

CT 109.

# PLEAS FOR FREE INQUIRY:

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW,

- (1.) OF DUTY,
- (2.) OF INCLINATION,

BY

"M. A."

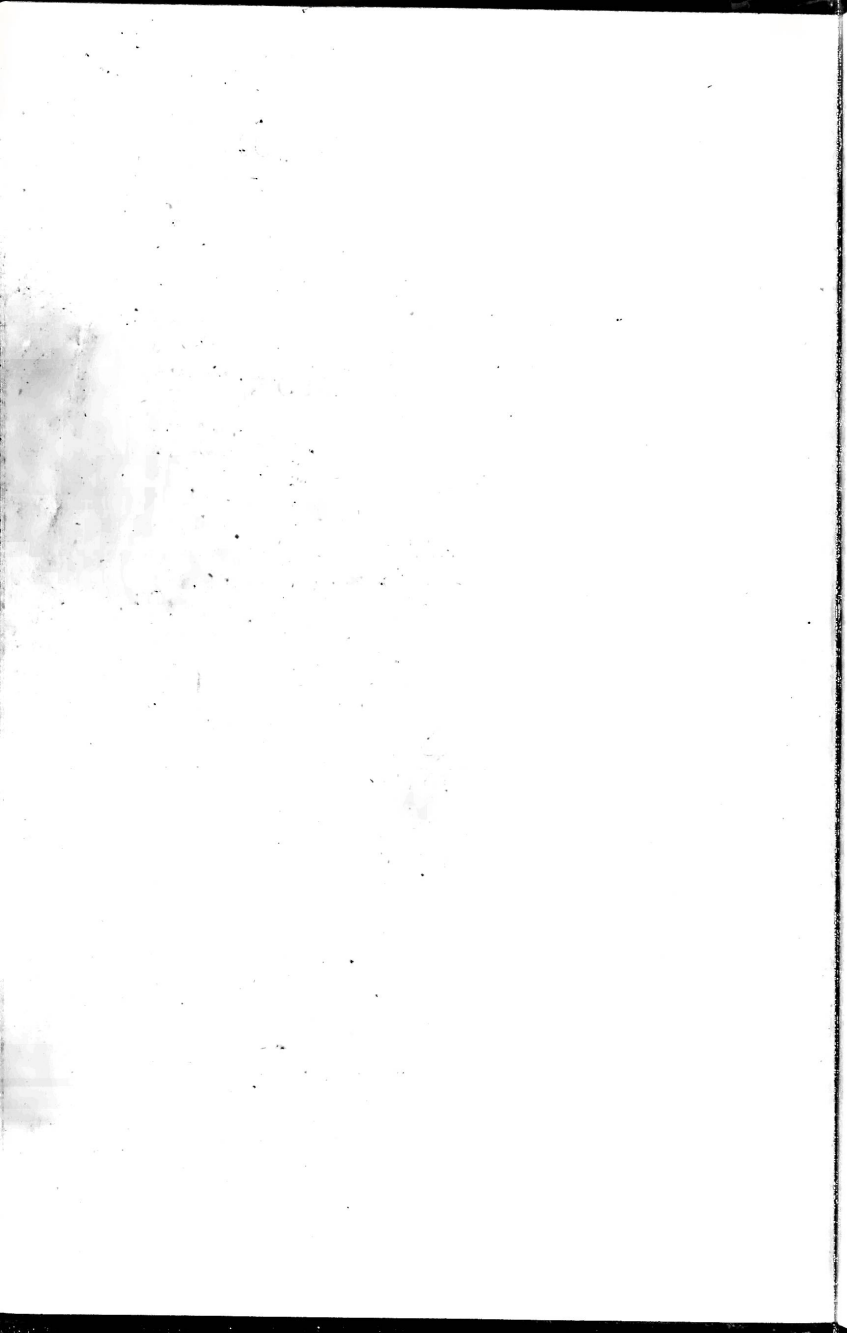
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## PLEAS FOR FREE INQUIRY.

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### I.

“IF we were to begin to reason upon miracles and to inquire about them,” said a young lady, in my hearing, a few evenings ago, “we might possibly end by disbelieving them.” “And, therefore, it is much better not to do anything of the kind,” added her mother; and this sentiment, I could not but observe, was received with marked approval by those present.

Not long since a gentleman of my acquaintance, a man gifted with strong reasoning powers, and with a great thirst for truth on most subjects, happened to take up a volume of “Colenso on the Pentateuch” in my library. “Have you read the work?” I asked. “Oh dear, no!” he replied, “I am not anxious to cloud my belief by any such investigations.”\*

It may seem almost puerile to make a note of such observations as these; for do they not indicate a frame of mind common to nine-tenths of mankind, in and out of these islands? But it is, on that very account, of importance to consider what is the real meaning which underlies them. They can have but one meaning. “In religious matters it is much better for us to cleave to the belief which has been instilled into us in our infancy, and to make no inquiries.”

\* According to one who declares he knew him well, the great Faraday said, “I prostrate my reason in this matter (*i.e.* religion), for if I applied to it the same process of reasoning which I use in matters of science, I should be an unbeliever.”—Letter in the *Spectator*, Feb. 1870.

"I take my creed from the parson, as I take my coat from the tailor," said Goldsmith, expressing, in rather coarse terms, the same idea.

Now, if this view of our duty with regard to religious inquiries be a correct one, it will be well to notice some of the consequences to which it must necessarily lead. All missionary enterprizes ought to cease. The very ground of their existence is completely cut away. You could not consistently tender the gospel to a Hindoo, for he might reply to you, in your own words, "In religious matters it is best for me to cleave to what I have been taught," or, even if he were not likely to make so foolish a reply, you, who have asserted the truth of that proposition, are bound to leave him alone, or to give up the truth of the proposition. If your views had been held three centuries ago there could not possibly have been a Reformation. Nay, Christianity itself must have perished in its cradle. For, granted that certain startling miracles were wrought, of a nature to convince those who witnessed them of the truth of that revelation, without further inquiry, it is not pretended that the witnesses of such miracles were numerous. They were not exhibited before the whole of the human race then in being, nor (according to the Protestant view) before many successive generations. The time, therefore, soon came when it was requisite to tender the Christian system to the Heathen, as a system to be judged of on its merits. Some sort of inquiry, some act of judgment, however rude, was necessary on the part of those who, otherwise than through the direct operation of these miracles, embraced the new religion; and embracing a new religion involved the throwing off of their old one. In other words, they did *not* cling to what had been taught them. If they, and every one else, had acted in the way my young lady friend's mother would have all to act, it would be difficult to say what our creed

would be in the present day. It certainly would not be Christianity.

At this point some may be inclined to ask, "For whom can this self-evident reasoning be intended?" My answer is, "For nearly every one." For, in fact, as I have already said, and as is quite patent, ninety-nine out of every hundred men and women, in the present day, do act and think in regard to religion precisely in this way, and in no other. While no one would deem it necessary to warn an intelligent man, such as the friend who came into my library, not to take up with a conclusion about the ballot, or the purchase system in the army, or the existence of the gigantic Moa, or Spirit-rapping, or the Tichborne case, without some consideration, or in consequence of what his parents or teachers had told him, it is clear that in the matter of religion the vast majority of mankind are mere children. They seem to lose their heads whenever that great subject comes uppermost. Men who would not put a hundred pounds into a railway without long and laborious investigations as to its position and prospects, will embark what they themselves deem their spiritual all in a system into the foundations of which they have never taken the trouble to inquire, while others actually shun any such inquiry.

There are some defences of such a course, which deserve attention. One is the plea of *authority*, and would probably be put forward in some such terms as these:—"In a world where the bulk of mankind are necessarily engaged in the work of providing for themselves and their families, it is unavoidable that many beliefs should be held, which nevertheless the mass of mankind lack the time or the capacity for verifying for themselves. We believe that water is made up of oxygen and hydrogen, we believe that the blood circulates, that Sirius is so many billions of miles from the earth, that the next total eclipse of the sun will be visible in London in such and such a

year, without ever having investigated the truth of these statements for ourselves. We believe in these things because they have received a general consensus, founded on the labours of capable men, to whom civilized mankind has tacitly entrusted the task of inquiring into them. And there are other conclusions which we accept for a like reason, not because they are undisputed, but because they are the results of what we consider the best obtainable opinions; the advantages of Free Trade, for example, or the efficacy of vaccination. Well, for similar reasons, among others, we believe in our religion. We know that for eighteen centuries it has been held to be true by the ablest and most virtuous of mankind. We know that for the same length of time it has been exposed to the criticism of the acutest intellects and the assaults of the most determined opponents without, as far as we can judge, its foundations having been in any way loosened, and we think this reason a sufficient one."

Upon this, it must be observed.

(1.) That the beliefs here sought to be compared with religious belief differ from it in some important particulars. It is not, speaking roughly, likely that any great harm will befall a man in this world, and it will hardly be contended that harm might befall him in another world, owing to his holding, on the authority of a great number of other people, a scientific or philosophical, or economical opinion which afterwards proved to be erroneous. Though, even on these points, cases might easily be put, in which it would be his duty to verify as far as he is able, his opinions. And it is to be observed how, when the idea is once started that some evil effects may possibly follow in this life, upon any received conclusion or established practice, people will eagerly bestir themselves and enquire into and discuss the grounds for its acceptance. The recent agitation

against Vaccination is an example of this. But with regard to religion, the case is quite one *sui generis*. The Roman Catholic will hardly admit that the Protestant can be saved from excruciating and everlasting torture; and the orthodox Protestant is inclined to look with very much the same sort of eye upon the Roman Catholic.\* And if it be said that this is putting the matter too strongly, this much may be affirmed with confidence, that the believer in each religion deems that religion to offer to such as embrace it the best chance of escaping so frightful a future. And this consideration attaches at once a most important consequence to the act of belief in religious matters. I will take it, if you please, on authority, that the water in my well is composed of oxygen and hydrogen, and will continue to drink the water without further inquiry. But the case is different with regard to a plant or vegetable which is declared by whole nations to produce, after a certain period of indulgence in it, some frightful malady. The fact that a number of other people have been eating the plant in question won't satisfy me; especially if these people have gone off, one after another, to a distant country where I must needs lose sight of them. Common prudence would, in such a case, dictate the necessity of analyzing its ingredients.

(2.) This is, to say the least, a very dangerous argument for protestants to depend upon. It has, in fact, been extensively used against them. If acted upon in the sixteenth century, it would, as I said just now, have rendered the Reformation impossible, and if pressed home at the present day, it would make the holding of the reformed faith a piece of

\* The Dean of Exeter (Dr. Boyd) is reported by the *Western Morning News* to have recently expressed himself in these terms, "No one can charitably entertain the hope that a mere Roman Catholic can be saved."

dangerous imprudence. There are, at this hour, probably about twice as many Roman Catholics as Protestants in the world, and looking back on the last nineteen centuries, an immeasurably greater number of the former than of the latter have passed through existence. In the list of learned men, men of science, great writers, great thinkers, profound philosophers, who have flourished throughout that period, at least two Catholics might be found for every Reformer. So that the argument from authority might carry some of those who hold it a great deal further than they intend. If we are to take refuge in a crowd, to save ourselves from the trouble of thinking, it would be advisable to take refuge in the largest crowd.

(3.) That a belief is and has been held by a large portion of mankind, learned as well as simple, may be put forward as a plea for acquiescing in it, till it shall have been shown to be unreliable, but cannot for a moment be accepted as a proof of its truth. There are few beliefs which have commanded more universal assent down to a comparatively recent period of the world's history than that in witchcraft; and the same may be said of the existence of ghosts and of fairies, in various shapes, and the divine or prophetic character of dreams, of the ideas that the world was flat and that antipodes were inconceivable, that a body could not act where it was not, and many others. Yet there are few educated persons who cling to these notions now-a-days. If the upholders of the "authority" argument be right, then those who burnt witches two centuries ago were abundantly justified in doing so. But we believe them to have been certainly wrong in their conclusions.

(4.) The task of verifying a Divine Revelation ought not, one would imagine, to be attended with the same difficulties as the verification of abstruse mathematical or physical or economic truths, difficulties



which are indeed such as to oblige the mass of mankind to take these upon authority. For it is of the very essence of a revelation—not, perhaps, that all its parts should be easy to understand—but at any rate that the grounds for its acceptance as a whole should be intelligible to those to whom it is addressed; that its claim to come from God should not be capable of being decided upon only by philosophers and learned men, but should be within reach of the ordinary mind. For, if the inquiry be so complex, either from the contradictory character of the evidence, or from other circumstances, that the general run of men are quite unable to judge for themselves; if they have to fall back upon the assurances of experts; then, even supposing that all these latter were agreed—which is the direct contrary of the fact in this instance—we should never have grounds for believing in Christianity which would not fall very far short of the “sure and certain hope,” the conviction of its truth, which is, I understand, necessary to be attained to by the mind in order that we may participate in the benefits of the revelation. We should be forced to admit that as these wise and learned persons have been constantly mistaken in other conclusions of theirs, in arriving at which, their minds were much less likely to be biassed by education and habit, so they might have gone equally wrong on this occasion. The case would be different, if the truth of revelation were *demonstrable*. Then, the ablest minds might alone be capable of working out the demonstration, and the masses would be justified in taking it from them, as we see them do very properly in scientific matters, every day. But this, confessedly, is not the character of the Christian proofs, which are not susceptible of demonstration, either by the learned alone, or by any, but which require an exercise of the judgment and a weighing of *pros* and *cons*, such as are evidently not beyond the

reach of ordinary humanity. Bishop Butler, the greatest of modern Christian apologists, admits this. "The general proof of natural religion and of Christianity lies level to common man, even those whose time is chiefly taken up with providing the conveniences, perhaps necessities, of life." Part II., c. 6. Butler was far too able a man to use this argument from authority.

Seeing, then, that such exceptional interests are at stake for ourselves, that the above plea from authority is dangerous for protestants and doubtful for all in religious matters, that we must always be uncertain as to the truth of what we fancy ourselves to hold in such matters, so long as we have not looked into them for ourselves, and, further, that there is no such difficulty in this inquiry as can be urged as a reason for not undertaking it, it would seem that some case may already have been made out for inducing us to inquire.

But there are some other arguments which we hear used in favour of taking our religion as it comes to us, and not probing it too closely, which must be briefly noticed. Here is one. "My belief such as it is, makes me happy and comfortable: why seek to disturb it? If you should succeed in doing so, you have nothing to offer me in its place." Reasoning of this kind, if indeed it can be called reasoning, and almost every other plea which is advanced against free inquiry in religious matters, labours under this capital defect, that it entirely ignores any difference between what is True and what is False, and the importance to man (not to use a stronger term) of distinguishing, as far as he is able, the one from the other. Those who put forward these pleas, founded on such a vicious basis, seem not to be aware that they are mere announcements of selfish and stolid contentment with what Bacon called "Idols." They are the voice of the moral sluggard, "You have woke me too soon,

I must slumber again"—slumber on peaceably in the enjoyment of my dreams, whatever they may be, and which are, at any rate, more enjoyable than your realities! They are the last expression of human cowardice: the cry of a civilized being afraid to find himself alone with his own reason. They have, underlying them, a principle which, if admitted, would be fatal to all human progress: this same notion that man is not bound to search after TRUTH, for its own sake and regardless of consequences; but that he may acquiesce in shams, or what he has no ground to suppose other than shams, provided such a course should seem most conducive to his own individual comfort.

Can any one, who has glanced at the history of man, doubt that such a view, if acted upon generally, would be fatal to the development of his higher faculties? From "the first syllable of recorded time" to the present hour, the world has been one battlefield of truth against error. Every truth that has been established has been a fresh position won and kept in the upward progress of the race from the rudest barbarism to our existing point of civilization. The first assailants of error, the benefactors of society whose names we revere, have fought in the van, with a motto on their shields the exact opposite to that of these reasoners. They have never thought of their own personal ease, which forms the essence of this plea. They have almost always had some kind of martyrdom to undergo; such of them as have been religious reformers, in cases where they have not suffered the comparatively easy fate of being despised as visionaries, have come forward, only to endure vexations, to be tortured, to be put to death, as enemies of their kind. The great scientific and social and political and religious discoveries which have been made in every age have been made by those who steadily adhered to the principle that Truth is

to be sought for, for its own sake and regardless of consequences. And there is no other method according to which such discoveries can, as a general rule, be made.

Does not this look as if the duty of searching after Truth *is* cast upon us? And is there anything in the nature of religion to except it from such a law? I should think the presumption is quite the other way. I can conceive many generations of men getting on pretty well, who yet held—as, in point of fact, many generations did hold—that the earth was a flat, stationary body, with the heavenly luminaries set in a concave dome above it. Though they would necessarily be all the better for learning the truth on that and kindred subjects, since no error of any kind can be shown to have benefited man in the long run. But is there not something absolutely rotten in the condition of those who contentedly jog on with what may be entirely false notions of their Deity? Assuredly, it is of as much consequence to the human race to acquire, as far as it is able to do so, correct notions about Him, as about the physical configuration of the world it inhabits. And if people don't choose to inquire, they cannot make sure that their notions on this head may not be deplorably false ones.

To the objection, "You have nothing to offer me in the place of my religion," the same remarks will apply, as to the "What's the odds so long as you are happy!" cry. It is unworthy of being seriously put forward, unless, indeed, Truth is not to be sought, for its own sake, and self-gratification is to be the accepted guide to all our conclusions. But, from this point of view, that of the individual and his interests, the objection merits a moment's attention, in consequence of a misconception which prevails extensively on the subject of the origin of religious beliefs. It is true that the question, "What can you give me," &c., is a difficult one to answer off-hand; and for this

reason, that religions always undergo a process of development. They never spring into being, complete at all points. They never assume even a rudimentary form till the creeds which they are destined gradually to replace have begun to be discredited in the popular estimation,\* and in the same ratio as these latter lose their hold over the masses, so do the former generally gain in power and in consistency, and push out fresh formulas and new dogmas, cautiously at first, then with increasing boldness. This seems to be the general law, and the conversion of whole tribes by violent means to ready-made religions is not an exception; only, a fresh force is put in exercise. The bed of a river which overflows a plain has been formed in the same way as the beds of other rivers. It is a great mistake, for instance, and yet one commonly made, to suppose that the religion which we know under the name of Christianity came at once into being, full-grown, like Eve from the side of Adam, or Minerva from the head of Jove.

\* In other words, they must supply a want; and such a want may exist in nations which are not themselves clearly conscious of it. Such seems to have been the condition of the civilized world when the Christian religion made its appearance. It seems too as if, besides this, a certain state of the moral atmosphere were necessary in order that a religion should make rapid progress among those who were not born in it; just as a fever will run through a whole population at one time, but not at another. It may be doubted whether Mahomet would have met with equal success if he had appeared two centuries earlier or later than he did, or whether Wesley would produce any great effect now-a-days, on a population not much differing from that to which he preached. We are not entitled to suppose that Christianity would not have succeeded, at whatever time it might have arisen (for, in this argument, we are not denying its divine character) but we may point to the admitted fact that savage nations are never converted now-a-days in a mass, as they were in the early centuries, even long after the age of miracles had passed. Their *want* is presumably the same; the atmosphere seems to have changed.

It took, on the contrary, a long time, even on the showing of its orthodox apologists, to elaborate it into a system. Similarly, what we know as Protestantism, or the reformed doctrine, was not at once ready to hand for the benefit of those who had been brought to entertain doubts of the teachings of Roman Catholicism; but, first of all, that teaching loosened its hold on the mind, and then a system to supply its place was slowly manufactured. We have reason to suppose that a similar law would govern the rise of any religions which might displace the existing ones. On the hypothesis that a miraculous revelation should come to be generally disbelieved in, the natural tendencies of the human mind would oblige it to found a new system of worship in its place, and we could not tell beforehand what it would be, in all its details, till the hypothesis was realized. A transition from an old creed to a new one necessarily entails great misery on a large number of people, but this usually falls most heavily upon one generation—the generation which is losing its hold on the old belief without having definitely constructed a new one. Every great change, upheaval, war, revolution, pestilence, potato-famine, the introduction of fresh machinery, or improved modes of locomotion, inflicts similar misery upon numbers of persons, without any seeming compensation to themselves, but often for the general benefit, as becomes apparent, when things have settled down in the new order.\*

On the supposition then—an erroneous one as I think, but I am willing to make it, in order to put

\* Any amount of illustrations might be given of the statement in the text. Since writing the above, I find that Mr Pell, speaking on the Metric Bill in the House of Commons (on Wednesday, July 26) remarked, "No doubt *the present generation would suffer* from a change of weights and measures; but we ought to consider those who come after us, and who would find it absolutely necessary to adopt the metric system."

this plea for inquiry as disadvantageously for the pleader as possible—that there is nothing at all to offer to the individual, in place of his existing religious belief—and noticing, by the way, that he could not cease to hold it, till he became convinced that it was untrue, in which case he clearly ought no longer to hold it, I think it cannot be doubted that as soon as this disbelief became general, a fresh religious creed would arise for the use of the human race, and that creed would be the work of the race itself, acting it may be through the medium of many powerful or (which is less likely now-a-days, but still possible) of one pre-eminent mind. And if what these people would call the worst should happen, if the Christian dogmas on examination should prove unworthy of credence, would it not, I ask, be far nobler, more befitting a man, even if not more conducive in the end to our own happiness, to take our part in the contest against error, and our share in the task of freeing the human mind from its fetters, even though ours should be the generation upon which the bulk of the mental anguish caused by the change should fall, rather than to draw the bed-clothes over our heads with the childish idea that we shall thereby escape from confronting the spirit of free inquiry? Our experience of life, if it be not altogether distorted by selfishness, shows us that there are occasions when, if we would play the part of men, we must needs sacrifice life and fortune, and even our good name. And shall it be said that if a similar and much higher call arise, we are to decline to sacrifice what we admit to be only our prepossessions? Religions may be kept up, have indeed been kept up, for a long time, for many centuries, on this basis, viz., that it is exceedingly uncomfortable to make a change at all, and that in case of changing, there is no other ready-made edifice of dogmas at hand, to step into. But it is inevitable, that as knowledge grows, such a basis as this must tumble to pieces.

One more plea may be noticed. There are people who will say to you quite seriously and sincerely, "We *feel* that our religion is true. We are as sure of its truth, without further inquiry, as we are of our own existence. Dr Arnold, if I remember rightly, lent his authority to this wonderful delusion. It is related of him, I hope incorrectly, that he advised a young man, who hesitated about taking orders in consequence of some doubts he had conceived, in these terms:—"Preach Christianity and you will feel that it is true." Here, again, we have the real character of Truth and Falsehood utterly ignored: for, what is this but to say that a persistent habit of looking at things in one particular light, and carefully excluding from the mind every counteracting influence, will engender an *impression* of their truth? This is an undoubted fact, and it is no less a fact that such a course is in the highest degree immoral and vitiating to the mind. Such a plea, equally valid for every religion that has ever been taught under the sun, does not merit further consideration. But, as Habit has been mentioned, it may be well to observe that its enormous influence has scarcely received adequate notice, even from competent writers and reasoners on theological topics. Perhaps, they have rather shunned the subject. What the force of habit and association, even in the case of the highest minds is, may be realized, if we consider the well-known phenomenon of the geographical distribution of religious beliefs. If a visitor from another sphere were informed of the various creeds which prevail among men, if he were told that there were some people who believed in one God, and others who believed in two antagonistic gods, others again who worshipped three gods in one, others who had no precise notion of a personal Deity, and who held the transmigration of souls; if he were further advised of the numerous sub-sections into which each of these



great religions is divided ; his first impression would possibly be that they were scattered over the world in such a way that in the same family one member would be found believing A, another, B, a third, C ; or that the learned throughout the world as a general rule held A, and that B, C, D, &c., were divided among the unlearned, according to the circumstances and education of each. He might, I think, be somewhat surprised, till he had considered the matter a little more closely, to learn that the divisions were vertical instead of horizontal ; that whole wedges of mankind might so to speak be cut out of the body of humanity impregnated with much the same belief from the top to the bottom of the mental scale ; that creeds were for the most part mere accidents of birth ; that by the transfer of the parents of Bossuet to England, in all probability an eloquent protestant apologist would have been given to us, and that similarly in Whitfield, educated at Madrid, we should have seen a powerful Jesuit preacher. Habit and association of course account for this. From this cause, there are immense difficulties to contend with in setting up a new religion ; once established, if not extirpated by violence, its growth is for a long time only a question of the propagation of the species. It has often occurred to me that if an experiment could be made, in an uninhabited planet, of starting a race of beings with, say *Pickwick* for their inspired volume (and it would not be difficult to give an allegorical interpretation to its characters and incidents) mighty nations, most highly civilized, might flourish for many generations, which should cherish this same *Pickwick* as a divine message and their dearest possession. Thousands of excellent, able and devout men would derive happiness and consolation from its pages and die with the volume clasped to their breasts. Many thousands of others would be put

to death for questioning its divine claims : oceans of blood and millions of treasure would be poured out in wars between nations who took up with conflicting views of the character of the younger Weller ; and as scientific truth, or in other words God's own undisputed truth, insensibly made its way, and these horrors were in some degree mitigated, a deadly hatred would still exist between those who sided with the "Eatanswill Gazette" and those who swore by the "Independent;" and no person who did not hold the prevalent and consequently orthodox view about the journey to Bath or the imprisonment in the Fleet would have a chance of being elected to a seat in a popular legislature. In short, all but a few would *feel* that Pickwick was divine, and that it and it alone supplied all their highest wants.\* While on the subject of Habit, I cannot but notice that Mr Mozley in his very able Bampton Lectures, has spoken of what he calls the Historical Imagination, as throwing difficulties in the way of a belief in miracles. By the term, he understands the power of realizing the past, so as to figure oneself moving among its scenes and its actors, as if it were the present, and when the past is so apprehended (he says) miracles are realized too and,

\* This illustration may seem far-fetched. But surely all but a few who are past arguing with, will admit that we have a parallel case in the Song of Solomon. When we find passage after passage such as this, "By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth," "I sought him but I found him not," &c., labelled after this fashion, "*The Church's fight and victory in temptation*," when "How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O prince's daughter ! the joints of thy thighs are like jewels. . . . thy navel is like a round goblet . . . thy belly like a heap of wheat . . . thy neck as a tower of ivory," and a great deal more to the same effect, is taken to be "*A further description of the Church's graces*," and when we call to mind that in times past thousands of good men have had their happiness sensibly increased by reading these words, and would have cheerfully submitted to a slow

being realized, they excite the same sort of surprise and incredulity as would be occasioned to the mind if we pictured them as occurring in the present day. This is very true. And there is also a kind of imagination, which may be described as the imagination produced by habit and association, and which causes a feeling of surprise and incredulity to be engendered, when we figure to ourselves something as being possibly true, which conflicts with the ideas which have grown with our growth and form, as it were, a part of ourselves, and which we see to be held by all or nearly all around us. And this acts as strongly and in the same manner as, though in this case in a different direction to, the same sort of faculty set face to face with events conflicting with our daily experience. If, for example, we permit ourselves to picture Christ as not having risen from the dead, and ascended bodily into Heaven; if we indulge in the thought that the evidence for those events would certainly not satisfy us if we found it in Herodotus or Livy; these ideas are at once confronted by the whole force of the Imagination of Habit. Every lesson learnt at a mother's knee, every sermon we have heard, every christian death-bed we have attended or read

fire the impugner of their divine inspiration, anything in the way of allegorical rendering and book-worship will be conceivable.

I remember to have met somewhere with a religious biography of a Mrs Adelaide Newton. This lady writes that on a bed of sickness she was greatly comforted by Solomon's Song. The text, "His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold," she found particularly sustaining. In a Life of the Rev. Mr M'Cheyne, of Dundee, which I have lit upon in the house where I am writing, I find in one of his letters the following passage, "I have a very dear boy in my parish who is dying just now. He said to me the other day, "I have just been *feeding for some days* upon the words you gave me," (singularly enough they are the same) "His legs are like pillars of marble set upon sockets of fine gold."

of, the massive cathedral with its "storied windows richly dight, casting a dim religious light," the troops of rustic worshippers flocking down the sweet summer lane to the sound of the village bells, memories of our friends and relatives and records of multitudes of other persons who have gone through life clinging to the doctrines of the resurrection and ascension as their greatest happiness and consolation, visions of the catacombs, of the early martyrs in their coats of pitch, of modern missionaries in far-off lands, eighteen centuries looking down upon us from the Cross and the open sepulchre; all these, and countless similar images crowd immediately into the mind, not indeed to be separately apprehended and distinguished, but in insensible combination and often with irresistible effect. And the effect is to produce a shudder at the bare notion that all these lessons and scenes and memories and recorded saintly actions should have their foundation in a delusion, that such *numbers* of mankind (and this strikes us particularly) should have been allowed, and should still be allowed, to go wrong; a sense of pain and consequent incredulity is engendered in regard to the picture which we first summoned up. "As it is the nature of doubt," says Hume, "to cause a variation in the thought, and transport us suddenly from one idea to another, it must, of consequence, be the occasion of pain." Very few persons, in their religious inquiries, will go beyond the point where pain supervenes, generally taking that as a warning to desist. Now this sort of Imagination has had at least as much to do in keeping men steadfast to a belief in the Christian miracles, as the other kind has had to do in inducing a disbelief in them: but it is hardly necessary to say that it has no scientific value whatever, and ought not to be allowed to bar the way to inquiry. On the con-

trary, if properly analyzed, it will be found to render inquiry all the more desirable.

Hitherto, I have dwelt on the considerations which would seem to show that it is our *duty* to investigate, as far as possible, the claims of revealed religion to our acceptance. And one would think that, in the case of Christianity, if people would only take off their coloured spectacles and look straight at the matter with their naked eyes, a sense of duty would be backed by inclination. It will be the aim of the remainder of this paper to look a little more closely, than is sometimes done, into this question, around which some strange misconceptions have gathered.\*

\* There is a point which has occurred to me now and then, which I have only space to advert to briefly in a foot-note, and which does not appear to me so entirely unworthy of notice, as it will doubtless be thought by many. If it be the duty of such as are able, to enquire into the truth of the religion which has been taught them, is it not conceivable that some bad *consequences* to the individual might follow the neglect of that duty (as indeed we observe to be the case with regard to all shortcomings) and that not only in this but also in another world? Suppose—and the supposition does not seem, to me at least, a very violent one—that the distinguishing dogmas of Christianity should turn out to be untrue; but that the existence of a God and a future state, in which some results will follow on, and some notice will be taken of, our conduct here (beliefs which are not peculiar to Christianity, which were in the minds of men before its appearance, and which it shares with several other religions) should, on the contrary, prove to be quite true. In that case, would the persons I have alluded to altogether deserve to escape censure for having taken up with a creed, which proved to be in its distinctive parts a false one, without investigation? If it be said that it would be unfair, on that hypothesis, to punish them in any way for holding what they had been taught and really did believe, would not this be applying an entirely different standard to their case to that which Christians apply to non-Christians, and the extreme among them, the Dean Boyds of Protestantism and Catholicism, even to their fellow-Christians? These considerations might be carried a great deal further; and they seem to me to merit some attention.

## II.

It will not be my object in what follows, any more than in what has preceded, to dispute the truth of what is known as the Christian system of belief. My object will be to show that it is greatly to be *hoped* by every well-wisher to the human species that that system (as I understand it) may prove to be utterly untrue. This is a proposition which, if fairly stated, must, I think, command the assent of every impartial mind, as surely as that two and two make four, or that two straight lines cannot enclose a space. And it may be thought by some that if this be so, a reason is furnished for *supposing* Christianity to be untrue. But I shall not occupy myself with any consequences of this sort which would or might flow from the proposition. I shall consider the proposition by itself.

The Christian religion, then, as commonly understood and preached among us Protestants, teaches, along with others, the following so-called truths, which are represented as having been miraculously communicated from on high. Every human being produced into the world, since the first pair, is born the subject or victim of a primeval and inherited curse of the most awful character. His natural destiny, after a period in any case very short, spent on this earth, is a never-ending existence of the most frightful torture, surpassing in intensity anything that the human imagination is able to conceive. In order to provide a remedy for this state of things the Almighty descended from Heaven, took upon him the form of man, and suffered death upon a cross. The actual fruits of this transaction appear to be these, that a small number of persons, specially selected, and who have undergone a mysterious process known as "conversion" or the "new birth," are not merely excepted from the general fate, but made partakers of eternal happiness. For the rest of mankind

remains only that appalling destiny from which these favoured persons have been providentially rescued.\*

Now I say that it would be impossible to conceive a message more frightful in its purport than this, which conveys such intelligence; unless, indeed, it were one to the effect that *all* men were to be eternally tortured, or, at any rate, that a yet larger number of people were to be so tortured, or, that in the case of those to be tortured, their sufferings were to be intensified to a still greater degree than we have reason to apprehend under the Christian system—all so many suppositions, for which, apart from this Christian system, we should not have an atom of proof, if, indeed, the indications do not all point in an opposite direction. And it may be confidently affirmed that an incalculably brighter message than this would be one from on high, which should inform us that with man “death is the end of all things.” And every right-thinking person who had previously held the orthodox creed ought to hail such a message as a relief from a hideous night-mare.

This view of the matter will surprise and doubtless shock many who have been taught to look upon the Christian dispensation as ushering “glad tidings” into the world, as “bringing life and immortality to light,” as the supreme expression of God’s mercy and tenderness to a suffering world. They will ask how, for so many centuries, this system of belief can have paraded itself under a false name. Yet the answer is very plain. By the “Christian system of belief” I understand the whole system of revealed religion as adhered to among us. If we take this as one great message, or series of messages, to mankind, the term “glad tidings” may be fairly applied to one portion of it, and has been so applied, on the assumption that certain other portions of the message are proved to be true. In other words, revelation *does* announce good

\* See note at end.

news, supposing always you accept as a fact that, if it had never been made, the whole of mankind would have been doomed to endless perdition. *But the announcement of this fact is part of the general message, or system of revealed religion, and stands or falls with it.* If, independently of revelation, we had arrived at a knowledge of this state of things, then the additional facts that we are said to have learnt in a miraculous way, viz., that through Christ some will be saved, would present themselves to us in the light of a remedy. But there is nothing outside revelation itself, to lead us to any such conclusion; the indications are all the other way. They tend to show us mankind not as having experienced "a fall," not as having sunk from a lofty to a degraded condition, but as having undergone the reverse process, as having emerged from the lowest savage state to a much higher condition of civilization and morality. To render my position clearer by an example.—A message to a number of people who had reason to know that they were all of them to be roasted alive, to the effect that only a certain portion of them were to be roasted alive, would be, on the whole, glad tidings. But a message to a number of people who had no reason whatever to fear that any such fate was impending over them, *but for the message*, to the effect that it had been originally decided to roast them all, but that now some were to be excepted, might be good tidings for such as were excepted, but would be very bad news indeed, for the general body. It might be quite true, but the people in question would be authorized to hope—the condemned for their own sake, and the reprieved for the sake of their fellows—that the whole of the news, including the alleged original determination to roast all, might turn out to be a mischievous invention.

It seems astonishing how such simple considerations as these should fail to present themselves to our minds,



or that divines and theologians should have power to drive them away, when we are dealing with such a stupendous subject as the relations between God and man. For these theologians who thunder from their pulpits and other places of vantage against "free inquiry" have nothing whatever to advance in answer to our particular proposition. I fail altogether to see how, on their own showing, they can avoid admitting that the discovery that there has never been any revelation at all, a discovery which should even go so far as to prove that there is no God and no future state, would be on the whole an immense gain to the species compared with what they have to offer us. We should see this at a glance, if we took in the case of another planet. Which would you consider preferable for their interests, that the inhabitants of any one orb in yonder heavens were mortal, and that they passed into sleep when their present life was ended, or that they existed eternally, a small portion in endless happiness, the remainder in endless misery? You would not hesitate, for an instant, in giving me an answer. And now look at the strange inconsistency of men! We live in a world where not only is the last named prospect held before our eyes, but it is converted by the alchemy of divines into a mercy for which we ought to be grateful: we are warned not to tamper with so precious a possession; we are urged, as we value our happiness, not to raise a doubt about, not even to inquire into the truth of a system, which, if true, is to consign the greater part of us to permanent misery? If any consideration were wanting to fill up the measure of our natural hopes with regard to the soundness of such preaching as this, it would be found in the sad spectacle furnished by the orthodox believer and his easy-going acquiescence in the prospect of a general holocaust of his relatives and dearest friends, and the low opinion of human nature to which such a spectacle must lead us. Every

orthodox anglican clergyman and dissenting minister holds (and indeed most of them preach every Sunday) that the majority of persons with whom he is brought in contact in his daily life, are lost creatures. I have never been able to understand how such a belief can be realized to the mind, and the person holding it can retain the power to eat, or to sleep, or to think connectedly, or to do anything else than go raving mad, in such a condemned cell of humanity as this world must needs be. Even to a man who feels sure that he has drawn for himself a prize in the dreadful lottery, indulgence in anything like happiness or self-congratulation would seem an act of the most enormous selfishness. Yet these people live on very comfortably; what seems to make them most unhappy is, as a general rule, the smallness of their own earthly incomes, their own trumpery rheumatisms and tooth-aches, the insubordination of the sexton, the neglect of the great man at the Hall: they are rather anxious than otherwise to pay their court to the worldly and unregenerate whom fortune has placed above them, and often give themselves much trouble to contract friendships with people who are surely condemned to a fate compared with which the pangs inflicted on a Ravaiillac or a Damiens were a flea-bite, if there be one single word of truth in their own Sunday utterances. Is it that these people do not, after all, believe what they profess to teach us? or is it that the belief (the possible truth of which we admit for the purpose of this argument) is one to which the human mind refuses to yield more than a kind of vague assent, differing very little, when closely analyzed, from total incredulity, or is it that this creed, accepted in its entirety, is demoralizing and debasing in its effects on men?

This last question may seem improper, and indeed blasphemous, on the part of one who does not profess, in these pages, to deny the truth of a doctrine, which,

if true, must come from God. But the truth, if once admitted, will so entirely overthrow all conceptions which we should otherwise entertain of the moral attributes of the Almighty, that I do not think this objection to my language will, under the altered circumstances, hold good. A being who has revealed himself and his intentions concerning us his creatures, in these terms, is clearly not susceptible of being judged by a human standard. We certainly could not call such an one a "humane," or "a considerate," or a "fair-dealing" God, if we are to give to these epithets any meaning such as they possess among ourselves. Or, if it be blasphemy to speak of him as other than "just," he is just in some sense not to be attained to by our minds, and this is after all only a kind of conjuring with words. Similarly, manifestations of divine power, and revelations of the divine intentions, which are "demoralizing" and "debasement" to us, may at the same time harmonize with his plans and express his great purposes, and there is no harm in using words which have a relative and may indeed have an absolute truth. For on accepting the dogmatic Christian belief, we find ourselves plunged in a strange vortex:—

“ ἄνω ποταμῶν ἱερῶν χωροῦσι παραί  
καὶ δίκαια καὶ πάντα πάλιν στρέφεται.”

*Euripides, Medea., 411, 412.\**

It will appear that this world of ours, after having been shot out of the sun in an incandescent state, or otherwise originated as a separate planet, has turned round slowly on its axis and cooled by degrees, and, after undergoing a variety of other changes, has been fitted for the habitation of man.† Man is called into

\* “The waters of the sacred rivers flow upwards (to their sources) and justice and everything is reversed.”

† Or, as some, following the letter of Genesis, still maintain, in six days. The earth, in any case, was fitted for man's habitation, whether gradually or rapidly is of no consequence here.

being by God with the intention, as it would seem, that he should live innocent and happy. Almost at the same time another and a hostile power comes upon the scene and debauches the mind of man—whether from the mere wish to defeat the intentions of his adversary, regardless of consequences, just as a general, to win a certain position, is ready to sacrifice any number of soldiers on either side, against whom individually he bears no spite; or with a deliberate and fiend-like resolve to involve other created beings in the same fate which has overtaken himself, is not of much consequence either to our argument, or to mankind. His success, in this undertaking, is complete. Henceforth, all men stand accursed. This state of things demands, as we are told, a remedy. The remedy, when applied, results in this, that only an insignificant portion of mankind are touched by it, the remainder following the exact destiny which had been marked out for them by the author of evil. Here is an immense and permanent victory of evil over good, of a character to astonish us. The finite created being has triumphed over Infinite Wisdom. The world, after all, has been created in *majorem Diaboli gloriam*. This is a mystery, it will be said. Granted: but let us not disguise from our minds the character of that mystery, as it affects ourselves. It may be a part of a great and general plan that there should be a contest in a number of inhabited worlds, between the spirits of good and of evil, and that the devil should win a victory in some of these worlds, and God in other and (perhaps) more numerous worlds. Or again, it is conceivable that every human being should be made to suffer endless misery, for the purpose of furnishing an example and a warning to some other superior class of created beings. These would be great mysteries and many others might be supplied from the imagination, which, perhaps has already had something to do with these matters.

But that would not alter the fact that the beings thus falling under the power of Satan and condemned to consequent suffering, would have reason to affirm that their fate was a hard one; it would not prevent them from hoping that any message conveying an intimation of such a fate might prove untrue; it would certainly justify them in refraining from using the word "good" of an omnipotent Being who did not choose (for the word omnipotent excludes the supposition that he is not able) to carry out his designs without such a flagrant violation of all that men call Justice.\* The moral conception of such beings will

\* Some writers have objected to the term "omnipotent," as applied to God: among others, Archbishop Whately and Mr Woodward, who goes so far as to say that, "there is no such thing as unlimited and absolute omnipotence;" and this view seems to be endorsed by an able writer in this series, ("Is Death the end of all things for Man? by a Parent and a Teacher.") But I think it will be found impossible to conceive one Supreme God, if we conceive his power as originally short of what is expressed by the familiar Saxon "All-Mighty." If he be not all-powerful, his power must be limited by certain laws, subjected in its exercise to certain conditions. But, whence those laws and conditions? If *ab extero*, then either (1) they must be in the nature of things, i. e., self-constituted, and, in that case, we may as well give up the idea of a God altogether, for here is a no-god, an atheistical principle at work, laying down laws and devising bounds. We might as well say that God found matter ready to his hands. Whence, then, the matter? Or (2) they must be imposed on him by some independent power, and then we have two Gods, one acting as a check upon the other, and shall find ourselves involved in the endless difficulties which such a theory carries with it. If, on the other hand, we conceive limitations to his power, which are self-imposed, this is not to deny the attribute of omnipotence to God, but to affirm that, for purposes of his own, he may have set bounds to that omnipotence; a quite different proposition. For example, I cannot conceive any exercise of the Divine will which should obliterate or alter what we call the past,—accomplished facts, such as the fact of my consciousness at any moment of my life. Millions of years hence, these will remain, not to be wiped out from the

become confused. The terms right and wrong as applied to the actions of their Deity will no longer have a meaning for them. That the recipients of such a revelation should be in any way debased and demoralized by it will cease to be a proof that it is not divine. For, as it would seem to be a part of the divine plan that these beings should be made miserable in another world, so it might well be part of the same plan that they should be debased and degraded in this present life. And the standard of morality as far as relates to the Creator being entirely gone, there would be no more harm in designating his acts as immoral, than there would be in terming them cruel, which from the constitution of our minds we must deem them to be.\*

record of realities that have had an existence. But if it be true that the Deity has called me into separate and individual being, this will be an instance of self-limited power. A subject such as this cannot be discussed in a foot-note, and in treating it we are all of us liable to get out of our depth ; but it must be noticed, because it has been contended by some that, if God be not omnipotent, "the salvation of the finally impenitent may be, impossible." If it be meant by this, that it may have been a condition imposed by God upon himself that sinners should be eternally punished by him, this is only another way of saying that God has determined so to act ; we are playing with words, and the statement in the text is not affected. The meaning must be that a necessity of this kind may be forced on him from some external source. I think the supposition quite untenable, but even if we imagine such a thing possible, the beings spoken of above would still have the strongest reasons for hoping that it was not so ; they might still complain that they had been created at all, when such frightful consequences to them must needs follow their creation. Unless it be contended that God may have been compelled to create human beings who should sin (which seems to me not more absurd than to suppose that he may be compelled to damn them eternally, after they have sinned) in which case, we shall only be falling foul of another First Cause, in the shape of Necessity.

\* When some of the missionaries in New Zealand were expounding the horrors of Tophet and eternal fire, their auditors exclaimed, "We will have nothing to say to your

As I have spoken of an omnipotent Being inflicting suffering, it may be well to notice in passing the obvious remark that there is suffering in this world. But it is never wholly untempered by alleviation. It is always of a kind which we can conceive to be ultimately productive of some balance of good, while, in very many cases, we can lay our finger on the very good which it effects. Moreover, it will be well to bear in mind that every physical pain or disease, or moral anguish, or pang of unrequited love, or wail of bereavement of which we have any experience, or can form any idea, even if endured by the same individual for any finite number of millions of years, are to the pangs which 'tis a thousand to one will overtake that individual, if unfortunately for him Christianity should prove true, as the portion of space occupied by an animalcule in the milt of a cod-fish to infinite space itself. In the spectacle of earthly suffering, there is nothing which need upset our moral sense: the case is different when the prospect is such as I have referred to. But even if the endless torturing of sentient beings be in strict analogy to what we see here, it is nothing to my point, which is, not that all these dreadful proceedings will not take place, but that it is greatly to be hoped that they are a mere figment of the brain; in other words that it would be much to our interest to disprove, if we could, Christianity as a dogmatic religion; and that there is no benevolent man who sets himself to think on this matter, who would not favour the attempt, if only he thought it practicable.

This, however, is a digression. I was endeavouring to show that this terrible message, if it should turn out to have a foundation in fact, will upset all religion. Such horrid punishments can only be meant for white men. We have none bad enough among us to deserve them!"—Farle's Residence in New Zealand.

our moral judgments. So far as we have considered it, we seem to have lost all hold on what is right or wrong, or elevating, or debasing, or merciful, or cruel, or in short, on anything that is not *fated*, and to be wandering about in the darkness of Necessity, like so many personages in a Greek Tragedy. And the more we look into this extraordinary communication, the more do considerations arise, one after another, which increase our bewilderment. If there be one character, more than another, in which I am forced to conceive the Deity, it is in that of a Lawgiver: if there be any attributes which I am forced to assign to him they are those which accompany the function of originating laws. Yet what sort of a code is this, which we have imposed upon us, embodied in his perfected Revelation? God makes known his will to man, and it is found to be one such as no man can comply with. At best it is one such as only a small portion of mankind are expected to obey. The behests are wholly unsuited for the bulk of those for whom they were designed. It is as though a human Legislator promulgated statutes which should have the effect of making nine-tenths of the population capital convicts. Man, created imperfect and incapable of rising above imperfection, is to be punished eternally for not being perfect. The mere statement of the hypothesis shows that these would be bad and injudicious laws. Yet this is precisely the kind of Legislation which we attribute to the Almighty. This view clearly lowers our estimate of him as a Lawgiver, if we are to argue from human experience, that is to say if we are to exercise our reason at all; but where everything is in such a tangle as far as our minds can reach to it, this is a point of small consequence. I pass over the fact that many of his supposed commands to the ancient Israelites are distinctly immoral in our sense of the word, because



this, to persons who can get over the other difficulties of the subject is, as we have seen, no difficulty at all.

There remains yet another consideration, which is not without a practical bearing on this subject. If so many of our other conceptions of God's attributes, founded on human conscience, are to be discarded: if what we call wrong may, with him, be right: if what we should term cruelty, when exercised by him, assumes the shape of justice: if, in short, the human standard is quite inapplicable to the almighty, on what ground can we be called upon to assign to him the quality of Truthfulness? I see none whatever. It may be a part of his divine and inscrutable plan to promise one thing and to perform another. If any one says this is blasphemy, I reply that it is rank blasphemy to question his right to act as he chooses, and that if the human standard is to be set aside in one particular it must be set aside in all others. If the whole of his plan were unfolded before us, it might be seen that it is on the whole advantageous for creation that man should be deceived in this way.\* And, if this be so, neither can we attribute unchangeableness to him, even though he has proclaimed himself to be unchangeable. We shall, then, be in this dilemma. We shall be by no means sure that, if we obey his will, we shall receive the promised reward. And we shall moreover be unable to ascertain with certainty what his will may be. Though many centuries ago he uttered commands against murder, theft and idolatry, it does not at all follow that he should be of the same mind now. I see here some danger to Society, if Theologians should

\* And such a course of action would be quite in accordance with what we learn of God Almighty from the inspired volume. In 1 Kings xxii., we are told how he wished to make use of the volunteered services of a "lying spirit" to deceive Ahab.

continue to press upon us their idea of an absolute and quite inhuman God. And it by no means follows that because such dangerous consequences have been hitherto kept in check by other forces (the chief of which have been the unwillingness of some and the inability of the many to carry out this doctrine to its legitimate conclusions) they may not awaken to a formidable life when the mass of mankind begin to reason more closely on these subjects.

What has preceded goes merely to this : that we have a sufficient and certain answer for those, if any such there be, who tell us that it is not for our interest to inquire into the truth of revealed religion. The exact converse of this statement is as clearly capable of proof as any proposition that commands the assent of the mind. It *is* for our interest to inquire into the truth of this so-called revelation, and to disprove it if we can :\* as surely as it would be to the advantage of a number of persons sailing together in a ship who should be informed that the ship was going to sink, to learn that the statement was untrue, even if that statement were accompanied with the offer of a life-preserving apparatus to such as, believing the story, might choose to apply for one, (and here I think I am rating the scheme of salvation upon the whole more highly than its advocates claim to put it : since according to them only a small number of passengers hear of their peril and have

\* Since writing this paper, I have met with a passage of Voltaire in which that great writer, in a few pregnant sentences, sums up the whole of my argument. It occurs in his notes to the "Pensées" of Pascal "Si dans votre système, Dieu n'est venu que pour si peu de personnes, si le petit nombre des élus est si effrayant, si je ne puis rien du tout par moi-même, dites moi je vous prie quel intérêt j'ai à vous croire? N'ai-je pas un intérêt visible à être persuadé du contraire? De quel front osez-vous me montrer un bonheur infini, auquel d'un million d'hommes, un seul à peine a droit d'aspirer?"

the apparatus offered them.) It might be, I do not say it would be, the result of further inquiry that we should find there is no reason for supposing mankind to be in these desperate straits. Let us, at any rate, look somewhat more closely, each according to his ability, into this matter, with the earnest hope, which we are in every point of view thoroughly authorized to entertain, that the alleged message, or revelation, may prove to be untrue—yet, not suffering our hopes to run away with our judgment, if, after adequate investigation, the news should seem to be confirmed by reasonable proofs. In that case, we must bow our heads *cervice paratâ ferre jugum*, and every one should look to securing his own safety, as best he may. But let us also cease talking such nonsense (for it is absolute nonsense) as is involved in saying that this revelation is good tidings, or anything but very bad tidings, for the bulk of mankind. To reject it, if it should prove to be true, would be foolish: but it is impossible not to hope that it may turn out a myth: that we are not after all in the hands of a Deity whose pleasure it is to act in so barbarous and ruthless a fashion towards ourselves: or of one whose design, as a whole, compels him so to act towards us: or of an iron necessity stronger than God and which prevents him from acting otherwise; and that, in the words of Buckle, mankind may all the while be only trembling before “the bugbears of their own imagination.”

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NOTE, REFERRED TO AT PAGE 23.

It will doubtless be objected by some amiable persons, who are very much more humane than their own supposed creed, that this is to misrepresent Revelation. In what respect? Certainly not in regard to the asser-

tion that it sets us all down as by nature lost creatures, for this alleged fact underlies the whole scheme of salvation. But it will be said that we are nowhere in Holy Writ informed that a majority of mankind will be ultimately damned. Yet it seems to me that there are many passages in the New Testament which can be understood only in this sense. "Strait is the gate and narrow is the way." "Many are called, but few are chosen." "He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved: but he that believeth not, shall be damned." "Except a man be born again of water and the spirit" &c., (it being quite clear that only a few persons, comparatively speaking, have undergone the baptism of water and fewer still that of the spirit) the sealing of a certain number of persons in the apocalypse, and much of Paul's teaching.\* The milder meanings which have been conveyed into these passages by some commentators† are, in reality, due to a half-acknowledged shrinking of the mind from their real purport. The Fathers had no such scruples, and with the exception of a very few, who have never been esteemed quite orthodox, such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, maintained the eternal damnation of the greater part of the human species. The Church Evangelicals, the Scotch Calvinists, the orthodox Dissenters (more especially the Methodists and Baptists) have long held the doctrine and hold it at this day, and, of this, thousands of examples from their sermons and speeches and writings might be given. I give two or three, simply because they happen to come to my hand, where I am writing this note, far from any Theological Library to refer to.

\* *E.g.*, Eph. i. 4, 5, 6; 2 Thess. ii. 13; Rom. ix. 18-21; Gal. iii. 10-16, and cf. 1 John v. 12.

† In an article in Fraser's Magazine on Capital Punishments (June 1864) bearing the well known signature J. F. S., attention is very forcibly called to the common mistake made in terming the Christian religion a *mild* one. It is, in fact, the most ruthless of all known creeds.

“Every Evangelical clergyman knows,” writes one of the most esteemed correspondents of the Record newspaper, under the signature of *Vetus*, “if he gives the subject a serious thought, that three fourths of the people he addresses are travelling quietly along the broad road.” In the memoirs of the Rev. Mr M’Cheyne of Dundee, a great light in Scotland, will be found these words written by him. “Hell is as deep and burning as ever. Unconverted souls are as surely rushing to it . . . . *The great mass* you will find to be unconverted” (pp. 365-366). And again, “Seventy thousand die every day, about fifty every minute, nearly one every second, passing over the verge. Life is like a stream made up of human beings, pouring on and rushing over the brink into eternity. Are all those blessed? Ah no. ‘Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord.’ Of all that vast multitude continually pouring into the eternal world, a *little company* alone have savingly believed on Jesus. ‘Strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and *few* there be that find it.’” “The Scotch clergy declared that all mankind, a very small portion only excepted, were doomed to eternal misery,” (Buckle II. 372), and he gives numerous specimens of this preaching.\* Precisely the same doctrine is being preached, at this very day in the greater part of the pulpits of the country; from Mr Spurgeon (whose sermon on the execution of the murderer Palmer, contains a graphic description of the torments of hell the most singular that has ever been produced by an imagination which we must charitably hope to be diseased) down to,—or up to, whichever may be the correct way of putting it—Bishop Samuel Wilberforce.† This is undoubtedly

\* The Scotch “Confession of Faith” does not even except infants. “*Elect* infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ!” (Ch. x. sect. 3.)

† Witness the extraordinary sermon preached by him at

the prevailing theological view, and I believe it to be a correct view of Gospel teaching : and it is to people who hold this view that I address the challenge to disprove my thesis " That it would be greatly to the advantage of mankind that revealed religion should turn out to be untrue." To those who say that this tenet is not authorized by scripture, and who consider it probable that a large majority will be saved—while remarking on the singularity of the fact that the language of Scripture should be so ambiguous on this important point, that the most eminent authorities, Fathers, Catholics, Anglicans, Nonconformists, should have been led to interpret it *in the sense most unfavourable for the general interests*—I am ready to admit that some part of the reasoning contained in the preceding paper is not applicable ; but for all that, I will make bold to stand to my thesis, which will I think hold good, if the case be that revelation tells us of the eternal damnation of only *a small portion of mankind*. I will even go so far as to assert that tidings which should contain among other news this, that *one man only* was to be infinitely tormented, ought to excite in the benevolent mind some hope of its being false.

It may be well to add that my arguments do not of course apply to Universalists, nor to those who hold that the elect will be taken to Heaven and that the rest of mankind will simply cease to exist ; to which latter notion Archbishop Whately seems to have inclined, though he did not quite adopt it, for fear it might not be in strict accordance with the letter of Scripture. Those who hold this view may, in a certain sense, logically call Christianity " good tidings." They may allege that it is a message holding out a prospect of eternal life and happiness to some, while

Banbury in 1850, to " young people." It is commented upon at length by " Presbyterian Anglicanus," in an excellent paper on " Eternal Punishment " in this series.

the remainder are not shown to be worse off than they would otherwise appear to be. But I understand that the bulk of Christians look on both these views of the matter as heretical, perhaps in themselves damnable—in which case the holders of them will possibly have reason to change their views of the “gladness” of the tidings, at any rate as regards themselves.\*

In connection with this whole subject, I cannot help noticing the strange sort of euphemism which is constantly found in the mouth of the most determined Evangelical Christian and upholder of the general damnation theory, with regard to the Heathen. Such an one will in general shrink from the idea of burning these millions of human beings, and will fly off from discussion, into space, on the wings of some such passage as “they are a law to themselves,” &c. “The whole thing is a mystery, these nations must be left to God’s mercy, &c.” † It does not seem to occur to

\* In the *Record* or Low-Church organ, I remember reading, some time in the Autumn of 1868 an article in which the views of the Universalists were spoken of as “indescribably saddening!” Gems might be extracted from this newspaper and put up into a small volume, which would be infinitely more amusing than *Punch*.

† This is generally the cloudy method of the more refined and humane among the orthodox: but violent and half-educated Christian teachers are not afraid to sweep whole populations, past and present, into the bottomless abyss. Thus, while the amiable poet Cowper exclaims

“Ten thousand Sages lost in endless woe  
For ignorance of what they could not know?  
That speech betrays at once a bigot’s tongue:  
Charge not a God with such outrageous wrong!

*Truth*, 517-520,

Brother Carey, a Baptist Missionary, on being asked what was to become of Mussulmans and Hindoos “expressed his fears that they would all be lost.” Baptist Miss. Soc. Trans. quoted by Sydney Smith in his article on “Indian Missions.” There are plenty of Brothers Carey, at this day.

these good people that, if the theory of salvation through a new birth alone, and of damnation for those who have not been born again, is thus to be softened down and frittered away, their reasons for attempting to instil the christian religion into these Heathens are much weakened, if not altogether destroyed. Brothers Carey and Ringletaube, who deemed all Hindoos and Mahometans natural food for hell-fire, were consistent in the course they took. But if once we admit the possibility that a sort of rough justice may be dealt out to the Heathen, we shall see cause to stay our hands, lest, in case of our success, their last state may be worse than their first. For if we shall succeed in bringing every man of them over to our views, we shall only be thrusting them and their descendants into a position with regard to their eternal interests which does not seem, at the first blush, an improved one. Now, we ought not to wish them to change their religion, in their own interests,\* unless we are quite satisfied that the chance for the individual, of escaping hell, will be smaller if he remains as he is, than if he makes the change: a supposition which seems hardly possible on our own showing.

The Larger Catechism of the Church of Scotland is explicit on this point. "They who, having never heard the Gospel, know not Jesus Christ, and believe not in him, *cannot be saved*" (Answer 60).

\* I say "in their own interests," because of course there is the argument that God has ordered us to preach the Gospel to the Heathen. But if the Heathen as a body are not to be ultimately benefited by receiving the Gospel, if they are only to be placed in such a condition, by conversion, that nearly all of them will receive *many* stripes instead of a *few*, it will be for *our* interest, not for *theirs*, that we shall try to convert them, *i. e.* in order not to disobey God's commands, and so bring punishment upon ourselves.