

# UNSCIENTIFIC RELIGION;

OR,

REMARKS ON THE REV. J. M. WILSON'S  
"ATTEMPT TO TREAT SOME RELIGIOUS QUESTIONS  
IN A SCIENTIFIC SPIRIT".

[REPRINTED FROM THE "NATIONAL REFORMER".]

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## TO THE READER.

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MESSRS. MACMILLAN AND Co. having published a volume of Essays and Addresses by the Rev. James M. Wilson, this opportunity is taken of reprinting some articles that appeared in the *National Reformer*, after the first appearance of the essays and addresses contained in the volume referred to.

The second and third articles were written concerning two sermons that Mr. Wilson preached in March, 1884, and which are not included in the volume of essays and addresses. They were published by Macmillan and Co., in pamphlet form, shortly after their delivery.

The paper of most interest in Mr. Wilson's volume is undoubtedly the "Letter to a Bristol Artisan" (p. 128-175), which, though dated in 1885, is now for the first time published. This letter (which has been recently criticised with force and ability by Mr. J. M. Robertson in the columns of the *National Reformer*) is Mr. Wilson's reply to the pamphlet (published by W. H. Morrish, 18, Narrow Wine St., Bristol), wherein "A Bristol Artisan", took up the theme of Mr. Wilson's two lectures to the Secularists of that city, on the reasons why men do not believe the Bible. These lectures are contained in the new volume (p. 74-127), having previously been published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. The artisan had not the same facilities for making his views known, his pamphlet appeared in modest guise, and a small edition has not yet been sold. If, on our side, we had a society for promoting Secular knowledge, it might do well to bring out a second edition of this remarkable

essay, and to ensure that every thinking man and woman in England should have a chance of mastering its contents. But at present the want of such machinery is one of the great difficulties we have to contend against. I may, however, say that this pamphlet has extorted the approval of those most opposed to the artisan's views. Mr. Wilson says of it: "your pamphlet has deeply interested me, not only from its singular directness, and lucidity, and general moderation of tone, but because it is full of misconceptions, etc." Another clergyman says of it that "it will probably be widely read and influential both for good and evil". And the general opinion seems to be that no more discreet and inoffensive statement of the higher secular philosophy has ever been published.

Those who have read Mr. Robertson's criticisms on Mr. Wilson's reply to the artisan will be prepared to hear that no such complimentary language, can, in its turn, be used of it. At the same time it seems to me that Mr. Robertson has not fully realised the enormous advantage gained for Secularism, by the admissions that the letter contains. Mr. Robertson's own mind is clear—his horizon free from haze and mist; has he not forgotten that such clearness of vision is rare in times of transition. One of our universities, in its proud motto, offers *lux* and *pocula*, light and ceremonials. But in these days the retention of the pocula involves too often the darkening of the lux. And not only do the traditionary status and ecclesiastical endowments of the Church of England, that Cambridge offers to its graduates, tend to a frame of mind that shrinks from the full blaze of the rays of truth, but other and nobler ties are at work in the same direction—so noble and so human that I should be sorry to cast up the charge of nebulous inconsistency against the man whose light faileth. Let us, however, thank Mr. Wilson for these words: "It is absolutely necessary for you to grasp the conception of religion, as being NOT a system of dogmas about the being of God and his relation to man, revealed by some external and supernatural machinery, but as being an education, an evolution, a growth of the spirit of man towards something higher, by means of a gradual revelation." Let us, I say, ponder well these words. And let us ask Mr. Wilson to consider if he can put bounds to this growth, and say, "Thus far!" or predict

safely that at this time, or at that time, finality will be reached.

If I were inclined to be critical, I would also ask Mr. Wilson to reconcile his use of the word religion in the above extract with the conception of it given in the sermon he preached in St. Paul's Cathedral, hereinafter referred to.

But while anxious to award to Mr. Wilson all the merit that is due to him, I am entirely at one with Mr. Robertson in considering that this attempt to treat matters of faith by the methods of science has been (as all such attempts must be) a complete failure.

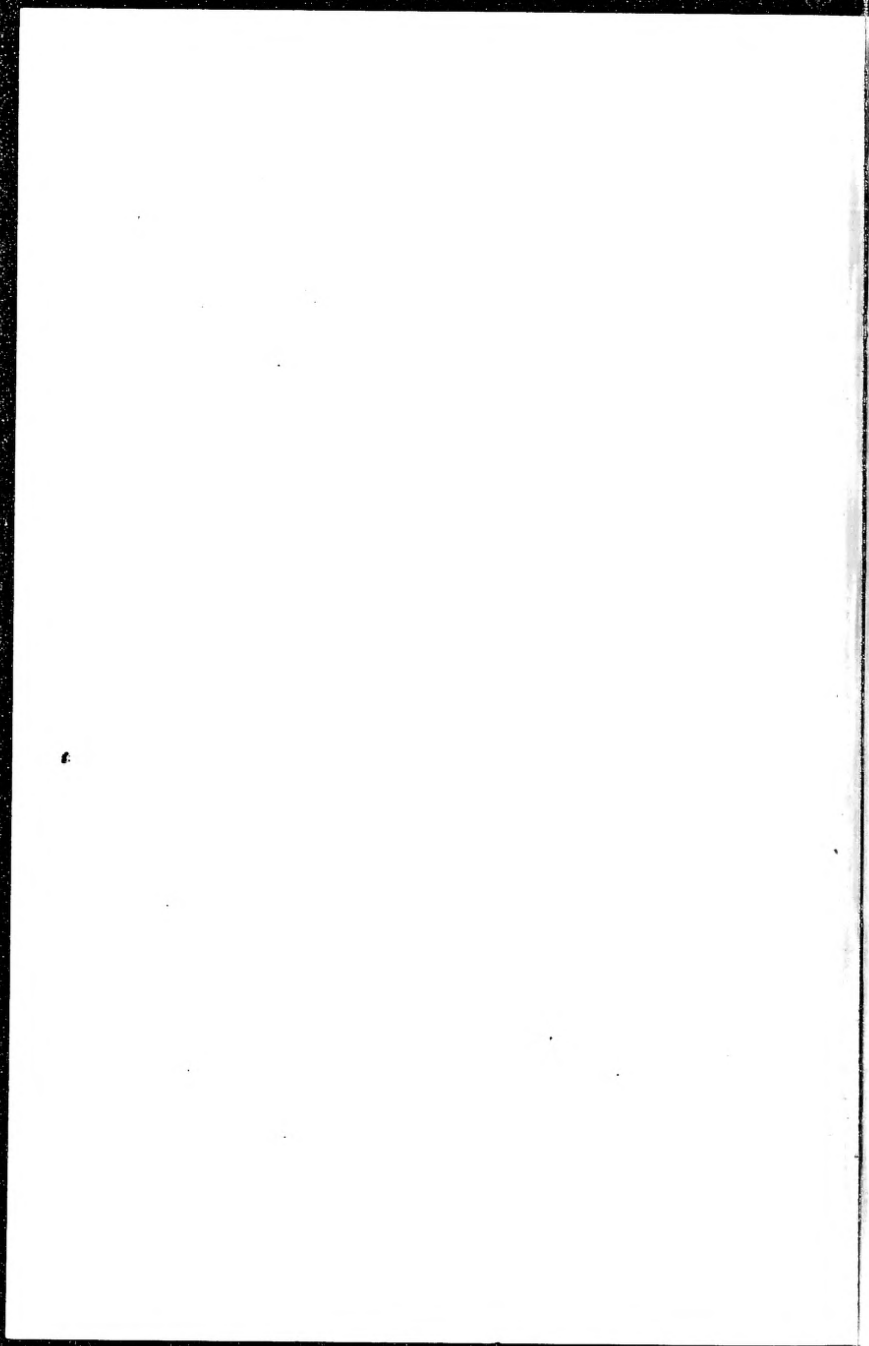
In conclusion I gratefully accept Mr. Charles Bradlaugh's permission to dedicate to him, as one of the leaders of sincere and active freethought—active because sincere—this attempt to state the issue between Materialism on one hand, and the indefinite faltering neo-Christianity on the other, which is clerical rather than agnostic, agnostic rather than religious.

S. S.

*July*, 1887.

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## UNSCIENTIFIC RELIGION.

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### I.—MR. WILSON'S BRISTOL LECTURES.

[From the *National Reformer* of 16th September, 1883.]

THE late Archbishop of Canterbury, who combined the shrewdness of a Scot with the tact of a courtier, said some years ago that Atheism should not be regarded as a heresy to be condemned, but met as an argument, to be seriously and temperately answered. The attitude thus recommended has been adopted by several enlightened clergymen, and will probably commend itself to many more. But if gentlemen in "holy orders" quit the vantage ground of orthodoxy, and meet Secularists on even terms, they must take the chances of war. Real argument implies that the side which has the best of it shall carry conviction to the other; and if the clergy cannot convert us, they run the risk of being themselves converted. The game is a perilous one for the clergy, but none the less are they bound in honor to play it out.

The lectures before us are the first fruits of Dr. Tait's remark. Mr. Wilson, head master of Clifton School, is one of the most distinguished of that noble band of workers in the cause of morality that the churches of to-day are producing. It were presumption for me to speak of the character and merits of such a man: if anyone wishes to learn them, let him ask the poor of Bristol. He delivered these lectures to audiences of the working men of that city about six months ago, and they have now been republished under the auspices of the Society for Promoting



Christian Knowledge. The *Spectator* remarks that the Society never did a bolder or a wiser thing than this; and many who take a broader view of the subjects discussed than the *Spectator* does, will probably acquiesce in that opinion.

Mr. Wilson addressed himself to the question, "Why men do not believe the Bible", and in the first lecture considered the intellectual difficulties; in the second, the moral difficulties. By intellectual difficulties, Mr. Wilson means "those which are the consequences of a particular theory as to the necessity of a literal translation and the verbal accuracy of the Bible". This particular theory, viz., that the Bible is verbally or mechanically inspired, is not, Mr. Wilson asserts, laid down by the Church, nor found in the Bible, nor was it taught by Jesus Christ or his apostles. Up to the time that the Roman Empire became Christian, and the Canon of Scripture was formed, "there was no thought of a divinely-guaranteed accuracy". Even after the Reformation, when the thirty-nine articles were promulgated, "there was no theory of inspiration". But as the study of the Bible became more popular, theories of inspiration were started, especially that of Calvin, who held "that from Genesis to Revelation the Bible is not only the Word of God, but *the words* of God; and it is this theory that lands men in endless contradictions".

I will leave it to the followers and admirers of Calvin to prove, as I expect they easily can prove, that the theory of inspiration, which Mr. Wilson attributes to him, was not his invention, but was commonly held in the Church centuries before his time. This does not concern us much. But before I pass on to what Mr. Wilson would have us substitute for the Calvinistic theory of inspiration, I would hint that he took an unfair advantage of us Secularists, in saying that we have no warrant for putting into the mouths of Christians a theory of verbal inspiration, when it is notorious that his assertion that the Church of England does not teach the verbal inspiration of the Bible, fell like a thunderbolt on the Christian public. Nine-tenths of the religious people in these kingdoms firmly believe the Bible to be inspired. Secularists have to deal with popular superstition, and not with the esoteric creed of a few priests. The sixth article of religion is so worded that it can perfectly cover, if needs be, the Calvinistic theory;

and if it suits Mr. Wilson and his friends to say *now* that "Holy Scripture" is not verbally inspired, he ought not to blame Colonel Ingersoll for addressing himself to the current belief. I strongly suspect that if these doubts as to the authority of the Bible had not reached the great mass of our countrymen, the doctrine now produced by Canon Westcott and Mr. Wilson would not have been much heard of. It is to be regretted that Archbishop Benson has, in a letter printed in the preface to these lectures, apparently supported Mr. Wilson's complaint of Colonel Ingersoll.

The fact is, that Secularists make little use of the Calvinistic theory of the Bible. It is to the book itself, and not to any theory of it, that their apprehensions point. They regard it as the history, more or less authentic, of a small nation whose social ostracism is a fitting reward for moral delinquency, and who have made themselves more detested than any other race of men. They cannot admit that the history of such a race, curious and interesting as it is, ought to be our guide and standard here and now.

It was a rhetorical artifice, and nothing more, to bring into contrast Colonel Ingersoll and Canon Westcott; clever and momentarily effective, but attended with no permanent gain. Mr. Wilson's subsequent admission (page 31), that some of his friends urged "You will unsettle more than you will help; you will shake the faith of believers, and not convert the sceptics", proves that Colonel Ingersoll was right and Canon Westcott wrong, in their estimate of popular theology.

Mr. Wilson would remove from the portal of the temple the bogey of Calvinism; unsuspecting worshippers are to be invited to enter; but once inside the temple, and belief in inspiration is the atmosphere they breathe: "Let men read the gospels as they would read any other book, with any theory of inspiration, or with none; with the one aim of learning the truth about Jesus Christ", and if this is done in a proper spirit, Mr. Wilson promises that they will soon get the belief in inspiration, though they may not be able to define it. Is this so? Does an absolute rejection of the Calvinistic theory, followed by careful, patient, honest study of the Bible, lead men to be Christians, or to form such an estimate of the character of Jesus Christ as enables them to recognise him as God? Experience

meets Mr. Wilson's promise with no dubious or uncertain answer.

Mr. Wilson avoids any definition of that theory which he would have us substitute for Calvin's. He says he can no more define inspiration than he can define "God", and that he can no more prove inspiration than he can listen to the colors of the rainbow. It is surely irrational and immoral to believe a theory that can neither be defined or proved. Some clearly defined theory may commend itself as possibly credible, even if it cannot be proved, but it seems romantic, if not impossible, to believe without definition and without demonstration.

And here I would make a protest and an appeal. The late Archbishop, and clergymen like Mr. Wilson, expect, and invite us to meet them in discussion. Do they consider that we do so with halters round our necks? We may freely discuss morality, and the non-essentials of religion, but to deny by advised speaking or printing the truth of the Christian religion, entails the penalties of that statute of William and Mary, which Lord Coleridge termed "ferocious" and "shocking". Can not Mr. Wilson and his friends help in getting the statute law and the common law amended? And cannot they give an earnest of their sympathies, by signing the memorial to Mr. Gladstone for Messrs. Foote and Ramsey's release that is printed at the head of page 265 of the *Freethinker* for 26th August. Our unhappy friends have now been thirty long weeks in gaol.

What is left of the "Christian religion" that the statute of William and Mary, joint defenders of the faith, so jealously guarded? The Court of Queen's Bench has by mandamus lopped off the devil; Canon Farrar's sermons have eliminated hell; the Trinity is threatened when the Athanasian creed is expunged; and now Mr. Wilson tells us that inspiration is no part of it. Whatever happens, let us hope that no blasphemous hand will touch the 36th Article of religion that treats of the consecration of bishops. So long as they are maintained in pomp and power, Christianity has no cause to fear.

The moral difficulty in the way of belief in the Bible with which Mr. Wilson's second lecture deals, is thus described: that as the Bible tolerates, or even approves of, various forms of immorality, such as slavery, murder, polygamy, cruelty, and treachery, it is hard to accept of

the God of the Bible as an object of worship. I don't think that Mr. Wilson has fully gauged the depth and strength of the moral difficulty felt by Secularists and Freethinkers, but accepting his statement of it, as above summarised, let us examine his mode of meeting it.

He admits that many of the persons mentioned in the Bible as objects of God's favor, are not fair examples of moral goodness, and that some of their actions are unworthy of our imitation. To get out of the Bible the moral teaching that it contains, we must read between the lines, and discover "the working out and the development of the idea of the kingdom of God". From the history of the "training of a typical nation" (the Jews) we are to "trace the growth of a purer morality, of personal responsibility, of the spirituality of God, of the thought of a future life". He thinks that "facts point unmistakably to the Jews as the nation that formed the chief channel for divine influence in religion", qualifying this by the proviso that "the morality of the Old Testament is no pattern for us, except so far as our own consciences, enlightened by the completed revelation, approve". This, I take it, is a fair summary, mainly in his own words, of what Mr. Wilson told the working-men of Bristol.

Close observation of these two lectures will show that Mr. Wilson avoided in the second the line of argument adopted in the first. When discussing the intellectual difficulty, he said the theory of inspiration that Secularists attributed to the Church was neither taught by it nor found in the Articles of Religion, but was a man of straw, set up for the purpose of being knocked down. He might have said the same of the theory of God's providence and moral government. The words "Kingdom of God", "Morality", and "Providence" do not occur in any of the Articles. The word "moral" occurs only once, in the seventh Article, which speaks of "the commandments which are called moral". Mr. Wilson might then have spoken of the moral difficulty, in the same form of words as he used for the intellectual difficulty: "What I say will doubtless surprise some of you, both Christians and Secularists, but it is an undeniable fact that the Articles of Religion do not assert that the Bible contains a moral standard, or that God governs as well as reigns". That he has not adopted this line of reasoning proves the truth

of the remark recently made in these columns: "Religion seeks to secure her frail tenure by grasping the skirt of that holy morality who was once but her timid and shrinking handmaid".<sup>1</sup> Mr. Wilson had the same ground for treating the moral difficulty as a man of straw, as he had in regard to the intellectual difficulty; but instead of doing so, he has eagerly enlisted him as a valiant champion on his own side.

The future of human happiness and morality, Mr. Wilson would have us believe, depends on the esoteric teaching derived by learned men from a number of treatises, written we know not by whom and know not when; in an ancient language few can read; of which no original exists (save for some possible speculation of a future Shapira); and about whose text and interpretation the best authorities seldom agree. We learn from the first lecture that their claim to inspiration is shadowy, undefined, and incapable of proof; and from the second lecture that they contain a veiled, and not a revealed, record of the will of God as governor of the world. When these treatises agree about any moral law, or in their estimate of the moral worth of any human action, we are by no means to accept this as a guide or pattern, but we must try to ascertain what indication is to be derived, from the history contained in the Bible, of the general course of God's providence in respect to the Jews; and this indication, when obtained, is to be subject to the veto of "conscience". Is this a satisfactory or practicable system of philosophy?

What is conscience? We may regard it as a knowledge of, and fidelity to, the stored-up experience of generations of men, as to what is best for human happiness on earth. If Mr. Wilson accepts this definition of conscience, he virtually accepts the secular philosophy. But whatever definition he may give of conscience, why is it to have a veto on the morality of the Old Testament, and not on the morality of the New Testament?

Let us apply Mr. Wilson's system to a case of every day life. The question arises whether a man may marry the sister of his deceased wife. From a purely ethical point of view the advantages preponderate over the objections. But what does the Bible say? is at once asked. The Bible

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<sup>1</sup> See *National Reformer*, 8th July, 1883, page 22.

gives an uncertain sound, but its more weighty texts are supposed to be against such marriages. But Mr. Wilson says we may not be guided by texts, but by the "history of the development of the kingdom of God, as worked out in the case of the Jews". Laymen are puzzled, and refer the matter to divines. Divines differ—some say the proposed marriage accords with that development, some say it does not. Eventually a clear majority decide one way or the other, it matters not which. Even then Mr. Wilson is not satisfied, but would appeal to "Conscience". Why not let conscience decide it at first without all this ceremony?

It is hardly necessary to observe that the theory of Biblical morality set up by Mr. Wilson, is, like Canon Westcott's theory of inspiration, new to the religious public. Both have been evolved by the "struggle for existence". But for the certain and now rapid action of Freethought, we should not have heard of either. A few years ago, and anyone who said that Moses and Abraham and David were immoral characters deserving censure, would have been treated as a blasphemer. Mr. Wilson has discovered that it is right and just to submit the character and deeds of these old Jews to a tribunal and a test, that may possibly brand them as foul disgraces to humanity, and confirm the hatred with which in all ages the uncircumcised Gentiles have regarded God's chosen people, which is nearly as strong now as in the days of Pharaoh, and of Nebuchadnezzar, and of Titus. Freethought has scored a considerable success in eliciting such admissions as Mr. Wilson has made. We are almost prepared to concede to him the claim he made at last year's Church Congress, that clergymen are Freethinkers. At all events, some of them, if not actually Freethinkers, are not unwilling captives at the chariot wheels of Freethought, and will swell her approaching triumph.

In these remarks I have treated only of the more important and essential parts of Mr. Wilson's two lectures. There is much in them, and especially in the second lecture, for the adequate notice of which more space is needed than the columns of a newspaper can afford. The lectures form an important point in the struggle between Superstition and Freethought, and ought to be studied by all, on both sides, who are interested in its issue. May I express my

admiration of the learning, liberality, and rare human sympathy they breathe? In the knowledge and love of of man, they recall some high exemplars. Even if Mr. Wilson has not succeeded in the objects with which his lectures were given, he has secured the warm thanks and true well-wishing of all Secularists, not those of Bristol only.<sup>1</sup>

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## II.—RELIGION *v.* REVELATION.

[From the *National Reformer*, 16th November, 1884 ]

The Rev. Mr. Wilson, whose two lectures on "Inspiration" were reviewed in these columns last year, has published two sermons that he preached some months ago. The first, entitled "Opinion and Service", was preached in Westminster Abbey, and reminds us that the question to be asked of us will be, What have ye done? and not What did ye think? The second sermon, entitled "Religion and Revelation", was preached in St. Paul's Cathedral. Both sermons—but especially the second one—prove the extent to which Church teaching has been influenced by hostile criticism, and what is now thought on these controversial points by that section of enlightened Christian men that Mr. Wilson represents.

In reviewing the Bristol lectures, we indicated the following concessions that they made to Freethought. (1) Mr. Wilson rejected the Calvinistic theory of inspiration, and condemned it as "landing men in endless contradictions". (2) He professed himself unable to define or prove the theory of inspiration which he would have us substitute for Calvin's. (3) He admitted that the Bible revealed no immutable standard of morality, but that its moral teaching must be sought for "between the lines". And (4) that, when found, it was not supreme, but sub-

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<sup>1</sup> Possibly this estimate of the value of the Bristol lectures may to some persons appear too favorable, but I will leave unaltered the terms in which I expressed the opinion that I originally formed of them. Of course, my estimate refers to the lectures only, and does not apply to the other writings included in Mr. Wilson's volume.

ject to the veto of conscience. Not only are these concessions still maintained in the sermon before us, but in other directions a retreat is sounded, and vantage ground gained for the implacable foe of theology.

Taking that which is known as "religion" in the popular and vague meaning assigned to it, the preacher divided it into the idea, power, or spirit, which he termed "revelation", and the expression cultus or form to which he confined the word "religion". He regarded revelation as ever antagonistic to religion, describing the latter as a universal human instinct common to all races, savage and civilised; dark and terrible in its history; stained with idolatry, cruelty, and lust. On the other hand, he would have us regard revelation as a divine work, spiritual, accumulative, and imperishable, ever striving with the low religious instinct, and illuminating and guiding man.<sup>1</sup>

Here I must ask if history affords any trace of this struggle between revelation and religion, or if it exists only in Mr. Wilson's imagination? We know of the strife between the ideas of the divine and the human, between Spiritualism and Materialism, and that for long ages it has been one-sided and unequal; we know that the idea of man and matter is at length superseding that of God and spirit; that securing the happiness of man is of more importance than ascertaining the will of God; that human affairs depend on ourselves, and not on the moral government of a personal God. This great strife is tending to the enlightenment and advancement of our race, but it is not the strife described by Mr. Wilson. Revelation is not mastering religion as he suggests, but religion and revelation combined are about to fade away before morality. The revelation that is on the winning side is not the revelation of God's will, but the revelation of man's reason.

All so-called divine revelations rest on the religious instinct, spring from it, and strengthen it. The two are inseparable, and history gives no indication of an inter-

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<sup>1</sup> One great merit of scientific system is accuracy of definition and rigid adherence to a definition once laid down. If we compare the meaning of the term "religion" given in the passages now referred to with the conception of it that is inculcated in the passage quoted in the introduction to this work we shall be able to estimate the extreme tenuity of Mr. Wilson's claim to scientific method. S. S.



recine strife between them. On the contrary, they have ever fought side by side against human reason and Free-thought. Can Mr. Wilson find any instance of a stake or rack or pillory having been used on behalf of revelation against religion, or on behalf of religion against revelation? It is surely vain for him to say that a sentence like this: "To obey is better than sacrifice" is revelation,<sup>1</sup> while this other is religion: "And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying . . . He among the sons of Aaron that offereth the blood of the peace offering shall have the right shoulder. For the wave-breast and the heave shoulder HAVE I TAKEN of the children of Israel, and have given them unto Aaron the Priest, and unto his sons by a statute for ever." By what process of reading between the lines does he venture to designate Samuel's words as revelation, and God's words as religion? Mr. Wilson says that "the cry 'crucify him, crucify him,' is the climax and acme of the ceaseless contest between the lower religious instincts of the human race and the higher divine light that pours on men". But supposing that the crucifixion really occurred, that the record of it is not (as Robert Taylor avers) a Gnostic forgery emanating from Egypt, that old hotbed of superstition and lies, why should we regard that crucified "blasphemer" as "the unique revealer of God"? Why should we not regard him as a son of man, himself the slave of religion, using such poor reasoning faculty as he possessed to expose the fraud and hypocrisy of a priesthood? What Jesus Christ revealed was human, and not divine; and he died, not as a revealer at the suit of religion, but as a reasoner at the suit of revelation. For our knowledge of divinity we are indebted to the Comforter, who never died for us.

Let Mr. Wilson tell us in his own words what he means by revelation:

"The word 'revelation' implies a theory; it is a way of regarding and grouping facts. The facts are the history of man, the development, continuous and discontinuous, of the spiritual insight and forces of mankind. These facts are what

<sup>1</sup> The 15th chapter of 1 Samuel, from which Mr. Wilson quote these words, is one we should have expected him to ignore. The obedience inculcated by Samuel was an awful crime, and Saul's clear duty was to have disobeyed the order.

they are, and we may hope by study to arrive at some knowledge of them. But we need theories to group facts; and the theory which is expressed by the word revelation is this, that man is, in his present condition, a partaker in some inchoate manner of that controlling universal consciousness which we call God; which illuminates the mind and conscience of man: that man is, or possesses, a *φανερωσις*, a manifestation of God. The control of God is exhibited in its effects, and one of the effects is the moral education and evolution of man. The growth, then, and development of this manifestation of the spirit of God in man, and by man, and to man, is revelation."

I fear that Mr. Wilson's attempt to construct a safe theory of revelation is as unsatisfactory as his attempt to deal with inspiration. Why should any "way of regarding and grouping facts" be styled revelation and not science? What facts are there to be grouped? The history of man is not a fact, but a theory resting on facts. The "development of man's spiritual insight" is not a fact, but a theory resting on fictions. What is "spiritual insight"? from what has it been developed? what is it tending to? Does not the use of the word "spiritual" beg the whole question of inspiration and revelation? Mr. Wilson here seems to fall into the same error that led Mr. Drummond to argue for the existence of a spiritual world governed by natural law.

Human history needs no belief in revelation for grouping the facts it records. The best historians eschew all reference to a controlling providence. Sir Archibald Alison wrote twenty volumes to prove that Providence was always on the side of the Tories; but who reads Sir Archibald Alison? Real history (such as Gibbon's) cannot be written if any such theory as Mr. Wilson's "Revelation" is used to group its facts.

Let us continue our quotation from Mr. Wilson:

"To those who are deeply impressed with God's influence on the hearts of man, to those who grasp this God-theory—this revelation-theory—it carries conviction. They read and see the history of man in its light—they see the Spirit striving with man—the Eternal Consciousness more and more revealed in the inchoate, time-bound individual. All the world of nature and history speaks of God. It is a theory which man cannot perfectly master, nor apply to every detail, nor prove conclusively to all minds; but in spite of this it convinces such as grasp it.

Discovery becomes indistinguishable from revelation. All is the work of God."

Passing by those parts of this quotation that are to me incomprehensible, I would ask if this reference to a "God-theory" is not either a palpable truism, or a misstatement of facts. Those who worshipped the Olympian Zeus, or Venus of the Myrtle-tree, or Diana of Ephesus; those who built the great temples of Hindustan; the Mahomedans who say that there is no God but Allah; were not all these imbued with the God-idea, and did they know of this eternal strife between revelation and religion? If on the other hand the idea of God to which Mr. Wilson refers implies a being hostile to religion, and governing mankind by a slow and partial process of revelation, then his sentence simply amounts to this, that those who believe it, believe it. Does this carry conviction to the great and constantly increasing mass of mankind who cannot grasp the God-idea? They cannot "see the spirit striving with man", but they see man's reason striving with religion and superstition. Mr. Wilson elsewhere says that it is found possible by experience "to feel all human history instinct with God". Does he realize the fact that those who have once grasped the profound solace of Materialistic philosophy see all theological dogma instinct with man?

With reference to such men, those "who have abandoned our dogma and are indifferent to our cultus", Mr. Wilson remarks as follows:

"It is perhaps our fault if they think that this is all that Christianity has to offer. But they do not and cannot escape from the Christian revelation, even though they call it by another name. It is light; and in that light some of them live and walk; and the cultus, the ritual, the *θηρησκεία* which they adopt may not be wholly dissimilar to that 'pure' cultus or ritual or *θηρησκεία* of St. James, which consists in charity and purity and unworldliness, and is, along with the sacraments, the only Christian ritual ordained in the Bible."

Here at least is consolation; whether we believe or reject the dogma, the work of revelation will go on. Why, then, should we force and strain our reason to accept a theory which does not depend on our acceptance of it, but which must remain true whether we accept it or not?

Better to maintain the rectitude and supremacy of our reason, knowing that we shall not lose one iota of the benefit of revelation. Is this Mr. Wilson's advice? It seems unanswerable.

Mr. Wilson's own position as regards religion seems to be delineated in the following sentences :—

“ But for the vast mass of mankind it is of far more importance to hand down to them and through them the leading truths of revelation in *any* form, than to insist on the inadequacy of the form. Of course men trained, as men ought to be trained, to criticise and question everything, may feel that the cultus and dogma of Christianity in its present form, if put forward and insisted on as absolute, authoritative, exhaustive truths, are a concealment of the higher light; and their honesty compels them to renounce and even to denounce them. But when such men come in contact with their less critical brethren, whose convictions and hopes and faiths must be clear, defined, emphatic, dogmatic, to whom vaguer and more philosophical expressions convey no meaning, they will discover that the language in which revelation is transferable to them is, to a far larger extent than they anticipated before trial, the current language of cultus and dogma. They will be powerless to find another shell for the kernel. Nevertheless, such men will fearlessly purify their teaching from the grosser dogmas from which Christian teaching is by no means wholly free, and will try to contend, to a certain extent, with the lower religious instinct in the true spirit of their Master, educating their people to feel the spirit, and not only see the letter.”

Some of this quotation describes the position of Secularists as well as of enlightened Churchmen. But in one essential point our morality differs from theirs. Holding as we do that the whole nut, shell and kernel alike, is poisonous, we do not retain a worthless shell for the sake of the kernel, but we boldly tell our less “critical brethren” to beware of both.

So far, therefore, as Mr. Wilson represents a distinct school of thought, whose influence in the church is on the increase, we may from this sermon, preached in our great national cathedral, claim this further concession to Free-thought, that religion is hateful, injurious, and of human origin, and that it is committed to a long and eventually losing strife. That is a clear advantage. It matters not that Mr. Wilson would see a divine revelation in the power that is to overcome religion. Let him cherish the delusion,

—we know that it is man's reason and not God's spirit that has maintained the glorious, and soon to be victorious, conflict.<sup>1</sup>

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### III.—RELIGION *v.* REVELATION.

[From the *National Reformer* of the 30th November, 1884.]

The theory of a ceaseless strife between the spirit of God and religion, propounded in the remarkable sermon preached at St. Paul's Cathedral and recently reviewed here, is so novel and startling as to justify a closer examination than was then attempted. It is with all the greater pleasure that we again refer to it, because Mr. Wilson's opinions deserve, in no ordinary measure, our respect and attention; for no English churchman has made such efforts as he has to understand the position of Secularists, or has shown such a disposition to discuss philosophy with us on terms of equality.

Freethinkers are in the habit of ascribing to human reason the gradual illumination of man, and his liberation from superstition. The claim, therefore, that these benefits are due to the influence or spirit of a God who hates superstition as much as any Secularist does, is well calculated to arrest our attention.

I have already quoted Mr. Wilson's definition of the revelation to which he attributes such vast results; and I have attempted to show that before his hypothesis can be placed before us for acceptance he must state with greater precision what facts there are for theorising about. Of ourselves we have no knowledge of such facts, and are entirely dependent on him for information about them. He tells us the facts are "the history of man, and the development of the spiritual insight and forces of mankind". It is surely on the propounder of a novel theory

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<sup>1</sup> The words "Let him cherish the delusion" have a shade of bitterness; and I should prefer to say: "Let him, if he can, prove his new position; till it is proved we must hold that it is man's reason, and not God's spirit, that has maintained the conflict".

that the onus lies of defining the historical facts on which it rests. History contains many facts, but I can recall none for the grouping of which this hypothesis is required. Let us enumerate a few; the siege of Troy and the sacrifice of Polyxena at the tomb of Achilles; the rape of the Sabine women and the death of Lucretia; the invention of printing and the discovery of America; the Oxford movement and the establishment of the Divorce Court. These facts lend themselves to scientific grouping in every direction save one; they may be arranged in support of theories in morals and politics, arts and science, education and political economy; they will even support Mr. Wilson's theory of religion; but the one thing on which they have no apparent bearing is the ceaseless strife between a divine revelation and religion.

As regards the so-called facts of spiritual development on which Mr. Wilson relies, the sermon before us does not furnish so clear a statement as is contained in a paper which he read in 1882, before the Church Congress at Derby, from which therefore we quote as follows:

"Besides these facts of history and criticism, there are other facts that cannot be traced to their ultimate origin; the result of the evolution of human nature under the influence, as we believe, of God's holy spirit; the facts of conscience and consciousness, of hope and aspiration and worship, spiritual facts which have no verification but themselves. With these lies most of our concern. They contain the germ of the spiritual life and progress of every man, the inner life which Christian teaching fosters and trains, till it is supreme. These facts lie in a region equally beyond authority and Freethought."

I submit that every phrase here used—evolution, conscience, consciousness, aspiration, and worship—requires definition. At first sight I should say that none of them implied a fact; but it is possible I may be mistaken. Still, without definition, we know not what facts are implied and whether the facts are objective or spiritual. Here again the onus of definition and proof lies on the propounder. It is vain to tell men who profess to see no phenomena that prove the existence of a God that from spiritual facts implied in such vague phrases as I have quoted, and which "have no verification but themselves", they must admit not only the existence of a God but that he has a spirit also.

Having thus attempted to show that Mr. Wilson's theory of revelation must remain in the hypothetical stage until it is duly equipped with scientific definition and demonstration, we will turn to his *à posteriori* sketch of the history of revelation. The first instance he gives of its existence is when it "spoke in Moses and made the two great commandments, love to God and man, stand out above all else". I am unaware of this event. Moses is said to have received ten commandments, one of which may be read as prescribing love to God (as if love was ever a creature of command), but they contain no trace of love to man. The precedence given by Moses to an enforced and unnatural love of God, and his silence about human love, far from illuminating our race, has caused much of the evil that Mr. Wilson attributes to religion. I have already referred to the second instance of revelation mentioned in the sermon: "when it spoke in Samuel and taught the nations" that command which King Saul was dethroned for disobeying. I am confident that an impartial consideration of the chapter referred to will lead to the conclusion that Samuel's speech was the reverse of illumination. The third instance is when "it spoke in David and in the prophets again and again in words too familiar to need quotation": I know not what passages Mr. Wilson refers to. There are many verses in David and the prophets that inculcate religion in its worst form; I can recall none that have helped to suppress it. Then, Mr. Wilson says, from the time of Ezra, for four centuries "the natural growth of thought and revelation was strangled by the grasp of religion". Here surely is a new idea introduced into the theory by the use of the words "natural" and "thought". Is the spirit of God a natural force; and has it, like man, the power of thinking? But passing this difficulty, methinks that in these four centuries man's reason achieved some deeds of renown. Buddha, Socrates, and Confucius taught; the Spartans fought at Thermopylæ; Sophocles wrote the "Antigone"; Euclid, the "Elements"; and Lucretius, the "Book of Nature"; and human art will never surpass the unknown sculptors of the Venus and the Apollo. We got on so well in those four centuries when revelation was hushed that one is tempted to ask if its revival has bettered us. Let the eighteen centuries of Christianity

and the twelve centuries of Mahomedanism answer the query.

After this pause a fresh impetus was given to revelation by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. "Obedience to the will of God, purity, gentleness, sympathy with all, with the sinful and the suffering, these and such as these were the lessons taught by his life." But it has been asserted that none of the lofty sayings attributed to Jesus in the three synoptic gospels were original: they are all said to have occurred in some earlier writing; and even if we give him the credit of selecting the best sentiments of those who went before him, we must not forget that it was he who said: "I came not to send peace, but a sword" (Matt. x., 44), and that this prediction has been fulfilled. Not even to his own Church has he brought peace, still less to the world. "He abolished ritual"; so did Buddha. He "broke down barriers of race and caste"; if so, why do they still exist? "He introduced no new dogma"; but the Comforter, that Spirit of God whom he sent—the same, I presume, who works for our illumination through revelation—has introduced much dogma. Of this final effort of revelation and its success Mr. Wilson says truly: "The religious instinct is strong; it is deep in human nature, and at times it would seem as if it had smothered the revelation of Christ".

Mr. Wilson has declined to define God. A God who has a spirit engaged in a ceaseless strife against religion, and which has been so near failure, suggests paradoxical ideas that cannot be clothed in definite terms. But though he does not define, he believes; and on this belief or consciousness he founds the theology that he preaches. Many learned divines hold that a theology resting on consciousness is insufficient, and that it requires the support of the understanding as well. Whether consciousness is of itself an adequate basis for theology is a question for the theologian, and does not concern us. No consciousness or belief, either in his own mind or the mind of others, can influence the earnest student of secular philosophy. To him such a theory as this, that rests both in its *à priori* aspect of hypothesis and in its *à posteriori* aspect of history, on unverifiable facts and sentimental consciousness, must fail to commend itself, even if without it the history of man were inexplicable.



But it is not so: we do not find in our history any entanglement that is insoluble save by the theory of a divine spirit; we can group all man's varied story, by man himself, his passions and desires, his conscience and reason. Surely that theory is better which rests on facts that can be verified, which explains our history, which solves past difficulty and future doubt—better than one which sets up an agency whose very existence is an emotion, and whose interference in mundane affairs is a mystery, for the solution of which we must eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

In these two articles I have tried to look at Mr. Wilson's theory from the point of view of a Secularist, and from the point of view of a Christian. To a Materialist it must appear illusory. But there are many Christians to whom it will be welcome as a resting-place, or half-way house. Those who recognise the hatefulness of religion, the hollowness of dogma, the impossibility of miracles, the contradiction of inspiration, the supremacy of morals, the one-ness of human nature, the eternity of matter, and the persistence of force; who cannot as yet relinquish the idea of a personal God who takes some interest, however partial and indirect, in our affairs, and who stands towards us in some relation that implies mutual obligation—such men may gladly accept the philosophy of this sermon. I should be inclined, however, to predict that they will find it is but a temporary refuge, and that the only secure citadel rests on the everlasting rocks.

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#### IV.—AUTHORITY *v.* CONSENT.

[From the *National Reformer* of 14th December, 1884.]

THE honest and persistent expression of secular opinion is at length producing some effect on the public mind. We address ourselves to all shades of religious thought. We meet the unprincipled assertions of interested priests and their too credulous flocks with satire and disapproval; those who show an inclination to argue we invite freely to

discussion; and the thoughtful men who see the instability of the popular conception of religion and who desire to understand the secular position are met half way, and are sure of our best help to enable them to grasp those truths which are our great consolation. As befits the guardians and expositors of truth, we strive to keep our walk and conversation unspotted and free from reproach, so as to show our fellows that morality is not dependent on belief. We make all due allowance for the hereditary taint of bigotry and intolerance, feeling that religion is an instinct of primitive and uncivilised man, and that its errors arise from no divine intervention, but from the ignorance and weakness of our race. Though assured of the ultimate triumph of truth, we accept with patience and forbearance, while the contest lasts, the rude buffets, the social and political disability which the laws of this country allot to unbelievers, knowing that deep down in the heart of England lies a feeling of justice, which must eventually ensure for earnest men and women a fair hearing and no disfavor. This is all we require; and when we obtain it we shall gladly leave our own opinions and those of our opponents to stand or fall by the test of truth.

I have been led to make these remarks on the present position of Secularists by some statements in a paper on the limits of Freethought and Authority read by the Rev. J. M. Wilson at the Church Congress of 1882; because I think that wide as is that gentleman's charity, and broad as are his views, he has failed to perceive that the weight of authority is on our side, and not on that of his Church.

With much of Mr. Wilson's paper we may agree. He has accurately defined Freethought, and appreciates its value; he recognises its natural limits, and strongly deprecates any artificial limits; he properly urges that between it and authority there is not a relation of mutual exclusion, but of mutual inter-dependence; but when he speaks of the consent of the past as an authority, and claims for it in religion and morals the weight of authority, we are bound to express our dissent.

I shall first quote the sentences where expression is given to those opinions that I differ from, and having done so I will state my views as to the real meaning of the words "Authority" and "Consent".

After stating that no artificial limit can be imposed on

the mind of man, and that even the creeds and tests of a Church must from time to time be interpreted and revised so as to bring them into accordance with progressive knowledge, he proceeds :

“Nor, again, is there any limit to authority. Heredity, education, the weight given instinctively to established beliefs, the vast momentum of long-standing habits and institutions, give to the past an influence on the present, which secures continuity amidst change, and makes progress steady. In other words, there exists a natural authority, subtle, groundless, far stronger than any artificial authority, and resented by none. We are held by the past, not to our harm, but our good : nursed by it, trained by it, for growth and for the right use of freedom.”

Further on, speaking of the weight of authority in different branches of knowledge, he uses these words :

“We shall see that the weight to be assigned to a great consensus of opinion in the past depends on the subject. In objective fact it is *nil*. . . . In criticism the weight is very small. . . . In theology it is far higher. . . . In ethics it is highest of all, because the axioms of ethics—honesty, justice, patriotism, filial obedience, monogamy, purity—rest on such an enormous mass of observed facts and experience in human nature. In these subjects it is so high that we are right in treating Free Thought, or rather its consequence, free action, as a crime.”

It seems to me that Mr. Wilson has here confused the two methods by which a man unable or unwilling to investigate a subject for himself may arrive at an opinion thereon without investigation. These methods are reliance on authority, and reliance on consent. They are of very different value, but are here treated as identical. We may form an opinion on the AUTHORITY of others, if we are satisfied of the observance of three conditions : (1) That their sagacity and intelligence is adequate ; (2) that they have maturely studied the subject under consideration ; and (3) that they are free from bias, interest, or compulsion. Given these conditions, and we bow to trustworthy authority ; if they are wanting, we feel hesitation and distrust. No one would trust the advice or opinion of a professional man whose intellect, or acquirements, or integrity was doubtful.

But this highest form of authority is ignored by Mr.

Wilson. When he speaks of authority, he refers to such influences as these,—heredity, education, long-standing habits, consensus of past opinion, experience of human nature. This is not authority but CONSENT. Idle, indifferent, or superficial men may use it as a guide, but no earnest inquirer after truth can accept of it as a limit to, or substitute for, Freethought. If the “consensus of the past” had continued to influence us, slavery would still have been legal, and scores of wretches would have been hanged every Monday morning at some modern substitute for Tyburn. Fortunately, in some respects, we are a practical people.

To secure the higher form of authority I have described, absolute freedom of thought is indispensable; and no thought is free that is bound by the weight of past consensus. Knowledge and experience are requisite, but they must be used as guides and not accepted as limits. Otherwise the thought is fettered, and the opinion valueless as authority.

In estimating the value of the opinion of another as authority, the third condition—that of freedom from bias, self-interest, and compulsion—is of such great importance that there is a *prima facie* reason for preferring the opinion of a Freethinker (I use the word in its common acceptation). Given equal intelligence and study, the opinion of a man who incurs obloquy by professing it, is more likely to be authoritative than that of a man who conforms to Mrs. Grundy and the “usages of society”.

The higher form of authority is wanting in regard to religion. Most dogmas are beyond human intellect, and no man ever existed whose opinion is authority for believing such a doctrine as the trinity. Nor is the study that Churchmen bring to bear on religious matters such as to command our confidence. It has no scientific value, and is bound by foregone conclusions. I shall wait till the third condition is seriously claimed for apologists before I dispute it, merely remarking that martyrdoms do not consecrate with the halo of authority the opinions for which men and women have died deaths of agony. Though every church has its martyr roll, it has also its black list of those who have suffered for free or for fettered thought, at its suit, and because they differed from it. Our fellow men have been so ready to die for all

sorts of irrational emotions that it is easier to inquire for oneself than to decide which of the martyrs is worthy to be followed as a guide.

I admit, therefore, all the influence claimed for Consent in the first of the two extracts quoted above. The influence exists, and has some good and some bad effects: we think the bad effects preponderate, and we object to its being elevated into the position of Authority.

Turning to the second extract above quoted, I shall very briefly state three objections of a more formidable nature than any hitherto made. Mr. Wilson seems desirous to impose on Freethought, in regard to morals, far more stringent bonds than he would impose in regard to religion; a course that appears to me so dangerous that I shall be very glad to learn that I have mistaken the drift of his opinion. My objections are: (1) The six "virtues" named by Mr. Wilson are not axioms of ethics nor axioms at all; an axiom must contain a statement of fact or opinion. (2) Not one of the virtues named implies an idea that can be transformed into axiomatic shape, resting on past consent and adapted for future guidance. Let Mr. Wilson try, as regards "Patriotism", to construct an axiom for the guidance of an Irish Nationalist, or, as regards "Monogamy", to construct one for a Turkish Pasha: he will find that the light thrown by the past on the path of the future is dim, indirect, and apt to mislead; and that the "authority" of one man is more valuable than the consent of millions. (3) So soon as Freethought condemns an ethical rule that rests on past consent, then the crime is not (as Mr. Wilson asserts) to translate the thought into action, but to stifle the free thought by pretending that consent is an authority that supersedes it.

In a word, I agree with Mr. Wilson in identifying Authority and Freethought. We differ in this, that he regards Consent as identical with Authority, and therefore identical with Freethought, while I regard Consent as opposed to and inconsistent with Authority and Freethought.

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## V.—ON FREE DISCUSSION.

[From the *National Reformer* of December 28th, 1884.]

THE following extract from the *Edinburgh Review* of 1850 (vol. xci., page 525) will be read with interest. The work reviewed is entitled "Influence of Authority in Matters of Opinion", and was published in 1849 by Mr. George Cornewell Lewis, afterwards Sir G. C. Lewis, Bart., who was a Cabinet Minister from 1855 till his death in 1863. A second edition appeared in 1875, and was reviewed by Mr. Gladstone in the opening article of the first volume of the *Nineteenth Century*. A reply from the pen of Sir James Stephen appears at page 270; and Mr. Gladstone's rejoinder at page 902 of the same volume. The opinions on authority and consent which I recently expressed in these columns were to a great measure based on Sir G. C. Lewis's book.

Times have changed since 1850, and it can no longer be said with truth that "public opinion exercises a formidable repression of infidelity", or that "the avowedly infidel books that appear are few". No dogma of religion is now so sacred, no pretension so vital, as to preclude discussion from any point of view, however radical.

Mr. Gladstone has thus described Sir G. C. Lewis' position: "As a Theist he did not recognise the ark of the covenant, but he recognised the presence within it as true, though undefinable". (*Nineteenth Century*, vol. i., p. 921.)

"There is one circumstance which, in England, impairs authority in matters of religion, to which Mr. Lewis has not adverted. It is the state of English law and English opinion on infidelity.

"Christianity, we are told, is parcel of the law of England; therefore to 'write against Christianity in general', to use the words of Holt, or 'to impugn the Christian religion generally', in those of Lord Kenyon, or 'to impeach the established faith, or to endeavor to unsettle the belief of others,' in those of Justice Bayley, is a misdemeanor at common law, and subjects the offender, at the discretion of the court, to fine, imprisonment, and infamous corporal punishment. The statute law is rather vague. By the 9th and 10th Will. III., cap. 32, whoever, having been educated a Christian, shall by writing, printing, teaching, or advised speaking, deny any one of the

persons in the Holy Trinity to be God, or assert that there are more Gods than one, or deny the Christian religion to be true, or the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be of divine authority, shall for the first offence, be incapable of holding any office or place of trust, civil or military, and for the second, be imprisoned for three years, and be incapable of suing in any court of law or equity, or of accepting any gift or legacy. The punishment for denying the doctrine of the Trinity was repealed in our own times; but the remainder of the statute is in full force at this day. It is true that, in these times, neither the common law nor the statute is likely to be enforced against a sober, temperate disputant. The publisher of the translation of Strauss has not been punished. But his safety is precarious. If anyone were so ill-advised as to prosecute him, he must be convicted of libel, unless the jury should think fit to save him at the expense of perjury; and we doubt whether the court would venture to inflict on him a mere nominal sentence.

“But the repression of infidelity by law is far less formidable than that which is exercised by public opinion. The author of a work professedly and deliberately denying the truth of Christianity would become a Pariah in the English world. If he were in a profession, he would find his practice fall off; if he turned towards the public service, his avenues would be barred. In society he would find himself shunned or scorned—even his children would feel the taint of their descent. To be suspected of holding infidel opinions, though without any attempt at their propagation, even without avowing them, is a great misfortune. It is an imputation which every prudent man carefully avoids. Under such circumstances, what reliance can an Englishman place on the authority of the writers who profess to have examined into the matter, and to have ascertained the truth? Can he say, ‘Their premises and conclusions are before the public. If there were any flaw in them, it would be detected and exposed’? The errors committed or supposed to be committed by writers on the evidences of Christianity may be detected, but there is little chance of their being exposed. It may, perhaps be safe sometimes to impugn a false premise, or an unwarranted inference, but never to deny a conclusion. It is dangerous, indeed, to assert on religious matters any views with which the public is not familiar. It is to this immunity from criticism that we owe the rash assumption of premises, and the unwarranted inferences, with which many theological writings abound. Facts and arguments are passed from author to author, which in Secular matters would be dissipated in the blaze of free discussion. Theological literature, at least the portion of it which relates to the doctrines which ‘are parcel of the common law’ has been a protected literature;

and much of its offspring has the ricketty distorted form which belongs to the unhappy bantlings that have been swaddled by protection.

“To this state of things we owe the undue importance given to the few avowedly infidel books which actually appear. They are like the political libels which creep out in a despotism. Their authors are supposed to be at least sincere, since they peril reputation and fortune. What could have given popularity to ‘The Nemesis of Faith’ but the persecution of its author? To this also we owe the insidious form in which infidelity is usually insinuated—intermixed with professions of orthodoxy, and conveyed by a hint or a sneer. If Gibbon could have ventured, in simple and express terms, to assert his disbelief in Christianity, all his *persiflage* would have been omitted; and the reader, especially the young reader, would have known that his anti-Christian opinions were the attacks of an enemy—not the candid admissions of a friend. To this also we owe much of the scepticism which exists among educated Englishmen: using the word scepticism in its derivative sense—to express not incredulity, but, doubt. They have not the means of making a real independent examination of the evidences of their faith. A single branch of that vast inquiry, if not aided by taking on trust the results handed down by previous inquirers, would occupy all the leisure which can be spared from a business or a profession. All that they think they have time for is to read a few popular treatises. But they know that these treatises have not been subjected to the ordeal of unfettered criticism. As little can they infer the truth of the established doctrine from the apparent acquiescence of those around them. They know that they may be surrounded by unbelieving conformists. And thus they pass their lives in scepticism—in a state of indecision—suspecting that what they have been taught may contain a mixture of truth and error which they are unable to decompose. If a balance could be struck between the infidelity that is prevented, and the infidelity that is occasioned, by the absence of free discussion, we have no doubt that the latter would greatly predominate.”

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