possessed before was in some way defective and imperfect, and this his creed protests against with the authority of an infallible mandate. His position is necessarily stationary; he stands just where his grandsires stood ages past, and where he would wish his descendants to remain for ages to come. Now, surely unbelief is far in advance of such a condition as this, for it leaves its possessor, without bias and prejudice, waiting the new knowledge that is continually to be had for the seeking. It allows his mind full scope to grow and advance in wisdom, because he does not for one moment believe that he has reached a perfection beyond which it is impossible to proceed. In connection with unbelief there is always a certain amount of suspension of judgment—that is to say, there is such an absence of dogmatism that any new discovery of science, any fresh thought in philosophy, or better and clearer ideas in religion, are always welcomed as an addition to the stores of knowledge already in possession. A calm repose rests on his mental powers: there is, to use the words of Harriet Martineau, a "clearness of moral purpose," which "naturally ensues"—a "healthy activity of the moral faculties." The un-

believer, not being biassed by any settled views which he thinks came from heaven, is ever ready to learn and be taught. There is about him a lofty liberty which he alone can enjoy. From whatever source the truth may come he is willing—nay, desirous—to receive it. He is ever ready, as Dr. Watts observes, to—

“Seize on truth where'er 'tis found,
On heathen or on Christian ground.”

The principal argument against unbelief is based upon the supposition that we have an infallible guide, whereas the fact is that we neither have nor can have anything of the kind; and, what is more, if we had such a guide, we could not understand it, and therefore it would be no guide to us. All that man requires is a reasonable probability, and his nature is so constituted that he is not capable of more. Besides, unbelief is not voluntary, and the power of belief is not under the control of the will. Belief is the result of conviction, conviction of evidence; and no man can believe either without or against evidence, or disbelieve in the face of evidence sufficiently strong to carry conviction. Opinions change, theories pass away; old faiths decay, and new ones appear in their places.

In connection with the Christian profession at the present time we have an illustration of such inconsistency as is not to be found in any other of the great religions of the world. History fails to record in association with those faiths such a marked difference between profession and action as we discover in the Christian Church. In Confucianism, Brahmanism, Buddhism, there is a persistent and earnest effort to regulate personal conduct in accordance with the alleged sayings and injunctions of their respective founders. But it is not so with Christianity. Where are the professing Christians to-day who even make the attempt to adopt the advice, practice, and precepts ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth? He was in every sense opposed to this world, and, in most emphatic terms, he denounces its enjoyments, its pride, its requirements, and particularly its riches. With him, heaven was of greater importance than earth, submission a higher duty than resistance, and poverty a greater virtue than

wealth. Christ urged that practice was more valuable than profession, and that the grace of God was more efficacious than the ethics of man. Where, in the present day, do we find these views practically endorsed even by Christians? They are really disbelievers to what they proclaim as being essential both for life and for death. Consistency, where indeed is thy blush? Before professing Christians condemn us for our unbelief, let them show us their genuine belief. Before they denounce us for rejecting what we regard to be error, let them prove that they practice that which they avow to be true. In the one case there is honesty of purpose and sincerity of conviction; in the other there is hypocrisy of profession and cant of fashion. Therefore in the words of Polonius, we say to the Christian :—

“ This above all, to thine own self be true ;
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

Wherein then consists the advantage of Unbelief? It is the symbol of mental freedom, the mark of intellectual dignity, the genius of cultivated reason, the wisdom of being guided by progressive thought, of replacing old fancies with new realities, of proving all things and holding fast that which reason and experience, not tradition and theology, decide to be true; of resisting to the very utmost all despotic sway over the intellect, and of vindicating to the fullest extent the right of personal independence. The advantage of unbelief is shown in its inspiring mankind, not, in the words of Tyndall, “to purchase intellectual peace at the price of intellectual death. The world is not without refugees of this description, nor is it wanting in persons who seek their shelter and try to persuade others to do the same. I would exhort you to refuse such shelter, and to scorn such base repose—to accept, if the choice be forced upon you, commotion before stagnation, the leap of the torrent before the stillness of the swamp. In the one there is, at all events, life, and therefore hope; in the other, none.” This, then, is the essence of unbelief—not blind adherence to the past, but a loyal allegiance to the ever-present. If it is asked what should a person disbelieve? the

answer is, everything that he cannot believe after honest investigation. Secularism condemns no one for not believing that which fails to commend itself to his or her reason and judgment. Hence, we do not believe in the necessity of priestcraft, the wisdom of allowing the church to control the education of the young, the necessary inferiority of women, the utility of death-bed repentance, and finality in thought, morality, or religion. But we do believe in the right of individual opinion, unfettered reason, moral excellence and intellectual discipline.

Unbelief asserts that every man and woman should be allowed absolute freedom to test every religion by the light of reason, and then either to accept one or reject all in accordance with the dictates of his or her understanding! By the revival of learning at the Renaissance a great impetus and new momentum were imparted to the human mind. The limits beyond which the Roman Church had for centuries prohibited any advance, on pain of the axe, the rack, the dungeon, and the stake, were now overstepped by the aspiring, emancipated intellect. Those old landmarks of the limits of former inquiry were now justly despised, as the memorials of barbarian ignorance; and an appeal was made from the dogmas of sacerdotal authority to human nature, human science, and human thought. This latter, the intellect, again asserted its supremacy, as it had of old time in Greece and Rome. A bright and radiant future was before it; it stood, as it were, upon an elevation from which it could take a wide and enlightened survey of the complicated interests of life. The master-spirits of the age soon proclaimed their deliverance from an irrational and degrading bondage, and demanded that the nations of the European world should come out of the darkness, the Egyptian bondage, of old Rome's superstitions, to emancipate themselves, to assert the dignity of their nature, and to maintain the potency of their reason.

Mental freedom being secured, Unbelief refuses to be again fettered; it has gone on from discovery to discovery; it has tested the value of the cardinal doctrines of orthodox Christianity—tested them and found them worthless. What has now

become of the Genesaic theory of the creation of the world? what of the age of the earth? what of the origin of sin and evil? what of the doctrine of human depravity? what of the belief in the vicarious sufferings of Christ? what of the old notion of eternal punishment? what of the destruction of the world by the deluge? what of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt? what of the miracles of Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha? what of the age of the Pentateuch? what of the contention for the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures? what of the testimony respecting the Jesus Christ of the four Gospels? It is well known what science says to all these old-world doctrines. It simply discredits them; treats them as figments of the undisciplined imagination, and passes them by as unworthy of serious notice. This has been the noble work of Unbelief.

Being unbelievers in orthodoxy we prefer fact to fiction, reality to imagination, and good conduct to mere profession! In the words of Mazzini: "We propose progressive improvement, the transformation of the corrupted medium in which we are now living, the overthrow of all idolatries, shams, lies and conventionalities. We want man to be not the poor, passive, cowardly phantasmagoric unreality of the actual time, thinking in one way and acting in another, bending to a power which he hates or despises, carrying empty Popish or Thirty-nine Article formularies on his breast and none within. We would make man a fragment of the living truth—a real individual, being linked to collective humanity, the bold seeker of things to come, the gentle, mild, loving, yet firm uncompromising apostle of all that is great, heroic and good." **HEREIN LIES THE GLORY OF UNBELIEF.**