

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Bible versus Civilisation :

AN APPEAL TO THE PIOUS.

BY

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"RIVERS OF WATERS RUN DOWN MINE EYES, BECAUSE THEY KEEP NOT
THY LAW."—*Ps. cxix.*, 136.

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Bible versus Civilisation.

IN his time, old John Bunyan grieved that religion went in silver slippers. What would he say now were he alive? We no longer respect the God we profess to worship, but have gone after the luxurious idol of civilisation. Civilisation is replacing God in our hearts and lives; we are casting out the Almighty from among us, and following other lights than His. It is time to rouse ourselves and begin to read the Bible, which we pretend to reverence, though we neglect to make ourselves acquainted with its sacred pages. If we profess godliness, let us have the decency to follow the precepts of our God. It is true that He has said "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth", and because it suits our social arrangements the murderers among us are made to suffer the just penalty of their evil doings. But God has also said "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live", and if God had not known that witches existed He would not have given such a terrible command. So explicit is His will in this matter that not only is death the prescribed punishment, but the precise manner of it—a bleeding shuddering death by stoning—is commanded. Yet we, glorying in our pretended enlightenment, decide we know better than our God, defy him, and speak with horror of the near date of 1722, when the last witch was burnt in Scotland by Captain Ross, Sheriff-Depute of Sutherlandshire! Who are we that we should change the decrees of Omnipotent Wisdom, creatures of a day who cannot fathom his awful designs? We cry Lord! Lord! and do not his com-

mands, but allow ourselves to be softened and beguiled by our humanity into the ways of the Secularists. That holy man John Wesley said that the giving up of witchcraft was in effect the giving up of the Bible. "I cannot", said he, "give up to all the Deists in Great Britain the existence of witchcraft till I give up the credit of all history, sacred and profane."

There is nothing in which we have more treacherously forsaken our religion than in our way of treating heresy. We even pride ourselves on our toleration, and look back upon the past "persecutions", as we irreligiously call them, with horror and disgust. Yet if we believe our religion to be the only true one (as who among us does not?), what is our duty respecting the heretic, the man or woman whom we believe to have forsaken the only true God? Does the Almighty whom we worship command us to tolerate such, to live harmoniously with such, bearing with them, praying with them, and beseeching our God to turn their hearts unto Himself? Not so. God knows the spiritual leprosy which will infect us if we live with heretics, and in His awful wisdom he says the heretic shall be cut off from the land of the living. "If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other Gods . . . thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him: but thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. And thou shalt stone him with stones that he die" (Deuteronomy xiii, 6—10). 'We cannot do this thing', we cry; 'we cannot obey here'; spare us, O Lord, we say; or, worse, we try to explain away the command, saying Christ's mission has changed all that. This is sheer self-indulgence. We either are to obey the Unchangeable, or we are not. "Thus saith the Lord!" We cannot escape the fact that if we profess godliness we must, at any cost or pain or distress, obey the mandates of our God; and they are rigid. What matter how flesh and heart shrink from casting out the

wife of our bosom and seeking her death, if only our conscience is at peace? Do we not extol the great and beautiful obedience of Abraham in his willingness to slay his beloved son? Do we say he ought to have disobeyed his God? And who are we that we shall dare with impunity to disobey explicit commands? Friends, we try in vain to fit our modern ideas to our God-given ancient religion. How are we better than the Secularists? They ignore the Bible; we pretend to worship its precepts, and blasphemously neglect its severe demands. We pick and choose as we like, and obey only such of the Almighty's laws as fit our modern civilisation, which boasts that it "has assisted, if, indeed, it may not claim the main share, in sweeping away the dark superstitions, the degrading belief in sorcery and witchcraft, and cruel intolerance". Alas, is not our science sweeping away our ancient and divinely-inspired religion?

To take up a specially modern delusion, does a reverent and earnest study of God's dealings with the ancient peoples show him to be such as our nineteenth century sentiment imagines—a God of love, a heavenly Father? It is very charming to think of Him as such, no doubt; our duty, however, is not to find the charming, but to search the true. Do we not read of very frequent and terrible massacres of men, women, and children by His direct commands; though sometimes virgins were spared as booty for God's priests? "But Sihon, king of Heshbon, would not let us pass by him; for the Lord thy God hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate that he might deliver him into thy hand . . . and we took all his cities at that time, and utterly destroyed the men and the women, and the little ones, of every city; we left none to remain" (Deuteronomy ii, 30, 34). This is one of many similar cases. And do we not see God's anger—his great majestic anger—raised against all flesh from time to time, until we feel that punishment, not love, is the garment of the Almighty? From the unsinching cattle which died of hailstones (Exodus ix, 19, 23, 25) to the preachers, 450 in number, of a false religion, who had to be slaughtered by God's true clergy, the one penalty

of exciting the divine wrath is—death. This thought naturally does not please us; we do not care to entertain it; we seek other writings to contradict it; but it remains. It is of the Lord; His law is eternal; let Him do what seemeth Him good. Shall not He do with His own as He will? The God of Nature and the God of our beloved Bible are not opposed. They are one. We can, as that pious soul Cowper said so truthfully, “Look from Nature up to Nature’s God”. The law of destruction so noticeable in Nature is also God’s law as expressed to us in his earliest written revelation. How little the Christ realised God’s spirit is shown in the opposition of his teaching to His Father’s. “Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you,” is Christ’s teaching. Something very different was the treatment which the Almighty commanded his Chosen Ones to exercise towards those nations with whom they had dealings. “So Joshua smote all the country of the hills, and of the south, and of the vale, and of the springs, and all their kings: he left none remaining; but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded” (Joshua x, 40). “And that day Joshua took Makkedah, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and the king thereof he utterly destroyed, them, and all the souls that were therein; he let none remain” (Joshua x, 28). The celebrated French divine Bossuet, one of God’s most eminent modern servants, shows how deeply he has studied the method of the Eternal, when he says, “God has all hearts in His hand; sometimes He holds back the passions, sometimes He gives them the rein. Does He wish to make legislators? He sends them His wise spirit and foresight. He warns them of the evils which threaten states, and establishes public tranquillity. Knowing human wisdom to be limited, He enlightens it, extends its powers, and then abandons it to its ignorance. He blinds it, overturns it, confounds it by itself. Its own subtleties embarrass it, and its precautions are its snare. When God wishes to destroy empires, He weakens counsel. Egypt, once so wise, becomes drunken, stupid, and tottering, because the Lord has spread the spirit of

folly in its councils. But let not men deceive themselves. God restores the lost faculties when it pleases Him. It is thus that our God reigns righteously over the peoples." God and Nature are not in opposition; the severity of Nature is the expression of his Omnipotence—his Power. Are not "the scorpion's sting, the cobra's poison, the ferret's teeth, the tiger's claws, and the eagle's talons" part of His divine design? Is not the law of the forest, is not the law of the ocean, rapine and destruction? Creation must be an expression of the Creator—His thought. Let us who are believers in the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses not try to escape, by the road of evolution, from the fact that God is the maker of all created things, and that He has Himself given the instincts to each creature, whether it is the instinct of the cat to torture the mouse ere killing it, or the instinct of the male rabbit to devour its offspring, or that of "the wasp bringing in the caterpillar for its young, and stinging it enough to paralyse, but not to kill". Is it not enough for us to know that since God designed "animals to prey upon each other for food, and then pronounced the system of almost universal carnage 'very good'," as a living writer expresses it, it is the Father's will; and we ought to forbear making comparisons between our petty ideas of goodness and the divine conceptions. Let us beware of mental pride in such matters, and bow our spirits before the Inscrutable.

In the light of these conclusions as to the unity of God and Nature, marriage, the central social institution, can be better understood. Our modern European notion of monogamy being the highest form of union between man and woman, leads us to assume that it is of divine institution. We resent any tampering with it, as immoral and contrary to the will of God. But were not God's chosen friends polygamists, and of a most pronounced type? Had not Abraham his Sarah, Hagar, Keturah, and concubines besides? Jacob married two sisters and their two maids, and "God hearkened to Leah and Rachel and gave them sons", as indeed he also blessed their maids. David had his Michal, Abigail, Ahinoam, and "four more wives and

concubines out of Jerusalem", God blessing six of the seven with children. May we not therefore infer, since Abraham and David were so close to God, and intimate with His counsels, that polygamy is more in accordance with His will than monogamy? Indeed, do we not altogether misunderstand the relative importance of man and woman as demonstrated in the Holy Scriptures? Surely even the Mohammedans read God's pleasure on this point better than we, His apostate children who lightly preach the equality of the sexes? And our very notions of illegitimacy are completely opposed to the cherished biographical facts of the greatest of the Bible heroes. God, like Nature, mocks at our little social ceremonies and upstart ways, and bids us back to our noble Old Testament to see what manner of men were "after his heart".

One last word. Let us cast from us, O friends, the silver slippers John Bunyan dreaded so much, and which have beguiled our steps too long into the wide sweet pastures of godless tolerance and civilised charities. Beautiful to look at, luxurious to worship, as is the idol of civilisation, which makes a virtue of forbearance and a merit of Samaritanism, it is at our soul's peril we pay homage at that shrine. The Eternal's dealings with, and instruction to, His own people, must be our guide; and may we bravely, and at whatever cost or heart-break, fulfil His awful Will.
