

THE ATONEMENT:

BY C. BRADLAUGH.

“*Quel est donc ce Dieu qui fait mourir Dieu pour apaiser Dieu?*”

THE chief feature of the Christian Religion is that Jesus, the Son of God, sacrificed himself, or was sacrificed by God the father, to atone for Adam's transgression against the divine command. It is declared in the New Testament, in clear and emphatic language, that in consequence of the one man, Adam's sin, death entered into the world, and judgment and condemnation came upon all men. It is also declared that “Christ died for the ungodly;” “that he died for our sins,” and “was delivered for our offences.” On the one hand it is urged that Adam, the sole source of the human family, offended Deity, and that the consequence of this offence was the condemnation to death, after a life of sorrow, of the entire race of mankind. On the other side of the picture is portrayed the love of God, who sent his only beloved son to die, and by his death, procuring for all eternal life, to save the remnant of humanity from the further vengeance of their all-merciful heavenly father. The religion of Christ finds its source in the yet undiscovered garden watered by a four-armed river.

Adam's sin is the corner-stone of Christianity; the key-stone of the arch. Without the fall there is no redeemer, for there is no fallen one to be redeemed. It is then to the history of Adam that the examinant of the Atonement theory should first direct his attention. To try the doctrine of the Atonement by the aid of science would be fatal to religion. As for the one man Adam, 6,000 years

ago the first of the human race, his existence is not only unvouched for by science, but is actually questioned by the timid, and challenged by the bolder exponents of modern ethnology. The human race is traced back far beyond the period fixed for Adam's sin. Egypt and India speak for humanity busy with wars, cities, and monuments, prior to the date given for the garden scene in Eden.

The fall of Adam could not have brought sin upon mankind, and death by sin, if hosts of men and women had lived and died ages before the words "thou shalt surely die," were spoken by God to man.

Nor could all men inherit Adam's misfortune, if it be true that it is not to one, but to many centres of origin that we ought to trace back the various races of mankind.

The theologian who finds no evidence of death at all prior to the offence shared by Adam and Eve, is laughed to scorn by the geologist who points to the innumerable petrifications on the earth's bosom, which with a million tongues declare more potently than loudest speech, that organic life in myriads of myriads was destroyed incalculable ages before man's era on our world.

Science, however, has so little to offer in support of any religious doctrine, and so much to advance against all purely theologic tenets, that we turn to a point giving the Christian greater vantage ground; and accepting for the moment his premises, we deny that he can maintain the possibility of Adam's sin, and yet consistently affirm the existence of an All-wise, All-powerful, and All-good God. Did Adam sin? We will take the Christians' Bible in our hands to answer the question, first defining the word sin. What is sin? Samuel Taylor Coleridge says, "A sin is an evil which has its ground or origin in the agent and not in the compulsion of circumstances. Circumstances are compulsory from the absence of a power to resist or control them, and if this absence be likewise the effect of circumstances (that is, if it have been neither directly nor indirectly caused by the agent himself) the evil derived from the circumstance, and therefore such evil is not sin, and the person who suffers it,

or is the compelled actor, or instrument of its infliction on others, may feel regret but not remorse. Let us generalise the word circumstance so as to understand by it all and everything not connected with the will. . . . Even though it were the warm blood circulating in the chambers of the heart, or man's own inmost sensations, we regard them as circumstantial, extrinsic, or from without. . . .

An act to be sin must be original, and a state or act that has not its origin in the will, may be calamity, deformity, or disease, but sin it cannot be. It is not enough that the act appears so voluntary, or that it has the most hateful passions, or debasing appetite for its proximate cause and accompaniment. All these may be found in a madhouse, where neither law nor humanity permit us to condemn the actor of sin. The reason of law declared the maniac not a free agent, and the verdict follows of course, *not guilty.*" Did Adam sin?

The Bible story is that a Deity created one man and one woman; that he placed them in a garden wherein he had also placed a tree, which was good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise. That although he had expressly given the fruit of every tree bearing seed for food, he, nevertheless, commanded them not to eat of the fruit of this attractive tree under penalty of death. Supposing Adam to have at once disobeyed this injunction, would it have been sin? The fact that God had made the tree good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, would have surely been sufficient circumstance of justification on the God-created inducement to partake of its fruit. The inhibition lost its value as against the enticement. If the All-wise had intended the tree to be avoided, would he have made its allurements so overpowering to the senses? But the case does not rest here. In addition to all the attractions of the tree, and as though there were not enough, there is a subtle serpent gifted with suasive speech, who either wiser or more truthful than the All-perfect Deity, says that although God has threatened immediate death as the consequence of disobedience to his command, yet they "shall not die; for God

doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods knowing good and evil." The tempter is stronger than the tempted, the witchery of the serpent is too great for the spell-bound woman, the decoy tree is too potent in its temptations; overpersuaded herself by the honey-tongued voice of the seducer, she plucks the fruit and gives to her husband also. And for this their offspring are to suffer! The yet unborn children are to be the victims of God's vengeance on their parents' weakness—though he had made them weak. Though indeed he had created the tempter sufficiently strong to practise upon this weakness, and had arranged the causes, predisposing man and woman to commit the offence—if indeed it be an offence to pluck the fruit of a tree which gives knowledge to the eater. It is for this fall that Jesus is to atone. He is sacrificed to redeem the world's inhabitants from the penalties for a weakness (for sin it was not) they had no share in. It was not sin; for the man was influenced by circumstances pre-arranged by Deity, and which man was powerless to resist or control. But if the man was so influenced by such circumstances, then it was God who influenced the man—God who punished the human race for an action to the commission of which he impelled their progenitor.

Adam did not sin. He ate of the fruit of a tree which God had made good to be eaten. He was induced to this through the indirect persuasion of a serpent God had made for the very purpose to persuade him. But even if Adam did sin, and even if he and Eve, his wife, were the first parents of the whole human family, what have we to do with their sin? We unborn when the act was committed, and without choice as to coming into the world. Does Jesus atone for Adam's sin? Adam suffered for his own offence; he, according to the curse, was to eat in sorrow of the fruit of the earth all his life as punishment for his offence. Atonement, after punishment, is surely a superfluity. Did the sacrifice of Jesus serve as atonement for the whole world, and, if yes, for all sin, or for Adam's sin only? If the atonement is for the whole world, does it

extend to unbelievers as well as to believers in the efficacy? If it only includes believers, then what has become of those generations who, according to the Bible, for 4,000 years succeeded each other in the world without faith in Christ because without knowledge of his mission? Should not Jesus have come 4000 years earlier, or, at least, should he not have come when the Ark on Ararat served as monument of God's merciless vengeance, which had made the whole earth a battle field, whereon the omnipotent had crushed the feeble, and had marked his prowess by the innumerable myriads of decaying dead? If it be declared that, though the atonement by Jesus only applies to believers in his mission so far as regards human beings born since his coming, yet that it is wider in its retrospective effect; then the answer is that it is unfair to be born after Jesus to make faith the condition precedent to the saving efficacy of atonement, especially if belief be required from all mankind posterior to the Christian era, whether they have heard of Jesus or not. Japanese, Chinese, savage Indians, Kaffirs, and others have surely a right to complain of this atonement scheme, which ensures them eternal damnation by making it requisite to believe in a Gospel of which they have no knowledge. If it be contended that belief shall only be required from those to whom the Gospel of Jesus has been preached, and who have had afforded to them the opportunity of its acceptance, then how great a cause of complaint against Christian Missionaries have those peoples who, without such missions, might have escaped damnation for unbelief. The gates of hell are opened to them by the earnest propagandist, who professes to show the road to heaven.

But does this atonement serve only to redeem the human family from the curse inflicted by Deity in Eden's garden for Adam's sin, or does it operate as satisfaction for all sin? If the salvation is from the punishment for Adam's sin alone, and if belief and baptism are, as Jesus himself affirms, to be the sole conditions precedent to any saving efficacy in the much-lauded atonement by the son of God, then what becomes of a child that only lives a few hours, is never bap-

tised, and never having any mind, consequently never has any belief? Or what becomes of one idiot born who, throughout his dreary life, never has mental capacity for the acceptance or examination of, or credence in any religious dogmas whatever? Is the idiot saved who cannot believe? Is the infant saved that cannot believe? I, with some mental faculties tolerably developed, cannot believe. Must I be damned? If so, fortunate short-lived babe! lucky idiot! That the atonement should not be effective until the person to be saved has been baptised, is at least worthy of comment; that the sprinkling a few drops of water should quench the flames of hell, is a remarkable feature in the Christian's creed.

"One can't but think it somewhat droll
Pump-water thus should cleanse a soul."

How many fierce quarrels have raged on the formula of baptism amongst those loving brothers in Christ who believe he died for them! How strange an idea that, though God has been crucified to redeem mankind, it yet needs the font of water to wash away the lingering stain of Adam's crime.

One minister of the Church of England, occupying the presidential chair of a well-known training college for Church clergymen in the North of England, seriously declared, in the presence of a large auditory and of several church dignitaries, that the sin of Adam was so potent in its effect, that if a man *had never been born, he would yet have been damned for sin*. That is, he declared that man existed before birth, and that he committed sin before he was born; and if never born, would notwithstanding deserve to suffer eternal torment for that sin.

It is almost impossible to discuss seriously a doctrine so monstrously absurd, and yet it is not one whit more ridiculous than the ordinary orthodox and terrible doctrine, that God the undying, in his infinite love, killed himself under the form of his son to appease the cruel vengeance of God, the just and merciful, who, without this, would have been ever vengeful, unjust, and merciless.

The atonement theory, as presented to us by the Bible, is in effect as follows:—God creates man surrounded

by such circumstance as the divine mind chose, in the selection of which man had no voice, and the effects of which on man were all foreknown and predestined by Deity. The result is man's fall on the very first temptation, so frail the nature with which he was endowed, or so powerful the temptation to which he was subjected. For this fall not only does the All-merciful punish Adam, but also his posterity; and this punishing went on for many centuries, until God, the immutable, changed his purpose of continual condemnation of men for sins they had no share in, and was wearied with his long series of unjust judgments on those whom he created, in order that he might judge them. That, then, God sent his son, who was himself and was also his own father, and who was immortal, to die upon the cross, and, by this sacrifice, to atone for the sin which God himself had caused Adam to commit, and thus to appease the merciless vengeance of the All-merciful, which would otherwise have been continued against men yet unborn for an offence they could not have been concerned in or accessory to. Whether those who had died before Christ's coming are redeemed, the Bible does not clearly tell us. Those born after are redeemed only on condition of their faith in the efficacy of the sacrifice offered, and in the truth of the history of Jesus's life. The doctrine of salvation by sacrifice of human life is the doctrine of a barbarous and superstitious age; the outgrowth of a brutal and depraved era. The God who accepts the bloody offering of an innocent victim in lieu of punishing the guilty culprit, shows no mercy in sparing the offender: he has already satiated his lust for vengeance on the first object presented to him.

Yet sacrifice is an early and prominent, and with slight exception an abiding feature in the Hebrew Record—sacrifice of life finds appreciative acceptance from the Jewish Deity. Cain's offering of fruits is ineffective, but Abel's altar bearing the firstlings of his flock, and the fat thereof, finds respect in the sight of the Lord. While the face of the earth was disfigured by the rotting dead after God in his infinite mercy had deluged the world, then it was that

the ascending smoke from Noah's burnt sacrifice of bird and beast produced pleasure in heaven, and God himself smelled a sweet savour from the roasted meats. To reach atonement for the past by sacrifice is worse than folly—it is crime. The past can never be recalled, and the only reference to it should be that, by marking its events, we may avoid its evil deeds and improve upon its good ones. For Jesus himself—can man believe in him? In his history contained in anonymous pamphlets uncorroborated by contemporary testimony? This history, in which, in order to fulfil a prophecy which does not relate to him, his descent from David is demonstrated by tracing through two self-contradictory genealogies the descent of Joseph who was not his father. This history, in which the infinite God grows from babyhood and his cradle through childhood to manhood, as though he were not God at all. This history full of absurd wonders, devils, magicians, and evil spirits, rather fit for an Arabian Night's legend, than the word of God to his people. This history, with its miraculous raisings of the dead to life, disbelieved and contradicted by the people amongst whom they are alleged to have been performed; but, nevertheless, to be accepted by us to-day with all humility. This history of the Man-God subject to human passions and infirmities, who comes to die, and who prays to his heavenly father—that is, to himself, that he will spare him the bitter cup of death. Who is betrayed, having himself, ere he laid the foundations of the world, predestined Judas to betray him, and who dies being God immortal crying with his almost dying breath—"My God! my God! why hast thou forsaken me?"