

CT 208

SACRED HISTORY

AS A BRANCH OF

ELEMENTARY EDUCATION.

PART I.

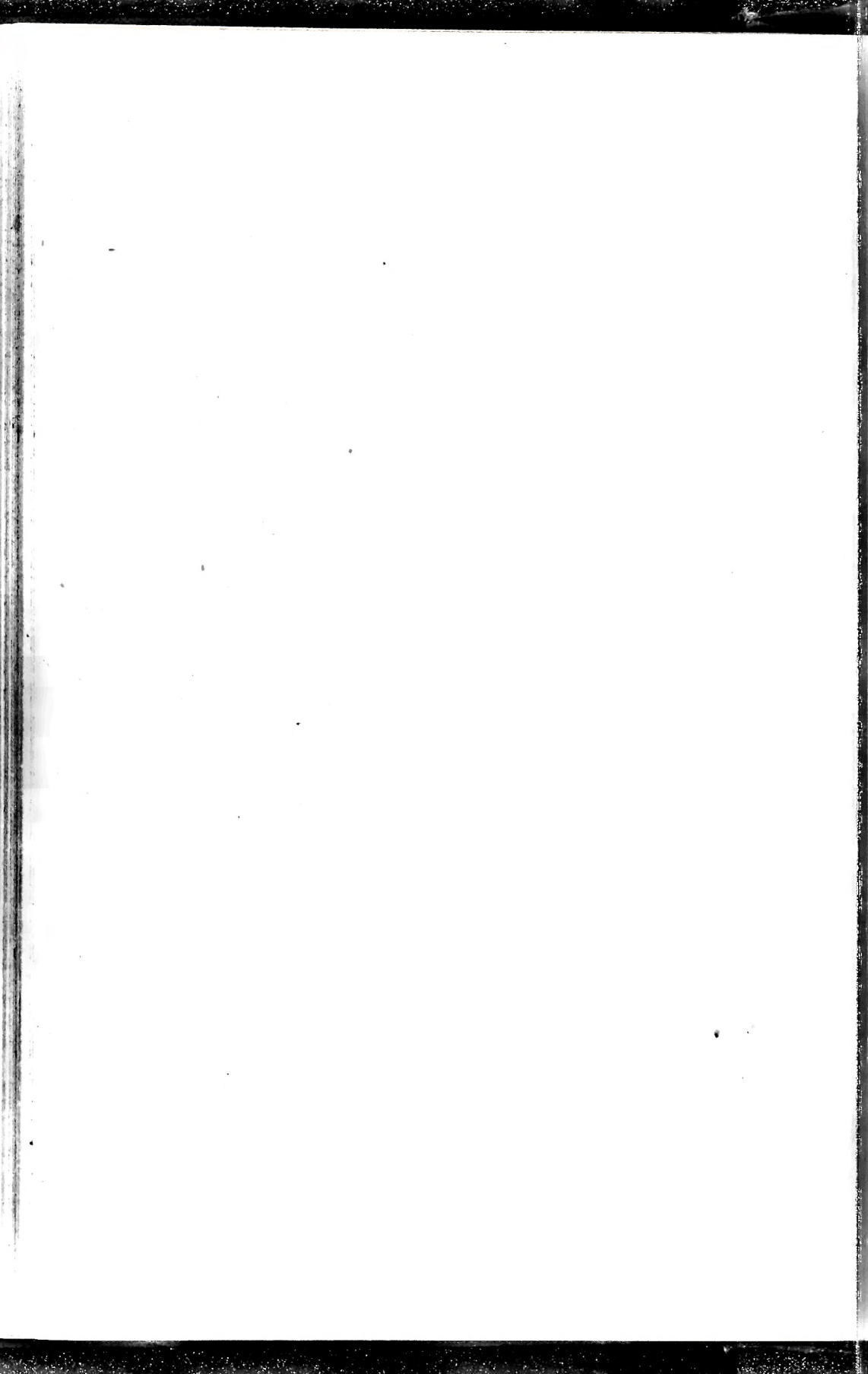
ITS INFLUENCE ON THE INTELLECT.



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ELEMENTARY EDUCATION.

OU^{GH}T the teaching of Sacred History, in its traditional and biblical form, to be approved of or maintained in the primary schools of a free and progressive people?

Such is the question which I propose to discuss. Thus stated, it does not address itself exclusively to any one nation, nor to any one Church. It is not a criticism of one denomination, nor of one school-system more than of another. It has no special reference to the religious instruction of Catholics or Protestants as such. Important and interesting for all sects and parties alike, it is addressed alike to all, and the discussion of it ought to be entirely free from party spirit and sectarian prejudice.

To avoid misunderstanding, it may be well, here, at the outset, clearly to define and to circumscribe the subject proposed for consideration. The position which I am to maintain would be utterly absurd, if it were extended beyond the limits which are assigned to it by the very title of this essay. There is no question, there can be no question here, of any but the *popular* Sacred History,—of Biblical History as it is commonly taught

in schools, and as we have all learned it in our childhood. I declare formally that I am not to treat of the Bible, nor of Biblical History, as viewed in relation to the science of Religion, as studied in our universities, in our theological halls, and generally in the higher walks of learning, by the light of comparative philology, of archæology, and of all the other sciences which are now made subservient to the science of history.

I most expressly restrict my subject to the now prevailing popular primary teaching of Biblical History ; and I shall accordingly take for reference, not this or that learned work of historical, critical, or exegetical interpretation of the Bible, but only the authorized translation of it, which every one possesses, and which is used in our schools.

It will be seen that this question, though bearing closely upon the highest theological doctrines, presents itself here in a totally different relation ; for it turns, in the first place and chiefly, upon a practical problem of popular education. The discussion of such a question, however various may be the opinions held regarding it, ought to be cordially welcomed by every man in a free country such as this, where true progress is universally desired.

It is not difficult to discern and to state the principles by which we ought to be guided in this discussion ; and there can scarcely be any dispute about these principles when stated. All must agree that education, in every stage from the lowest to the highest, ought to have a twofold purpose—the culture of the *intelligence*, and that of the *moral conscience*. Such ought especially to be the design and the aim of the *primary* education which addresses itself to the children of the people, among whom, in the majority of cases, it is not likely to be followed up by any other regular instruction. Before these children, who can scarcely be expected to have afterwards either the time or the means for completing

or correcting the ideas which have once been inculcated on their minds, a teacher ought to say nothing, do nothing, inculcate nothing, which may not have a good effect upon the intellect or upon the heart,—nothing but what may contribute to teach them either to think aright or to act aright. *To make men*:—this is the glorious task of the teacher in modern society. To make men, is to develop, in the youths committed to his care, enlightened intellects and upright consciences.

It is from this twofold point of view that we propose to consider the study of Sacred History; it is by its effects upon our two essential faculties, the *intellect* and the *conscience*, that we propose to judge it.

I. THE INFLUENCE OF SACRED HISTORY UPON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTELLECT.

Let us put ourselves in the position of a child who is being taught sacred history, and endeavour to realize and explain to ourselves the ideas of Humanity, of Nature, and of God, which will thus be conveyed to the mind of the child, in these three great departments which complete the cycle of human thought.

Let us see, first, how the modern idea of *humanity* will harmonize with that of a *sacred history*.

What is the meaning of this expression, *sacred history*? Wherefore *sacred*? In what respect is it more sacred than other histories? Is it that it will present to us the ideal of sanctity or holiness in action? Is it a history of the purest, the best, the most virtuous men? This title of sacred history would be intelligible, if applied to a book which should present to our view a gallery of portraits worthy to serve as models to humanity, a series of biographies, such as those of Joseph and of Moses among the Hebrews, of Aristides, and of Socrates among the Greeks, of Cakyamouni in Hindostan, of the great Roman Stoics, of the Christian

martyrs and missionaries, of a Spinoza, of a Luther, of a Vincent de Paul, of all those in short who have lived and died for the defence of their faith, their reason, their conscience, their earnest convictions. We might thus have an admirable collection of the benefactors of the human race, of men devoted to their duty, taken impartially from all periods, from all peoples, and from all creeds. But these exalted and noble lessons are not what men call *sacred history*. This history is thus named, not on account of the holiness of the precepts, or of the examples which it contains, but because it is the history of a people who were not, like others, left to their own resources, of a people who received, from God himself, revelations, promises, supernatural lights, who were, in a word, the "*people of God*."

What idea is the child to derive from this title alone?

His first impression, if left to himself, will be that God, like men, has His favourites, His protégés; that, by an entirely unmerited choice, He honoured with a special affection and care one nation to the exclusion of all others. The child, with his simple, direct, and wholesome logic, will say exactly what Calvin said. "*Certainly,*" wrote the great Reformer in his energetic freedom, "*in that God of old adopted the seed of Abraham, He has given a sufficiently clear proof THAT HE DID NOT LOVE THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE EQUALLY. Having rejected all other nations, HE LOVED ONE ALONE. He restricted His special love to a small number, whom He was pleased to choose from among the rest.*" It is well known that, up to our own time, this theory has been frankly accepted by the theologians called orthodox. In these days, however, when it is clearly becoming impossible to maintain such a theory, a peculiar explanation has been adopted. The doctrine of absolute predestination, which Calvin consistently made the chief corner stone of the orthodox system, is now rejected by many theologians as incompatible with

morality: and it is said that all nations and all men have an equal share in the love of God,—that the provisional and exceptional election of the Jews is not a privilege,—that Israel is chosen only as an instrument, not for himself, but for the benefit of the whole human race,—as a monitor whom God employs for the general instruction of all His children. Supposing this latter interpretation to be the true one, it would in some degree be a reply to the moral objection of the Divine partiality, which we shall repeatedly find again; but it does not at all remove the historical objection, which is that the *sacred history* causes the child to conceive a thoroughly false idea of humanity, by the very fact that it teaches him to divide human history into two parts, the one sacred, the other profane; the one, in which God speaks, acts, and shows Himself directly or personally on every page; and the other, in which He does not thus interfere, and in which He acts only by the operation of natural laws.

Until recently, it was considered orthodox to see in ancient history, the reign of God in Israel, and the reign of the devil everywhere else; but it is now more generally thought correct to recognise a negative preparation among the Gentiles, as well as a positive preparation in Israel. It is thus assumed that there have been two distinct kinds of divine revelation, all the other nations having been enlightened only by the dim and indirect rays of natural light; while the Jews, on the contrary, were alone privileged to be in constant and immediate communication with God himself. See how much is implied in the mere expression—*sacred history*.

I do not at present inquire whether this notion can be reconciled with that of divine equity; but I ask whether it can be for a moment maintained in the face of history. History now enables us to say with full assurance, that humanity is one, in all the diversity of its families; and that God, who is also One, has

spoken to man always and everywhere by the same means, and in the same forms. He is the Father of all men and of all nations, and has not shown himself to some, nor concealed himself from others, any more three thousand years ago than to-day.

The Jews, indeed, affirm that they received, from God himself, revelations of an entirely special and supernatural kind, which are recorded in the Bible. But the Brahmins, the Budhists, the Parsees, and I may say all the nations of the east, are no less positive in affirming the same pretension. There is not a single nation of Asia, ancient or modern, which has not its Bible, or which does not declare that it is the holy people—the chosen people of God ; not one which, in support of this exceptional “ calling and election,” does not appeal to miracles, to numerous interventions of the Deity, to the testimony of thousands of their best men, and finally to books divinely inspired.

When among so many *Bibles*, among so many *Words of God*, you take that of the Jews as absolutely true, and declare those of all other nations absolutely false, can you say, in all sincerity, that you have investigated, with equal attention, patience, and seriousness, the claims of all these nations to this pretended revelation—to this pretended office of “ special instrument ” of the Deity? Especially with reference to primary instruction, is it not manifest that neither the pupils nor the teachers are in a position to make this comparison between the Hebrew Bible, the Veda of India, the Avesta of Persia, the Koran of the Arabs, and the other sacred books of the East? They are virtually forced to regard the Bible as an isolated monument, without even dreaming of the possibility of tracing the connection between the sacred codes of the various ancient religions. The children do not know, and, according to the present system, nine-tenths of them will never know, that there are as many *sacred histories*, and as many *chosen peoples*, and as many *divine revela-*

tions, as there have been nations in the east, and almost in all antiquity. By far the greater number, thanks to this early instruction, will probably remain, all through life, ignorant or misinformed regarding the fundamental idea of human history—the natural progressive development of all the human races, a development which each of them attributes in the first place to a miraculous revelation, but which the comparative history of civilizations shows to be governed by laws common to all, according to a general plan of divine providence.

But how can the immense religious superiority of the Jews, over all other ancient nations, be explained on historical and natural grounds?

In the first place, this superiority is neither so decided nor so manifest, except to minds which are unacquainted with the study of the ancient civilizations. It is quite superfluous to say that, if we select the most beautiful of the Psalms, or the purest and most admirable pages of the Prophets, to be compared with some gross form of fetichism, or of primitive idolatry, if the Jehovah of Isaiah be opposed to the Jupiter of Lucian, our minds may well be impressed with the contrast. But take a wider view. Compare the moral precepts of the Mosaic law with those of Zoroaster, or of Manu,—the Hebrew poems with those of the Rig Veda; trace and remark the analogies of almost all the prescriptions relating to manners, to legal defilements, to ablutions, to the whole system of ritual, among the Persians for example, and among the Hebrews. It will then be found that the imaginary abyss of separation has been nearly levelled up; and, instead of an immense contrast, there will remain only inequalities of various degrees. The Hebrews will have the advantage upon one point, the Persians upon another, and upon a third the Hindoos, or the Egyptians.

Let us, however, forget for a moment that the monotheism of Zoroaster is as real, if not as precise, as that

of the Hebrews ; that the Persians and Parsees, no less than the Hebrews, have had a horror of any sensible representation of the Deity ; that charity was recognized and preached in India at an earlier date than in Judea ; that the appreciation and esteem of purity, of holiness, and of labour, were more ancient, and probably also more complete, among the Persians than among the Jews ; and that numerous passages can be quoted from the Vedas, or from the Yaçnas, which would sustain, in moral sublimity, a parallel with the most admirable pages of the Bible.

Let us forget for a moment all these patent facts, and many others similar, which might be noted, and let us suppose that, in religion, the Jews have had, over the rest of humanity, a clear superiority, equal to that, for example, which the Greeks have had in the domain of æsthetics. Would it be absolutely necessary, in order to explain such a difference, to place that nation outside of the common conditions of humanity, or to introduce for them alone the supernatural into history ? If you can explain, without any miracle, the genius of a Homer, or of a Phidias, as well as that of a Zoroaster, of a Budha, or of a Confucius, why should the same explanation not apply to the genius of a Moses or of an Isaiah ?

Seriously, whether we consult our own common sense, or whether we examine the past, can we believe that this same God, who now speaks to all men in the same language, employed a few centuries ago extraordinary means, to make himself known exclusively to a small Semitic tribe dwelling in Palestine, while, over all the rest of the globe, the thousands and millions of human creatures, whom He had there brought into existence, were left by Him to grope in darkness ? If we desire to give to our children our cherished modern idea of the unity, equality, and fraternity of men of every race, and of every time, of every colour, and of every clime, is it wise or right to teach them to behold

in the past some nations abandoned by God, and others enlightened by Him, a handful of *elect* specially surrounded with miraculous cares, and all the rest,—that is to say almost the totality of the human generations,—deprived by God of these exceptional favours?

Confining ourselves to this general criticism of the dualistic character, which sacred history introduces into the notion of *humanity*; let us now see whether it will give to our children better instruction upon the subject of *nature*, and whether it will impart to them a more correct idea of the physical than of the human world.

I shall not here formally enter upon the question of the supernatural. Although perfectly convinced, for my own part, that there have never been, in any time nor in any place, more miracles than are now to be seen in our daily life, I respect and would not unnecessarily offend those persons who still to some extent believe in the supernatural. Thank God, history shows us, with sufficient clearness, the progress of humanity in this question. From age to age, the supernatural steadily loses ground. At the commencement of civilization all is prodigy,—the thunder, the wind, an eclipse, a comet, the smallest meteor. By degrees, in proportion as men come to understand a little better the causes or the nature of such phenomena, the circle of miracle becomes narrower; until at length, as among Christians of the present day, men feel themselves compelled to refer miracles to a remote period of legendary antiquity, there to wait until another step of progress be accomplished, which shall cause them to be entirely renounced. Let us patiently and hopefully await, from the force of events and the development of humanity, the final fall of the few, frail, and ruinous refuges of supernaturalism which still survive. Humanity moves, and is now again stirring itself; but God guides the movement, and, notwithstanding every obstacle, He will assuredly cause yet another stride on-

wards to be taken in due time. It is only a question of time, and it is useless for us to struggle passionately against it.

But, without pausing to inquire what degree of belief still generally retains its hold upon the minds of men, and judging it more useful to regard the matter from the believers' point of view, let us seek to ascertain what part ought to be assigned to miracles in education, especially in that of the children of the people. However much you may believe in miracles, I would say to a believer, yet you regard them only as exceptions. You of course acknowledge that in general the world is guided by invariable, inflexible, universal laws. Would it not be well to maintain the same position in the instruction of childhood? Is it not necessary to insist infinitely more upon the rule than upon the exception? In the first place, thoroughly impress upon the child that there are laws of nature; and let his mind, which is so readily inclined to fantasy, be familiarized with those laws, and accustomed to seek *everywhere and always* the physical explanation of phenomena. After this has been done, it will be soon enough to teach him, if you think it right to do so, that in a very small number of extraordinary cases, two or three thousand years ago, some revocations of or departures from those immutable laws have taken place. If, on the contrary, at the age when his reason is still so tender, so pliant, and so unsteady, you speak to him continually of miracles and of prodigies, there must be great danger of reversing the parts, of making him take the exception for the rule, and, worst of all, of banishing from his mind the idea of seeking for the rule.

It ought to be borne in mind that reflection has to be *learned* by the child. His spontaneous conception of everything is under the figure of a material image; and, "as he has not yet any notion of the true conditions of knowledge and of certainty, his faith is in

proportion to the effect produced upon his imagination, and not in proportion to the evidence. He believes in what is marvellous more easily than in what is simple. The extraordinary is not only most interesting, but also most convincing to the mind of a child. *Miracle is the thing which he most readily comprehends.* It is sufficient to make a strong impression upon his imagination in order to convince him. The more brilliant the colours, the more readily will his young genius be captivated therewith. Nurses know this instinctively, and hence their incredible stories often remain graven in the memories of children, while reasonable and probable narratives make little or no impression. Phantoms have a much stronger hold than realities upon the minds of children; ghosts are to them much more formidable than living men; and fantastic pictures make a far stronger impression than the clear and distinct reality." These reflections of a great modern philosopher explain how very difficult it is for a child to acquire the idea of a *Nature* governed by regular laws, and not by miraculous caprice.

Such being the instinctive propensity of a child, must it not be injurious to the development of his reason to implant in his mind at first, as the basis of intelligence, a thick stratum of the marvellous, which cannot but tend strongly to stifle the faculty of rational reflection, of which the culture and the growth are already so difficult and so slow? This is precisely the danger which, in my opinion, is presented by sacred history. Taking possession, as it does, before any other history, of the still vacant mind, it widely diffuses and plants therein a taste for the miraculous, instead of furnishing an antidote to that taste already by nature so strong.

Recall to mind the impressions of your childhood,—your first lessons of sacred history. You will find that these fall into two great classes, both belonging to the

marvellous ; on the one hand *legends*, and on the other *miracles* properly so called.

By *legends*, I mean narratives which believers themselves can no longer take in the literal sense, but are now constrained to regard as allegorical, while attributing to them a symbolism as profound as they may wish. For example, Adam and Eve are placed naked and innocent, in a delightful garden, at the centre of which *two mysterious trees* spread their boughs. Do you remember their magical peculiarities ? The one is the tree of life, the other gives the knowledge of good and evil. All at once a reptile, the serpent (for, do not forget, Genesis does not say that this serpent was the devil,—a personage who does not make his appearance in the Jewish religion until a very much later time ;—it says merely that it was “more subtile than any of the field,” Gen. iii. 1),—the serpent, then, caused our first parents to eat the fruit of one of these trees. It was the tree of knowledge ; and you know that, as soon as they had eaten that fruit, it had indeed the effect of making them know what they had till then been ignorant of. Then, says the Bible :—

GEN. iii. 22-24.—“The Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil : and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever ; therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man ; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.”

Surely it cannot wound the religious feelings of my readers to enquire simply, whether any of them can here believe the Bible *in the literal sense*. Who can now be found to maintain that there really did exist two trees of which the magical fruits had these virtues, the one to make man think, and the other to render him immortal ? Who ever imagines now that the

knowledge of good and evil, which we all in some degree possess, is actually derived, as Genesis says it is, from a certain fruit eaten by our first parents? Who can believe that God drove man out of Eden, for fear that he should steal for himself immortality, as he had already stolen knowledge?—No one, assuredly. It is so little believed, that, among modern theologians, it is now generally thought necessary to apply a fanciful interpretation to the whole of this primitive legend. It has also been argued by some that it is impossible to determine clearly what portion of this picture ought to be taken literally, and what in a figurative sense. Perhaps so; but that is precisely the character of a *myth*. The phrase *magical fruit*, as here employed, may be objected to, because there is no such expression in the Bible; but then is not this one tree called *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*, and that other *the tree of life*? These words must either signify nothing, or else they suppose qualities very different from those of ordinary trees. Doubtless you may spiritualize all this; but then, who hinders you from doing the same with all the analogous myths of the Vedas and of the Avesta? If you were to give this story to the children, as you in reality take it yourselves,—as a beautiful myth,—as an ancient and simple legend, enveloping a great moral truth, it might then be all right and proper. But was it necessary that God should intervene to dictate only myths? If so, what difference, of any value, can you establish between the Word of God and mythology? Among two neighbouring nations you find the same cosmogonic allegory under different forms more or less poetic: in the one case it shall be only an imposture, while in the other case it is celestial truth! Is this reasonable?

Without insisting upon a crowd of other myths, to which the same or similar reflections would apply, let us come to the *miracles* properly so called.

May it not be said that the most important function

and aim of instruction ought to be, to make children early practise the habit of putting to themselves always these two questions,—WHY? and HOW? It is only thus that they can acquire the *knowledge* that the things which they learn from their teachers or from their books, are truths and realities; and this alone is *true knowledge*. It is only thus that they can be educationally inspired with that thirst for the knowledge of all things real and true, which is the mainspring of human progress. It is only thus that their reasoning powers, the highest faculties of their minds, can be exercised, disciplined, trained, and developed.

But will a history composed of miracles, that is to say, of things which cannot be explained—of which it is impossible to know the *why* and the *how*;—will such a history tend to encourage or to extinguish the scientific curiosity of a child? It has, to all his questions, a stereotyped reply, which cuts short the spirit of investigation:—*Why?*—Because God willed it. *How?*—As God willed it.

It is the peculiar character of the Semitic peoples, and especially of the Jewish race, to disdain secondary causes, and to prefer always, overleaping all intermediate steps, to ascend at once to first principles, or to the great First Cause. The necessary consequence of this is a general want of relish for the detailed study of facts, for the scientific observation of nature, for comparative criticism and analysis. Ask an Arab how the grass grows, how the stream flows, what produces earthquakes, famines, or epidemics,—a thousand similar questions; and he will reply to you, astonished at your ignorant curiosity,—*Allah is Allah*. Is not the reason and cause of everything a decree of God? What is the use of climbing step by step in the series of secondary causes? Why not accept *the will of God* as a universally sufficient explanation?

This is exactly the effect which sacred history inevitably produces upon the intellect of childhood. It

accustoms the mind to dispense with the laborious investigation of the *how* and the *why*, causing it to refer things directly to God without any other explanation. Instead of being trained to see God in all those secondary causes and natural laws, by which He constantly manifests himself to us,—instead of being made to perceive that every pathway of science leads straight up to the Author of all, the child is led, through the irregular cross-roads and by-ways of miracle, to seek God chiefly by *imagination*, and is hindered from learning that He is rather to be found by *reason* on the one hand, and by *conscience* on the other.

Suppose that a pupil were to ask the question,—*Why* and *how* could there be a universal deluge?—Instead of having imparted to him a few scientific notions as to the natural character and physical causes of the great changes and revolutions of the globe, his legitimate and wholesome curiosity will be snubbed and repulsed, and he will be instructed to behold and to wonder at *the act of God*, whereby “the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened,” (Gen. vii. 11). Will not that child be very much enlightened?

When the account of the appearance of the rainbow after the deluge is the Bible-lesson for the day; this might be a favorable opportunity for making the children understand, in opposition to their natural propensity for seeing miracles everywhere, that there is absolutely nothing at all supernatural about the rainbow, and that it was quite in the nature of things that a rainbow should be produced at the time, for example, when the rains of the deluge ceased. But listen to the explanation of the matter which they will be required to accept:—

GEN. viii. 13.—“And it came to pass in the six hundredth and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from off the earth.”

GEN. ix. 8-17.—“And God spake unto Noah, and to his

sons with him, saying, And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you; and with every living creature that is with you: . . . neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth. And God said, This is the token of the covenant. . . . *I do set my bow in the cloud*, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth: and it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud; . . . and *I will look upon it that I may remember the everlasting covenant* between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth."

I do not insist upon the significance of this latter clause, which, taken in its literal sense, as it must be taken by children, will represent to them God looking upon His bow in order that He may remember His covenant. The myth, which is here put in the place of natural causes, is of small importance for well-informed persons, but the truly important consideration is that it is presented to children as an absolute fact, and that they are thus taught and accustomed to rest satisfied with merely chimerical explanations of natural phenomena.

What must be the influence of a primary education, which turns thus continually upon an inexhaustible stock of marvels? How can we expect the intellectual faculties of our children to be awakened, confirmed and developed, if, to all their questions about the nature of things, the only reply is this,—*God is God, and He is omnipotent.*

Master, the child will say, is it really true that there have been men who lived more than 900 years? Is it really true that one or two men have ascended up to heaven in a chariot of fire? That two or three others, being actually dead, have come to life again?—What presumption to ask if these things are true! How can you be so wicked as to doubt it?—They are written in the Bible.

Master, how can a she-ass speak?—Everything is possible to God.

But that cruse of oil which never failed nor was exhausted, how was that?—God is all-powerful.

And how could Jonah have been able to live three days and three nights in the belly of a fish?—My child, if the Bible said that Jonah swallowed the whale, instead of being swallowed by it, it would still be necessary to believe it.

It is thus that, while wishing to teach our children to honour God, and to believe His Word, they are in reality taught to learn nothing, but to bend their minds in passive submission to this modern and Protestant form of the worst feature of Popery,—*the Bible says so, or the Bible does not say so.*

I have often heard it said that there is nothing which children learn more willingly than sacred history. I can easily believe it; for, excepting fairy tales, there is nothing better suited to *please* their childish minds: it is so full of prodigies! But will the recounting of prodigies convey genuine instruction to the children? Will they thus be taught to think, to reflect, to observe, and to search always for truth and reality? Or will the influence of such teaching be exactly the reverse?

You see it is a practical question, demanding the most serious consideration. The teacher of a primary school is in the presence of children, by far the greater number of whom cannot be expected to acquire in after life any regular knowledge of the natural, physical, or mathematical sciences. It must certainly be injurious to make such children believe that one day, at the end of a battle between two Asiatic tribes, in order to confer upon a Jewish captain the signal advantage of slaughtering a few more fugitives, God actually caused the sun to halt in its diurnal motion through the sky, and to stand still for “about a whole day,” and that He moreover set to work, (for the Bible says so, and the children will take it in the most literal sense,) to “*cast down great stones from heaven,*” (hailstones) whereby more of the fugitives died than those who

were slain by the victorious Israelites. (Josh. x. 11-13.) To confirm the impression of this prodigious miracle as a literal fact upon their minds, the children will probably be reminded of another occasion, when, touched by the prayers and tears of a sick king who had been told that he was about to die, God relented so far as to promise him a supplement of fifteen years of life, and, as a sign that the promise would be fulfilled, "He brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down in the dial of Ahaz," (2 Kings xx. 11); "*So the sun returned ten degrees, by which it was gone down,*" (Isaiah xxxviii. 8).

What man of common sense, if he will only give the matter a serious thought, can ever be persuaded that this profusion of miracles, bidding defiance to all the conclusions of human reason, and even to the laws of mathematics, is a wholesome education for the minds of children, ignorant, credulous, imaginative, and confiding, who will probably never afterwards be in a position to acquire a scientific notion of the laws of nature, and to whom therefore and henceforth, it will seem, *as it did to the primitive peoples*, quite natural that a miracle should, at any moment, interfere with and upset the regular course of nature?

There are, however, some teachers who, on the contrary, maintain that nothing is better fitted to form the intellect and to improve the mind of a child, than the study of miracles. The miraculous is, according to them, one of the best means of culture. Such a thesis can only be maintained by those who do not properly understand what a miracle is. If a child sets himself to *reflect* upon the miracle of Isaiah or of Joshua, however little he may have been taught of the elements of cosmography, it will immediately occur to him that, if the Sun (or the Earth) had stood still or gone backwards in space, there must have thence resulted, in instant succession, throughout vast systems of worlds, endless perturbations, huge catastrophes, universal destruction ;

and, rather than suppose such impossibilities to serve no purpose but to favour a petty Jewish king, or to complete the massacre of a troop of Amorites, a child who has been truly taught to *reflect* will think of these miracles exactly what you think of those of all religions, except your own.

It is impossible to find any mode but one, of reconciling the miraculous with good instruction ; and that is to *explain* it, or, in other words, to deny it ; and this is what even the believers are now, in some measure, forced to do. In these days, for example, even among the orthodox, you will find very few persons who believe in the plagues of Egypt. It is not now uncommon to hear even fervent defenders of miracle explaining, that these plagues arose from natural causes which occur in Egypt every year but in smaller proportions ; that frogs, lice, locusts, water resembling blood, etc., are well known there ; and that the Bible narrative only shows us God giving to these facts a proportion and a fitness, which raised them to the sphere of the miraculous. Well, be it so ; but having once entered upon this path, how far are we to go ? With regard to the passage of the Red sea, the physical possibility of this famous miracle may be explained to the children by the action of the tides combined with violent winds. As to the manna and the quails it may be said that in winter innumerable flocks of quails reach the warm countries, and that the manna appears to have been the savoury fruit of a shrub which grows abundantly in the desert of Arabia. Elsewhere, the teacher may explain to his pupils that the art of discovering springs of water, and of rendering the water drinkable, still continues to be a requisite qualification for the guide of an army or of a tribe in the sands of Arabia, etc.

It is thus that some of our Protestant theologians are now disposed to treat sacred history, while others, more conservative, are ready to exclaim,—Take care what you do, to explain a miracle is to reject it, and

all the miracles hang together, so that if you reject one of them, you reject them all.

Very true ; and, likewise, if you adopt one of them, you adopt all the others. Human history is one great book, of which every page is full of miracles. How can the supernatural be preserved whole and entire in a single one of these pages, when it is banished without hesitation from all the others ? If God has performed miracles among the Jews, why deny that He may have done the same among the Hindoos and among the Persians, among the Celts and among the Germans, as the ancient writings of all these peoples abundantly affirm that He did ?

Then you had better say at once that, in the name of science and through hatred of the supernatural, you mean to deprive us of the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments.

No, this discussion has no tendency whatever to deprive you of the Bible, but only of *the superstition of the Bible*. Even you who profess so absolutely to revere the Bible as the "Word of God," do you think it would be difficult to make you confess that you reject many passages of it as containing indefensible errors ? Do you believe, for example, that the hare and the rabbit are *ruminants* ? It is not merely Moses however, it is God himself who, according to two formal texts of the Bible (I speak always of the Bible which is in every hand), directly affirms that both these animals *chew the cud*, (Lev. xi. 4-6 ; Deut. xiv. 7).

If there be one single error in the Bible, there may be two, there may be ten, and we thenceforth differ from one another only about a question of number ; which amounts to saying that no person can any longer maintain the absolute infallibility of the Bible ; and, if it contains errors, then there is nothing, even from the believers' point of view, to hinder us or them from regarding the supernatural as *one of these errors*.

Upon the third point, it is often affirmed that sacred

history abundantly compensates, in precious advantages, for all the objections which can otherwise be brought against it. There are many who admit that it presents deficiencies and inaccuracies with regard to the knowledge of *humanity* and of *nature*, while maintaining its entire perfection with regard to the knowledge of *God*.

I do not forget that Biblical history, suitably treated from the Christian point of view, often serves admirably to impress upon the children these two grand ideas,—that of the *one God*, and that of the *living God*. Even here, however, is there not some illusion? Among the men of three or four thousand years ago, the notion of God evidently was not, could not be, that which it has become with the progress of humanity. In the earliest times of which the vestiges have been preserved to us in certain books of the Bible, it bore the stamp of a rude anthropomorphism. But, however rude it may have been, it is not we who shall forget that, in its time, anthropomorphism was a progress, and that it marked the first dawn of religious and philosophical thought.

We do not at all wonder to see God *humanized* in the most ancient pages of this same Bible, in the later portions of which we shall find the purest and highest expression of the religious sentiment, precisely because we know that the Bible is neither an exceptional book, nor even the work of one single period; but merely a collection of Hebrew literature from its first attempts to its highest development.

In the earliest portions, everything bears the trace of a primitive social state, everything there has, so to say, the tone and the aspect of *childhood*; but by degrees the images change, the symbols are purified, and the worship, as well as the literature of the nation, becomes more elevated and more spiritual. If this development be taken into account, the differences which appear between Genesis, for example, and the

poetic writings of the later period, are not greater nor more surprising than the interval which separates the Niebelungen from Klopstock and from Goethe, or than the contrast between the "legends of the round table" and the works of our modern historians. If, on the contrary, this successive and progressive character be abstracted from the books of the Bible, then sacred history becomes a chaotic mixture of sublime and of rude ideas, and then it must tend, upon many points, to mislead the mind of a child.

If the Bible is a human book, its anthropomorphism is not only no reproach, but must even be admired, as it is admired in the commencements of other ancient religions. When I read therein, God *repents*, God *is angry*, God *forgets*, and God *remembers*, God *is glad*, and God *is grieved*, when I read on every page, God *speaks*, or God *appears*, I easily reduce to their true value these various symbols, while fully appreciating their ingenuity or simplicity, and the beauty or the truth which they may contain. But when you give these same symbols to a child, as so many supernatural facts, derived from a book which not only is true, but which is the very Word of God, then the danger commences, and it is necessary to protest against this substitution of ancient Hebrew anthropomorphism for eternal and pure truth.

God is not only thus humanly personified in the Bible, but He is therein sometimes *materialized* to an extent which is now almost inconceivable to us, who are accustomed to contemplate Jehovah only through the light of Gospel times. For example, when Noah came out of the Ark, he offered a burnt-offering of many animals to God ; "and the Lord *smelled a sweet savour* ;" "and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more," (Gen. viii. 21). Would the most fervent imitators of the Biblical style now venture to employ such an expression, even under the pretext of symbolism ?

It would be more than wearisome to collect here all the traces of a similar materialism, all the texts in which corporeal forms are attributed to God. Think of the burning bush; think of Sinai, where, from the midst of clouds and of thunders, with "the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud," God gives, with his own hand, to Moses, two tables, written, says Exodus, "*with the finger of God,*" (xxx. 18; xxxi. 16). Think especially of the prominence given to this idea,—majestic, if its poetic symbolism be understood, but extremely rude if taken literally as given in the Bible:—no man can see or hear God without instantly dying: one single people has been able to *hear* him, one single man has been able to *see* him—without perishing. Would it be easy to explain the following passages, so that they shall not have, at least for children, a sense decidedly *too material*?

EXOD. xix. 18-24.—"And Mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and *God answered him by a voice.* And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mount; and the Lord called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up. And the Lord said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the Lord to *gaze,* and many of them perish. And let the priests also, which come near unto the Lord, sanctify themselves, *lest the Lord break forth upon them.* . . . Thou shalt come up, thou and Aaron with thee; but let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto the Lord, lest he break forth upon them."

EXOD. xx. 18-21.—"And all the people saw the thunders, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear; but *let not God speak with us lest we die.* . . . And the people stood afar

off: and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness *where God was.*"

DEUT. v. 24-26.—“Behold, the Lord our God hath shewed us his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire: we have seen this day that God doth talk with man, and he liveth. Now, therefore, why should we die? for this great fire will consume us: if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, then we shall die. For *who is there of all flesh that hath heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, AS WE HAVE, and lived?*”

And, as a commentary upon this scene, as grand and imposing, as it is possible for an exhibition of symbols to be, addressed only to the senses through the imagination, let us see how Moses afterwards sums it up and estimates its importance:—

DEUT. iv. 32-36.—“Ask now of the days that are past, which were before thee, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and ask from the one side of heaven unto the other, whether there hath been any such thing as this great thing is, or hath been heard like it. *Did ever people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as thou hast heard, and live? . . .* Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee: and upon earth he shewed thee his great fire; and thou heardest his words out of the midst of the fire.”

Elsewhere it is not the *voice*, it is the *sight* of God which kills. It is said to have happened, in a small number of quite exceptional cases, that God has consented to let himself be seen, and seen by the eyes of the flesh. These miracles are accordingly narrated to us with the greatest solemnity.

One day, the seventy elders of Israel followed Moses up into “*the Mount of God.*” Moses, however, alone went up to God in the mount, but the elders went up so far, that, according to the text,—

EXOD. xxiv. 10. 11.—“*They saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his*

clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand : also *they saw God and did eat and drink.*"

Moses alone,—and it was this which gave him in the eyes of his people a supernatural character,—was able to penetrate into that cloud where resided "the glory of God," and out of which God appeared like a consuming fire. God himself renders to him this testimony, that He would speak with him "*mouth to mouth,*" even apparently, and not in dark speeches," (Num. xii. 8.) This peculiar privilege is repeatedly described ;—"The Lord spake unto Moses *face to face,* as a man speaketh unto his friend," (Exod. xxxiii. 11 ; Deut. xxxiv. 10, &c.).

Such declarations as these, and many more such might be quoted, have a character thoroughly and undeniably materialistic, if regarded as records of literal facts, and not as poetic fictions ; but even these are not the worst. The *material* conception or representation of God has been carried to a degree of still more astounding grossness. Witness that passage which equals, in primitive rudeness, anything which the most barbarous nations have written about the nature of their gods. Moses had long conversed with God, but hitherto he had not seen him. He said to God one day, "*I beseech thee, show me thy glory!*" God did not reply that his essence being incorporeal cannot be seen ; but, on the contrary, He consented to *pass before* Moses, and to let him hear his voice : but, added He,—

EXOD. xxxiii. 20-23.—"Thou canst not see my face ; for there shall no man see me and live. And the Lord said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock : and it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by : And I will take away mine hand, and *thou shalt see my back parts* ; but my face shall not be seen."

Would it not be highly irreverent and even profane to regard this passage as a literal, and divinely inspired,

and therefore *infallible record of facts*? What would be said of such a story, if it were found anywhere else than in "*the Holy Bible*?"

When people and teachers come to see, in all these pretended miracles of Horeb and of Sinai, only their true character of tragic and sombre poetry, there will no longer be any question about the propriety of putting them into the hands and heads of children, any more than there is at present about the '*Prometheus*' of Æschylus, or the '*Inferno*' of Dante, or Milton's '*Paradise Lost*.' But, once more, do you not perceive what an abyss there is between admiring myths *as myths*, and accepting them as supernatural *facts* dictated by God himself?

Elsewhere, God is represented as a man obliged to make personal inquiry as to whether a rumour which has reached him is correct or not:—

GEN. xviii. 20, 21.—“And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrha is great, and because their sin is very grievous; *I will go down now, and see* whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; AND IF NOT, I WILL KNOW.”

Again, men began to build a tower, whose top should reach unto heaven:—

GEN. xi. 5-7.—“And *the Lord came down to see* the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, *let us go down*, and there confound their language.”

And it is thus that the famous confusion of languages is *explained*!

Surely the specimens which I have quoted, though the series might easily be largely extended, are amply sufficient to show, to those who require such proof, that not everything in the Bible is fitted to convey to

our children such a pure and spiritual notion of God as it has been customary to believe.

Some one will hasten to reply:—"But we never read these passages in the schools, we suppress them, or we suitably modify them in our lesson-books."—I am fain to believe that in many cases it is so; but, whether you teach these things or not, they are nevertheless in the Bible, and are there by the same title as the most admirable passages; so that they suffice to show to us clearly, in its true aspect, the degree of civilization and of enlightenment, to which the books containing them belong.

And then, although you may, in some measure, suppress such passages as bear too visibly their date upon them, you do not suppress those innumerable revelations, apparitions, or manifestations of God, of which the Bible is full, and you cannot deny that they all (excepting perhaps some of the prophecies which, moreover, do not come under the denomination of *sacred history*) address themselves to the senses through the imagination.

From one end of the Bible to the other, God *speaks* to patriarchs, to judges, to kings, to warriors, to priests. *Is it by the voice of conscience?* No, it is by a vision, by a "sign," by a miracle, by a dream. When He *speaks* to all his people, it is by blessings or cursings of a *temporal* kind. It is not from *within*, it is from without that He governs: it is not by *love*, it is by fear.

Ah! my readers, is there not still a necessity, even after so many centuries of Christianity, for a fresh and vigorous effort to extirpate that superstitious instinct, which even now makes so many people tremble at the noise of thunder and at the flash of lightning, as if God were then either more present or more to be feared than when the sun shines clearly in a serene sky? Must we still continue to propagate, in our families or in our schools, that false idea which is the very soul of the primitive history of every nation, and of the Jews

as of the others :—if you suffer, God is punishing you : if you prosper, God is blessing you : if an epidemic, a famine, or an earthquake ravages a country, God is angry : if the harvest is double, God is favourable : you have been victorious, then the Eternal has fought upon your side : vanquished, it is because He has abandoned you ?

One of the masterpieces of Semitic literature, which has been and must ever be in all ages admired,—the poem of Job,—presents to us the first recorded protest of the human conscience against this idea. Job is struck with plagues and afflictions, and his friends thence infer, according to the custom, that God is thus punishing him for his sin. But Job replies with indignant eloquence—“No, I am not guilty. No, my suffering is not an expiation.”

JOB xiii. 15-18.—“Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him ; but I will maintain (in the margin, *prove* or *argue*) mine own ways before him. He also shall be my salvation ; for an hypocrite shall not come before him. . . . Behold now, I have ordered my cause : I know that I shall be justified.” (Read also ch. xxxi. &c.).

Every one knows that, at the end of the poem, God declares to the three friends that they have been wrong, and that Job’s view of the matter is correct :—

JOB xlii. 7.—“For ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, *as my servant Job hath.*”

This is manifestly the chief signification and purport of the book ; and it is to this that the attention of our children ought chiefly to be directed, if we would have them to understand what they read ; instead of insisting precisely upon the one circumstance which weakens the lesson, by shewing them that, in the end, God restores to Job all his possessions, and by thus teaching them, here also, to regard material prosperity as a criterium of the divine favour.

Plato, wishing to make us understand how entirely the moral life is independent of external conditions, shows to us the just man overwhelmed with sufferings, with contempt, with calumnies, and with afflictions of every kind ; in the midst of which, and even upon the cross where he dies, we are taught to recognize in him the just man, the teacher of truth, the friend of God, the pattern for our imitation, and, at the same time, the most truly happy of men ! Would not this sublime lesson be worth more than hundreds of Biblical miracles for teaching our children to realize that they are more or less near to God, not in proportion to the success of their enterprises, not according to external indications of prosperity or adversity, popularity or contempt, but according to the internal testimony of their own conscience, according to their degree of obedience to duty ?

It would be absurd to look for this profound intelligence of the spiritual sense of religion, in a nation or tribe at the commencement of its social development. But it is none the less absurd that, three or four thousand years afterwards, it should still be imagined that we have only to reproduce, without any change, the first lisplings of human thought, and to regard this reproduction as an infallible revelation.

Where the notion of the Father Almighty, revealing himself to the reason and to the conscience, has not yet acquired all its fulness, we need not wonder to find that the relations between God and man are often presented in a very imperfect fashion.

Take, for example, prayer or blessing, as it appears in the first books of the Old Testament, and try to discover in these a spiritual and moral character. You will not find it any more than you will find there the God who is purely spirit and purely love.

Prayer* is there, as among all the peoples of that period, a mystic spell, a sort of magic power, a cabal-

* And *imprecation*. See the history of Balaam, Num. xxiii. 25, 26.

istic formula. Let us look at a single specimen. It is at the crisis of a battle : Moses has not taken part in the fight, but has withdrawn to an adjoining hill, armed with his rod, and there he intercedes for his people.

EXOD. xvii. 11-14.—“ And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed ; and when he let down his hand Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands were heavy ; and they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat thereon : and Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side : and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua discomfited Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. And the Lord said unto Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book.”

Here again I would be the first to recognise a beautiful poetic image, if the story is to be understood in the same manner as the analogous stories, which we may read in the Vedas, or elsewhere. But those who desire to make us and our children believe that the thing has actually taken place, ought to see that, if such virtue must be literally attributed to this mechanical prayer of Moses, they have no longer any right to ridicule the prayer-mills of the Budhists, or the rosaries of the Roman Catholics.

But, it is said by some, this is a type, an emblem, an allegory, which we must “ *interpret spiritually.*”

Be it so, but who hinders you from interpreting spiritually all the similar imagery, which abounds in the other religious and mythological books of antiquity ? If you have so much indulgence for the rudest allegories of Hebrew legend, whence comes your severity or contempt for the most beautiful and symbolical stories of Greek, Hindoo, or Scandinavian legend ? God speaks, God appears in person, God dictates a book ! and that book contains pages which, in order to be accepted by reason, require to be “ *spiritualized,*” neither more nor less than those of Hesiod, of the Vedas, or of the Eddas !

The truth is that, among all primitive peoples, prayer, blessing, and cursing have a peculiar virtue, a mysterious influence, a magic power. Of this the history of Isaac is one of the clearest examples.

The old man, wishing and intending to bless Esau, is the dupe of a coarse imposition; and the words which, in his thought, he addresses to Esau, fall, unknown to him, upon the ears of Jacob. When Esau returns from his hunting, to which he had been sent by his father himself, Isaac, astonished and trembling, says to him:—

GEN. xxvii. 33-37.—“Thy brother came with subtilty, and hath taken away thy blessing. . . . *I have blessed him, yea, and he shall be blessed.* . . . I have made him thy lord, and all his brethren have I given to him for servants; and with corn and wine have I sustained him: and what shall I do now unto thee, my son?”

Can it be denied in presence of words so clear, that, for the Isaac of Genesis, the *blessing* was a kind of talisman or spell, an enchanted formula, consisting in the words, not in the thought, and having a virtue equally independent of the intention of him who gave it, and of the merit of him who received it? A *stolen* blessing was not on that account the less valid! How can all this be explained to children?

But an explanation is not withheld, we have often heard and read it, as follows:—Isaac knew very well that, before the birth of the twin brothers, God had said to Rebecca, “the elder shall serve the younger.” Moreover, when the blessing had been given to Jacob, Isaac felt that it was, notwithstanding the imposture of his son, *an accomplished fact*, which he did not feel himself at liberty to undo, and which had acquired, by its very accomplishment, a providential character. The whole was the result of a divine decree, and this was perceived by the conscience of Isaac at the very moment when the act of blessing was consummated.

We frankly confess that, in morality no less than in good sense, this incredible theory, of an *accomplished fact which acquires by its very accomplishment a providential character*, appears to us even more deficient, if that be possible, than the explanation of the biblical Isaac. "*Thy brother hath come with subtilty, and hath taken away thy blessing, I have blessed him, yea, and he shall be blessed.*"

Samson is again another example, among a thousand, of these false and rude ideas, regarding the relations between God and man. Here it is neither a *prayer* nor a *blessing*, but a *vow*, in virtue of which the hair of Samson's head (orthodox theologians believe it still), was the thing, the charm, or the talisman, wherein his supernatural strength lay !

Samson keeps company with a woman of loose character, (Judges xvi.); but that does not in the smallest degree deprive him of the divine favour attached to his hair. His head being cropped, he loses the distinctive blessing of God ; but his hair grows again, and with it comes back the divine blessing. It is impossible to see anything else in the text, unless it be put there by force ; for, immediately before narrating the last exploit of Samson, the Bible explains to us how he has regained his strength by telling us :—

JUDGES xvi. 22.—“Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaven.”

What is the profound religious idea which we may hope, without sophistry, to derive from this lesson, for the improvement of the minds or the hearts of our children ? Explain it as you may, Samson will always be for them only the Jewish Hercules ; and, I confess it, I greatly prefer for their instruction the Hercules of the Greeks. The latter, at least, will not now teach them to think that God—the true God, the God whom they themselves ought to worship—has actually figured

in scenes and anecdotes, which, like those about Samson, are trifling, superstitious, and absurd.

In conclusion :—To excite, to over-excite, in children the taste for the extraordinary, to make them seek God, not where He is ever to be found, not in the laws of the physical or moral world, not in the eternal harmony of the stars, not in the marvellous organisation of the flower or of the insect, not in the sublime spectacle of unity and design presented by the Universe, but in all sorts of disorders and capricious interferences which, if they had taken place, would have proved nothing but the divine instability, improvidence, and weakness ; thus greatly to exaggerate and to confirm, instead of counteracting, in their young minds, their naturally fantastic and chimerical notions of things, their ignorance of causes, their disregard of rule, fear instead of thought, credulity instead of knowledge ; and then to seal the whole with this disastrous idea, that, if they have the misfortune to contest the absolute truth of even the most absurd narratives, doctrines, or miracles attested by a pretended *Word of God*, they are guilty of blasphemous sacrilege, and doomed therefore to eternal damnation, unless they repent and learn *at least to say*, that the whole book is a divine revelation of truth :—behold and consider the kind of *influence* which the teaching of sacred history always inevitably exerts, only in greater or less degree according to the absence or presence of various antidotes, upon the culture of our children's intelligence, and upon the formation of their ideas of *humanity*, of *nature*, and of *God*.

Ere long we will publish the second and the more important division of the subject ; and therein we will strive to show how this kind of teaching acts upon the *conscience*, and upon the moral direction of life.