

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

CHRISTIAN

PERSECUTION.

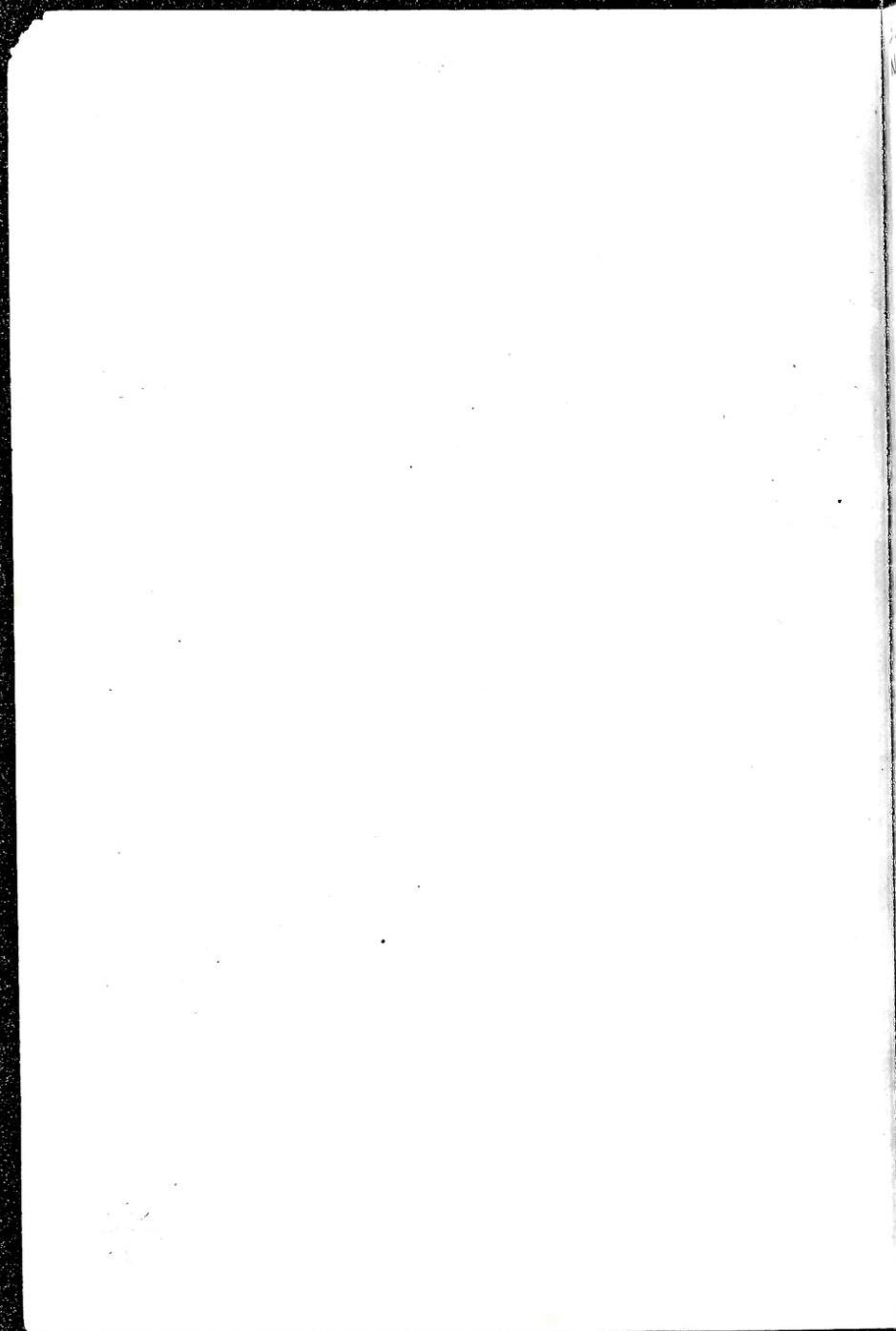
BY  
SALADIN.

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## CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION.

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THE Church that is better at argument must give way to the Church that is better at blows. God is not a dialectician with words—he debates with the *shillelagh*. The young plant of Christianity will never grow till it is fenced round with a hedge of swords. “Proof,” say you? If such a statement be not true on the very face of it, history can produce proofs in abundance. The Saxon axes hewed Christianity out of Britain; it had to be restored by the monks of St. Augustine, and they managed to re-establish it, only because they managed to get the axes on its side. The Society of Jesus fairly planted Christian colonies in Japan; but, in spite of the sword of the spirit and the whole armour of righteousness, Christianity became utterly exterminated before a torrent of spears. If Christian cannon had only spoken louder, the sound of the “glad tidings of great joy” (save the mark!) might to-day have been ringing from the cathedral of Yeddo. If, instead of the sword of the spirit, there had been 20,000 British bayonets, the breezes of Nippon might to-day have been musical with the psalms of David. Persecution paralysed the *heresy* of the Albigenses, and ran its stiletto through the heart of Protestantism in Spain. In France Catholicism waded to power through the carnage of the St. Bartholomew massacre, and set her heel on the neck of the Huguenots by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. In England the issue between Rome and the Reformation hung in the balance till the diplomatic ability of Elizabeth and her ministers flung the preponderance of bills and bows, pikes and spears, into the scale against the interests of her of the Seven Hills.

State religion is State persecution. It is privilege to one band of sectaries and disability to all others. “The

opinions," says Lecky,\* "of 99 persons out of every 100 are formed mainly by education, and a Government can decide in whose hands the national education is to be placed, what subjects it is to comprise, and what principles it is to convey. The opinions of the great majority of those who emancipate themselves from the prejudices of their education are the results, in a great measure, of reading and discussion, and a Government can prohibit all books, and can expel all teachers, that are adverse to the doctrines it holds. Indeed, the simple fact of annexing certain penalties to the profession of particular opinions, and rewards to the profession of opposite opinions, while it will, undoubtedly, make many hypocrites, will also make many converts. For any one who attentively observes the process that is pursued in the formation of opinions must be aware that, even when a train of argument has preceded their adoption, they are usually much less the result of pure reasoning than of the action of innumerable distorting influences which are continually deflecting our judgments. Among these one of the most powerful is self-interest." Thus the mere act of taking one sect of Christians under State protection is injustice and persecution to all other sects whatever.

But, in the past, Christian persecution has seldom stopped at the infliction of mere civil and social disabilities. When persecution is spoken of to Christian apologists, under the influence of modern humanitarianism, they reply that persecutions have, indeed, been carried on by professing Christians; but that, in so far as they indulged in them, they belied Christian principles and permitted their vindictive passions as men to overmaster the essentially tolerant and humane principles of their faith. This is false. Nay, the very opposite is the truth. The modern and cultured Christian is tolerant only in proportion as he is not a Christian, and in ratio as he has progressed in the path of enlightenment and benevolence and forsaken that of Paul and the Fathers. The belief that you have the finality and fixity of truth

\* "The Rise and Influence of Rationalism in Europe," vol. ii., p. 3.



from authority that cannot err is an inevitable source of intolerance towards those who cannot accept the truth which is, to you, a complete entelechy. Doubt in your own mind, as regards the tenets you hold, is the well-spring of toleration towards those whose tenets are different. Absolute faith inevitably means persecution; doubt is the *fons et origo* of toleration. "The only foundation for toleration," said Charles James Fox,\* "is a degree of scepticism, and without it there can be none. For, if a man believes in the saving of souls, he must soon think about the means, and if, by cutting off one generation, he can save many future ones from hell-fire, it is his duty to do it." Not only, then, does Christianity, being a divine revelation, "the very word of very God," contain in it essentially the principle of persecution; but the Bible exemplifies the practice as well as supplies the theory. For his most horrible cruelties to the heretic the Churchman could always quote, "*Idolatra educebatur ad portas civitatis, et lapidibus obruebatur.*"†

Christianity itself whined and yelled under persecution on the scaffold or among the wild beasts of the arena; but, in conformity with its inherent principles, the moment it got the power to do as it had been done to it inaugurated persecution upon a scale tremendous and terrible, and to which the world had previously been a stranger. The early Christians were real; the modern Christians are a sham. If the Christians were real, they would before this have burnt to ashes the hand that pens these lines. Christianity would have done it unhesitatingly in the days before it degenerated into a conventional bogus that nobody can well attack, because nobody knows exactly where it stands. But in the old and true days, when it stood by the Scriptures and the Fathers, it acted in a way which, however deplorable, we must respect the actors for sincerity and consistency. To try to stamp out heresy it hesitated not to slaughter thousands and tens of thousands—nay, to exterminate a nation, or even to depopulate the world. "Give me the earth purged from heretics, and I will give you a heaven!" was the vehement cry of Nestorius to the Emperor. After the mission of

\* Rogers' "Recollections," p. 49.

† Deuteronomy xvii.

Dominic the persecution of heretics in certain districts amounted to absolute extermination; and in 1568 a sentence of the Inquisition doomed *the entire population of the Netherlands to death as heretics*. "Three millions of people, men, women, and children were sentenced to the scaffold in three lines."\* So terribly in earnest was the Christian Church, preferring that the earth should be rendered a depopulated and howling wilderness rather than be peopled by heretics.

No sooner had the perfidious murderer, Constantine, declared in favour of Christianity than, armed with the civil power, it sprang from the dust in which it had been writhing and shrieking under the rod, and, wrenching that rod from the hands of the persecutors, it brought it down with remorseless cruelty upon the backs of all and sundry who failed to recognise God incarnate in the wandering preacher of Galilee. First, with terrible hate, the Christian blade was stabbed into the Jewish heart, and persecution, such as they had never before experienced, fell upon the seed of Abraham, although they were of the same race as the man-god of this new faith in whose name they were called upon to suffer. The race-blood from which their Christ had sprung the Christians shed like water. Next, the Christian fury was directed against the Pagans, who, when in power, had been so tolerant to them, and who had never punished them for their monstrous creed, but only for their flagitious crimes. And, next, the Christian fury fell upon such Christians as differed from the majority on some nugatory and hair-breadth point of doctrine; and neither Jew nor Pagan was hounded to dungeon and death with more remorseless zeal than was Christian by brother Christian. "There are," exclaimed the heathen, "no wild beasts so ferocious as Christians who differ concerning their faith." A Jew who married a Christian incurred the penalty of death; a Christian who might select a Jewess for his mistress was liable to be burned alive; and a certain Christian Queen† passed a statute going into the details as to how Christians were to be enter-

\* "Motley's "Rise of the Dutch Republic," vol. ii., p. 155.

† Jeanne I., in 1347. *Vide* Sabatier, "Hist. de la Législation sur le Femme Publique," p. 103.

tained and accommodated in Christian brothels, but enacting that, if a Jew dared to enter the chamber of the holy harlots, he was to be flogged.

The Jew's own Scriptures furnished texts which the new sect read as his death warrant. God himself was cited as the first persecutor in that he expelled Adam from Eden for a breach of the divine law, and cursed his descendants. Elijah was referred to as having slain the prophets of Baal, and also Hezekiah, Josiah, and Nebuchadnezzar as noted persecutors of heretics under divine approval. Moreover, the master-spirit of the early Church, St. Augustine, gave to persecution the impetus of his genius, learning, and zeal. He cursed religious liberty in the memorable words: "*Quid est enim peior, mors animæ quam libertas erroris.*"\* With him heresy was the most detestable of all crimes, immeasurably worse than ordinary murder, being the murder of the soul. Toleration was an absolute crime. The closest and the tenderest relations of life were to be utterly trampled on and disregarded in the interests of suppressing heresy. "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 which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers; namely, of the gods of the people which are round about you, nigh unto thee, or far off from thee, from the one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth; thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shalt 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; because he hath sought to thrust thee away from the Lord thy God."† "He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned."‡ "If there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, nor bid him God speed."§ "If any man preach any other

\* Epist. clxvi.

† Deut. xiii. 6-10.

‡ Mark xvi. 16.

§ 2 John i. 10.

Gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.”\* “I would they were even cut off that trouble you.”† The whole Christian fabric was rested upon “Believe and be baptised.” Any hypocrite and liar could, when he found it suited his interests, say he believed, and generally there was an end of it. But, with baptism, it was different; there required to be the “outward and visible sign:” every human being that did not submit to being damped by a priest went inevitably to perdition. Practically, the Christian watchword was “Be damped or damned.” The Church took care that children who were likely to die before their mothers gave them birth should be, prenatally, baptised with a syringe. Christendom was baptism mad. Only the waters of baptism could render you so damp as to be unsuited for hell. The keenest intellects of the Middle Ages engaged in a subtle and acrimonious controversy in regard to a Jew who got converted to Christianity in an arid desert. The Jew was dying, no water could be found, and, instead of the cooling fluid, his brow was sprinkled with hot desert sand, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.‡ The controversy hinged on the question as to whether baptism with sand was, or was not, effective in securing salvation. The Council of Trent settled the matter, and declared that baptism must be by water, and water only; and so it was discovered that, after all the bother, the converted Jew was damned. Every unbaptised infant was consigned to the same region as the sand-baptised Jew. Every child came into the world bearing the guilt of “Adam’s first sin,” and under the sentence of eternal torment; and learned works advocating this view have been written as late as in the memory of men still living, and by no less able theologians than Dr. Jonathan Edwards—so firmly based is Christian persecution upon the bed rock of infallible dogma.

Under Christian persecutions thousands of Jews took the precaution to get baptised with water to save their lives. Christianity thus made tens of thousands of hypocrites and liars, and she makes millions of them

\* Gal. i. 9.

† Gal. v. 12.

‡ *Vide* Thiers’ “*Traité de Superstitions.*”

even at this hour—men and women who do not believe her dogmas, but who are too indolent to investigate and too cowardly to avow in vindication of conscience as against selfish interest. The converted Jews had more moral verve. Whenever there was a lull in the storm of persecution they returned to Judaism. No less than 17,000 converts that had been made by one man returned, as soon as they dared avow it, to the faith of Israel. This one man was St. Vincent, a friar so pure that it is recorded of him that he always undressed in the dark lest his modesty might be shocked by seeing himself naked. The Christians have had numerous purists of this order: they had, in more recent times, the holy ones who inveighed against Linnæus as indecent because his system of botany taught the doctrine of the sexes of plants.

The Crusades alone are estimated to have cost the lives of two million Christians, who dashed their religious fury, almost as impotently as the wave dashes its foam on the rock, on the warriors of the turban and Crescent. And even to this day the detested Mohammedan has his mosque on the site of the Holy Sepulchre. But the fury of Christian against Infidel was surpassed by the ferocious zeal with which Christian persecuted Christian, often for differences all but imperceptible, except to the faith-opened eyes of religious lunatics. As we have seen, a keen and rancorous dispute raged for years as to whether it was lawful to baptise with sand, instead of water; and to the learned and devout such problems were ever presenting themselves as the double procession of the Holy Ghost, the exact nature of the transfiguration light upon Mount Tabor, and the existence in Christ of two coincident, but perfectly independent, wills. Want of soundness on such insane subtleties was sufficient to have the unsound one burnt to a cinder.

Indeed, to a common-sense observer, who can divest himself of the distorted and diseased spirit which animated the centuries when Christianity was yet strong, it would seem that the faith had entered into a solemn league with the powers of Evil to fill the world with horror and misery. When accused by the Inquisition you were not permitted to confront your accuser, nor

even to know his name. You might be as orthodox as it was possible to be; but, if any one entertained a grudge against you, he could have you tortured to death by simply giving in your name to the nearest agent of the Holy Office. Then it was all over with you. The procedure was thus:—"The Inquisitor tried to mystify the accused by captious questions. He asked the presumed delinquent whether the new-born infant came from man or God. If the reply was, 'From man,' 'Then,' said the Inquisitor, 'you are a heretic; for only heretics deny the creation of man by God.' And if the accused happened to reply, 'From God,' he was equally convicted of heresy, as making God the paramour of a woman. They asked, too, whether the soul began with the embryo, or after it; whether all souls were made at one and the same moment, and where; whether the host consecrated by the priest was the whole Deity, or only part of him. If he answered, 'The whole Deity,' the examiner exclaimed: 'Suppose then, that four priests consecrate the host at one time in the same church, how can the whole Deity be contained in each consecration?' and, if the trembling respondent admitted, in his confusion, that such was the necessary inference, the Inquisitor triumphantly convicted him of asserting the existence of four gods at once. A Franciscan monk ventured to declare openly (1319) in Toulouse that Peter and Paul themselves would have been unable to prove their orthodoxy before the Inquisition, and was condemned to imprisonment for life for uttering this unpalatable truth."\*

Among the first schismatics to suffer martyrdom were the Arians and the Donatists. Their churches were destroyed, their leaders banished, and their writings committed to the flames. Then there was a lull. The tremendous power of the hierarchy had welded and pressed together the shattered fragments of the dismembered Roman Empire. The influence of the then Church and the condition of the then Western Europe were commensurate, and on the quiet of moral apathy and intellectual atrophy rested the pillars of the Age of

\* Mackay's "Rise and Progress of Christianity," pp. 301, 302.

Faith. But this age was, naturally, only a transition, not a permanency. The innate restlessness of human speculation and the Revival of Learning chafed against the iron ring with which the Vatican bounded the world. Under the blow of the crozier Europe lay stunned, but not slain. She arose, and, looking around in the dim sunrise which had succeeded a rayless night, she beheld Rome holding the crown and keys, and posing as the sole and only oracle to which the problems of existence and destiny could be carried and the vexed questions of secular life referred. The pretensions of the oracle were doubted. Scepticism arose spontaneously, and blossomed into heresy—in the eyes of the Church the most execrable of all crimes.

Though heaven and earth should fall to pieces, this heresy must be put down. Rome arose in her majesty, strong as the north wind, cold and pitiless as the descending avalanche. Her attitude had been, and must be, unquestioned, unchallenged AUTHORITY; and that authority must be vindicated. The issues of man's everlasting destiny were in her hands, and she would rise equal to the charge confided to her. She had the whole truth, and outside her pale was inevitable perdition. The fate of souls was in her keeping, and those souls should be kept, at whatever cost to the body. Better that earth should shriek for a thousand years under the fellest tortures human ingenuity could devise than that a single soul should pass an eternity of fiery agony in hell. Her mind was made up, her Holy Scriptures explicit, and her duty clear. She set afoot her Inquisition, deepened her dungeons, sharpened her heading axe, got ready her torch and fagot and her machines of torture, and set about her duty as expressly indicated in her doctrines. Christianity was then strong and honest. She could see her duty and carry it forward for God's sake, even through consequences the most terrible—through the annihilation of all that is essentially human and the substitution of all that is positively fiendish.

“Men, like fish, were devourers of each other; there was no fear of God or man; iniquity trod on the heels

\* Hallam's "Middle Ages," ii. 223.



of iniquity ; adultery, sacrilege, and homicide abounded ; the strong oppressed the weak."\* This was the state of matters that obtained from 1208, when Pope Innocent III. established the Inquisition, for weary century after century. The red spectre of persecution presided over the thud of the heading-axes and built up the fires that were fed with human flesh. On, from 1208, this spectre stalked down the ages till it was lost amid the blood-mists of the French Revolution. The ancient red spectre died in the grasp of the modern one : the rack of Innocent gave way to the guillotine of Marat. But the Inquisition did not depart till it had piled its holocausts mountain high. According to Llorente, who had free access to the Inquisitorial archives, in Spain alone the Inquisition burnt 31,000 persons to death, and condemned 290,000 to punishments in many cases only nominally less extreme than the death penalty. These numbers do not include the victims who perished under branches of the Inquisition established in Mexico, Lima, Carthagen, the West Indies, Sicily, Sardinia, and Malta. In the Netherlands alone 50,000 suffered death for heresy in a single reign—that of Charles V.

Vivicremation—burning alive—was the stale and ordinary manner in which the Christian Tweedledum disposed of the equally Christian, but more unfortunate, Tweedledee. But the vivicremation had, in the interests of Jesus, to be conducted on a scale so extensive that the ordinary stake-and-fagot arrangement was found to be inadequate. Besides, the quantity of timber it took to roast him was too expensive to be consumed on such a worthless thing as a heretic. It accordingly came into fashion to make strong enclosures, like cattle pens, into which the heretics were packed along with some cart-loads of straw and brushwood. Then the pen was closed and surrounded with troops, and the straw and brushwood set fire to. And there, amid flame and smoke, perished scores at a time, their cries of agony falling on the impervious ears of their brother Christians, and the stench of their burning flesh ascending as a sweet-smelling savour to the nostrils of Jehovah Elohim, in whose accursed interests man had so terribly turned his hand against his brother man. Then followed the

wholesale and unconsecrated burial. Scores still alive, but blistered with burning straw and half-suffocated with smoke, had the cold earth of the grave pit laid upon their scorched flesh, and were, in their tomb, left to die at their leisure. The Archbishop of Rheims and seventeen other prelates looked upon the conflagration in such a pen as I have referred to, when no fewer than 184 heretics were in it, at one and the same time, suffering death by fire.

In the face of the appalling numbers of those who died for real or suspected heresy in regard to often incomprehensibly subtle points in that most unscientific of all sciences, theology, dare you, O Christian apologist, contend that a faith that, in one way or other, has been guilty of the violent death of millions of the human race has brought "glad tidings of great joy"? Thousands, tens of thousands, were tortured for days with the fellest torture that Christian ingenuity could devise, and then borne out with dislocated joints, broken bones, and mangled limbs to, over *a slow fire*, writhe out the bitter dregs of life that yet remained. Hear their groans, their shrieks, their yells of anguish arise from the torture-chamber and the fagot's burning agony. These cries of mortal pain yet peel down the corridors of the ages, and proclaim your "peace and goodwill" a mockery and a lie. And to the fiery sufferings of dissolution was added all the poignancy of supernatural terrors. The Spanish heretic was burnt in a yellow blouse, upon which the flames of hell were painted to indicate that the few days or hours of torment on earth were to be succeeded by torment everlasting in the infernal world. The heretic's goods were confiscated, his children left to perish, and his wife, under social and ecclesiastical ban, to sink to prostitution and beggary; for the heretic's crime was so terrible that it blighted all that had been connected with him like a canker and a curse. Thus was spread the suffering over an immeasurably wider area than the mere tens of thousands who perished at the stake. For every sufferer had some friend, some father, some mother, some child, and the bane of his martyrdom alighted upon all, and the fearful conviction that the one who had been so dear to them had gone only through a fiery prelude on

earth to the everlasting burnings of hell. Thus the Christian faith blighted and embittered the lives of millions whom its malevolence only indirectly reached. Unsatiated with the burning of the living, the Romish Church\* tried for heresy the very dead man in his grave, and the coffin and the pall and corruption could not save him from the dread tribunal, more especially if his heirs were in possession of property which, finding him guilty, would confiscate to the Church. Death and suffering to millions and outrage to the very dead in the tomb are associated with the faith of the Galilean and his Gospel of sarcastic mockery: "*On earth peace and goodwill to men.*"

\* If any apologist for Christianity may venture to affirm that Catholicism had the monopoly for persecution, I hereby throw down my gage of challenge, and am prepared to maintain that Protestantism, in proportion to its power, in the work of persecution, was no whit behind the Church of Rome.



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