IN SEARCH

OF

A RELIGION,

AND NOTES BY THE WAY.

BY

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"He that will know the truth of things must leave the common and beaten track, which none but weak and servile minds are satisfied to trudge along continually.....Truth, whether in or out of fashion, is the measure of knowledge, and the business of the understanding; whatsoever is besides that, however authorised by consent, or recommended by rarity, is nothing but ignorance, or something worse."—JOHN LOCKE, *sect. xxiv., Partiality.*

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IN SEARCH OF A RELIGION.

SECTION I.

THE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS OF RELIGION.

It may be a weakness, but it is a confirmed habit of mine, to seek the aid of a superior understanding to my own, with a view of raising my own to the same level. The use of authorities and great names, when honestly applied in an independent spirit, is to confirm the view taken by the writer who applies them. The authority that admits of no appeal is useless to an independent thinker, and is by me dispensed with. I purposely avoid all writers that presume to settle disputed points for others, and intentionally ignore the Church that sets itself up as the arbiter of the destinies of the whole human race. However convenient such a Church may be to weak or lazy people, it is so clearly an imposition on the credulity of mankind, and so obvious an insult to the reason of man, that its pretensions and claims must be alike discarded in all inquiries entered upon by a rational human being.

Religion, as a profession, is a paying concern, and hence it is natural that professors should claim, even as a matter of self-interest, the particular religion they advocate as being the best. But it is well known that there is great difference between buying anything and selling it. When men in general become sufficiently acquainted with the various markets in the religious world, there will be greater difficulty in obtaining customers. At the present time the religions of various nations have not appeared in Europe, except in the form of samples or extracts; and the prevailing custom of the priests is to persuade all would-be religionists that free trade in religion is not necessary, that they have the best possible article in the world, and that all others that might be imported are impostures, or spurious editions of the

original genuine article. Although their assertions are utterly unfounded, they gain currency and credence.

Of course, the preachers of the great religions of the world are either believers in what they teach, or maintain the doctrines because they are paid to do so. Besides these two—the real believers and the professors—there is another class of men, who follow the custom of their fathers and the habit of the nation in which they live. It generally happens that in an age of ignorance there is uniformity of belief, and in an age of inquiry a diversity of opinion. The past two hundred years of European history appear conclusive on these points. Forbes, in his "Oriental Memoirs," states that at one time probably the Hindoo religion spread over the whole earth. He finds signs of it in every Northern country, in systems of worship, in various sciences, in the names of the stars, in the holidays and games, and in the laws, coins, monuments, and languages. There is certainly a similarity between all superstitions, and the religions of the Greeks, Hindoos, Romans, and Christians have a family likeness of a very striking character. It must be admitted, however, that, owing to modifications by climate, race, laws, scientific discoveries, and the development of poetry, art, and literature, the various religions of the world would appear, to the unpractised observer, as having each, in their turn, some claim to an independent origin and purpose. Some minds have no idea of perspective; it is always a full moon they see. What appears before them has no history; to them it is now as it was in the beginning: as to what it was in the beginning they are not concerned to inquire. Our cousin, the Yankee, did inquire, and he found that there was nothing new and nothing true, and that it did not matter! When a genial soul gets tired of the conflicting evidences and contradictory views, he turns—good, easy man!—and consoles himself with "Ah well! it will be all the same a hundred years hence."

There are, however, persons who cannot stifle their desire to know; they earnestly strive after the true and the best; they search for treasures under the sincere belief that there are some hidden. Very few are inclined to investigate the claims of the religions of various nations; they find sufficient variety in their own country.

There are two paths in England both of which have travellers; the one is occupied by inquirers after the right road to heaven among the many announced; the other is occupied by inquirers as to whether there is any road to heaven at all, or anybody who knows anything of heaven itself. Philosophically considered, the latter path is the best; the method implies that everything must be proved, that nothing will be taken for granted, and that demonstration alone will satisfy the inquirer. This is the sure and certain hope that every inquirer has a right to look for, and the demand is in conformity with reason and common sense.

The most numerous class of inquirers, however, assume that there is one true religion, if they could but find it; and, owing to the vast variety presented, the inquiry is very perplexing, and sometimes consumes the best part of a lifetime. The philosophical explanation is that the difficulty arises from the fact that the inquiry is concerned with subjects about which nothing is known. The restless nature of the inquiring mind needs long training before it can take John Locke's advice, and sit down in quiet ignorance of all transcendent subjects. A remarkable book published some years ago by Mr. Herbert Spencer puts this matter still stronger, for he declares that the power which the universe manifests to us is utterly inscrutable. He holds this to be the widest and most certain of all truths, the result of the most careful research, and a conclusion arrived at by the most rigorous logical process. Notwithstanding the conclusions and declarations of philosophers, the inquirer finds in every country distinct societies of men, ever ready to set his mind at rest, and to present him with a true religion, verified by scholarship, history, and personal experience. Not only are they sure—each of them—that theirs is the true religion, but they are equally certain of the falsity and dangerous character of every other religion in the world. The inquirer who accepts the assertion of each, that theirs alone is true, and every other false, is placed in a logical dilemma, for, if he takes the word of each, the only possible deduction is that the whole are false. The only way out of the difficulty is to reject the whole, or to select one, and read only such books and arguments as are written in its favour. So long as you read only one side of a contro-

versy, the chances are in favour of your being free from difficulty and doubt. There is this drawback: for all you know to the contrary, the religion you select may be the wrong one.

Lord Bacon would not describe you as "a believer," but only as one of those persons who "believe that they believe." Leighton says that men who know nothing have no doubts; but he maintains, as Coleridge does, that the road to belief is through doubt; "never be afraid to doubt; he never truly believed who was not made first sensible of unbelief." Dr. Herbert Croft says that it is not in any man's power to make himself believe anything further than his reason shows him, "much less Divine things." But the clerical party maintain that "Divine things" are not to be approached by the only faculty man has for distinguishing truth from error: these Divine things are said to be "above reason." If that be so, the uselessness of endowing man with reason is obvious; but how the clerical party became acquainted with "things above reason" is not so obvious, unless we concede, what they sometimes claim, that they are a superior order of beings, endowed with supernatural powers, by which they see invisible things, and perceive things which do not exist. It is quite natural that those whose profession it is to guide men should warn us that reason is an unsafe pilot through the raging sea of conflicting opinions; that through this dark and dreary vale of tears reason is a blind, fallacious guide; but our experience is that only those decry reason and despise wit who find these agents powerful enemies of their pretensions, and the purpose they wish to effect. They may urge that the exercise of the rational faculties may breed dissension in the Church, lead us away from the beliefs of childhood, and possibly from the religion richly endowed and protected by the State If so, the religion of the babe and the State must get on as well as it can without us.

The consequence of exercising reason in matters of faith is that it leads to inquiry, and thus to knowledge, which always proves destructive of superstition, which is opposed to all criticism, and especially criticism of itself It has always anathematised those who attempted to examine it. The orthodox of every age fear free thinking and free inquiry, and denounce them as the worst of

crimes. The murderer can have the consolation of the priest; but the doubter in religion is cast into outer darkness among those who weep and wail and gnash their teeth. Some men may reason wrongly, others not at all; but it has always been the practice of the friends of superstition to persecute men who do reason. Lord Bacon says: "It was a notable observation of a wise father that those who held and persuaded pressure of consciences were commonly interested for their own ends." Margaret of the Netherlands advised a much wiser and more reasonable policy. She said: "Who is this Luther? .....He is an illiterate monk.....Is he so? I am glad to hear it. Then do you, gentlemen, who are not illiterate, but are both learned and numerous—do you, I charge you, *write* against this illiterate monk? *That is all you have to do.* The business is easy, for the world will surely pay more regard to a great many scholars and great men, as you are, than to one poor illiterate monk." No better advice could have been given, for, as J. S. Mill remarks in his work on "Liberty," "there is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides."

SECTION II.

RELIGION AND FREE INQUIRY.

It is in vain that Pope, Church, and King proscribe the free exercise of thought in matters theological. Reason will assert itself in spite of all attempts to curb it. There is no power on earth which can prevent the encroachments of reason. It is the guide of man unfettered, as well as the power to break the fetters imposed upon him by priestcraft and despotism, which can no more stem the tide of rational inquiry than the king and his courtiers could prevent the advance of the sea. They must clear out of the way, or be trampled under foot by the

onward march of freedom. The progress of Freethought, speech, writing, and action is of more importance to mankind than any Constitution, Church, or other institution in the world.

In the seventeenth century a futile and foolish law was passed in France condemning to death any person who taught doctrines antagonistic to those of Aristotle. In the thirteenth century, in the same country, a law ordered all his works to be burnt. In various countries in Europe, at one time, not only authors were excommunicated, but also even grasshoppers and other insects. In fact, absurdities of this kind, showing the folly of our ancestors, are innumerable. All these foolish enactments were intended for the good of the persons punished, and for the protection of truth. The heretic was looked upon as an enemy in the field of faith, as the grasshopper was in the field of grain; hence both were excommunicated. To-day the men who attempted to surround the free inquirer with pains and penalties appear on a level with the men of Northamptonshire, who tried to keep the cuckoo out of the orchard by a high hedge; but, although equally foolish, the results of their folly have been vastly different. Neither succeeded, but the attempts to keep the cuckoo out of the fold of the faithful were attended by famine, privation, and murder. Yet the persecutors seemed unconscious that they were committing crimes of the deepest dye against truth and humanity. That these enemies to the progress of truth, and the inflictors of torture and mental agony upon their fellow creatures, were persons of irreproachable characters, and of pure intentions, has been amply attested by the historical evidence adduced by both Buckle and Mill.

Intolerance seems natural to the theological mind; it appears a duty to put down, by some means, all opposition, especially that which tends to show the futility and immorality of the principle upon which intolerance is founded. Mr. Mill shows clearly that the interference with, and coercion of, those who exercise their power to think, is illegitimate; that the best government has no more right to interfere than the worst. The following appears to me self-evident; and Mr. Mill, in my opinion, sums up and disposes of the whole case in this sentence: "If all mankind, minus one, were of one opinion, and

only one person of a contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind."

Progress in science, and improvements of all kinds, are only possible in the presence of intellectual freedom. Freedom of opinion is a necessity of progress in human affairs, and one of the conditions of personal happiness.

> "'Tis liberty alone that gives the flower
> Of fleeting life its lustre and perfume;
> And we are weeds without it."

Is it not clear, then, and as obvious as the sun at noon, that any religion that proscribes inquiry (the desire to know) as a crime, is antagonistic to the nature of man; out of harmony with his highest faculties; an obstacle to the progress of the human race?

That which is in unison with the intellectual requirements of man, and tends to promote his happiness, is alone venerable, and all else will be swept away. In the words of Sir J. Macintosh, "it is time that men should learn to tolerate nothing ancient that reason does not respect, and to shrink from no novelty to which reason may conduct."

SECTION III.

RELIGION AND MORALITY.

I THINK it was Lord Chesterfield who remarked that, after being informed as to the religion of a man, you still inquired as to his morals, but, if you knew his morals first, the question as to his religion would not arise. Sir J. Macintosh refers to the common saying, that morality depends on religion, and says that, "in the sense in

which morality denotes sentiment, it is more exactly true to say that religion depends on morality, and springs from it." Is it not obvious that any religion that is not based on morality must be either a frivolous or a mischievous system? Emerson, in his "Conduct of Life," says: "I look upon the simple and childish virtue of veracity and honesty as the root of all that is sublime in character. .....This reality is the foundation of friendship, religion, poetry, and art." It was a common complaint at one time that teachers of religion only enforced what was termed "*mere* morality." This was urged against the late Dr. Chalmers. In one of his references to this question, Emerson makes the following quaint remark: "Mere morality! as though one should say, Poor God, with no one to help him!" In another place he remarks that what is called religion is either childish and insignificant, or unmanly and effeminating. "The fatal trait is the divorce between religion and morality." The consequence of this centuries ago is pointed out by Milman, in his "History of Christianity" (vol. iii., p. 528), in these remarkable words: "No sooner had Christianity divorced morality as its inseparable companion through life, than it formed an unlawful connection with any dominant passion. The union of Christian faith with ambition, avarice, cruelty, fraud, and even license, appeared in strong contrast with its primitive harmony of doctrine and inward disposition." Thus, he says, Rome, Christian in faith and worship, became worse than in the better times of heathenism with regard to "beneficence, gentleness, purity, social virtue, humanity, and peace." This was the reign of faith, when hell was the most important institution, and the heretic the chief criminal.

Lord Bacon places the simple virtues first as distinguishing the ablest men that ever lived. "Clear and round dealing is the honour of man's nature; truth is the sovereign good of human nature."

Sir W. Jones describes the greatest man as the best, and the best as he that has deserved most of his fellow creatures.

Tillotson taught that truth and sincerity, in words and actions, would alone last and hold out to the end.

Laplace held truth and justice to be the immutable laws of social order.

Lord Bacon (on "Goodness") takes goodness "in the sense which the Grecians call philanthropia; and the word humanity, as it is used, is a little too light to express it. This of all virtues is the greatest."

The absence of morality or truth in society is thus painted by Dr. Chalmers: "The world of trade would henceforth break up into a state of anarchy, or rather be paralysed into stillness. The mutual confidences between man and man alone render commerce practicable. If truth were to disappear, it would vitiate incurably every social and domestic relationship—all the charities and comforts would take their departure from the world. The observation of honesty and truth is of such vital importance that without it society would cease to keep together." He concludes: "On the single transition from vice to virtue among men does there not hinge the alternative between a pandemonium and a paradise?"

David Urquhart, in his "Familiar Words," says that religion, in its Latin sense, means the binding of a man by his faith to perform what are now called political duties. To the Roman religion did not mean worship, but binding faith—of a man to do justice to the State as a member of the community. Politics in Greek, and religion in Latin, he describes as equivalent to wisdom and justice; politics being a knowledge of right, and religion the obligation to perform it. He says there was no religion to be worn as a vesture, nor politics as a mask. He repudiates any religion but justice, or that does not teach man to do his duty to his fellow man. He says: "It is he only who does what is just who is a Christian, whether in his individual capacity, or as a member of a community."

Dr. Thomas Brown ("Philosophy of Mind") says: "We must, if we value our happiness, be careful in determining what it is that we denominate religion, that we may not extend its supposed duties to usages inconsistent with our tranquillity.....When religion is truly *free from all superstition*, the delights it affords are the noblest of which our nature is capable." In his estimation the qualities indicated by it are what "constitute whatever we love and venerate in the noblest of our race." He says: "It would not be easy to estimate the amount of positive misery which must result from the

mere contemplation of a tyrant in the heavens, and of a creation subject to his cruelty and caprice."

G. H. Lewes objects to Comte because he makes religion simply and purely what has hitherto been designated morals. Being founded on knowledge, and limited to the relation of men to one another as social beings, there is no room for the play of agencies foreign to nature and the nature of man.

Sir W. Drummond held that "to give one hour of comfort to the frail victim of adversity, and to cheer with one transient gleam of joy the evening of life, ought surely to be among the pleasures, as they are among the duties, of humanity."

The moralist says, in the words of the pious Wordsworth, I am—

> "Well pleased to recognise,
> In nature and the language of the sense,
> The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
> The guide, the guardian of my heart and soul,
> Of all my moral being."

The *Edinburgh Review* once wrote: "If there be a religion of nature, and we believe there is, we conclude there can be no religion but truth, and no heresy but falsehood."

It seems somewhat singular that Dr. Thomas Brown should take exception to Paley, who defines virtue as "doing good to mankind, in obedience to the will of God, and for the sake of everlasting happiness." The latter Dr. Brown maintains to be the most important of the whole, it being all that constitutes moral obligation. He regards it as the most degrading of all forms of selfishness. It is rendered more offensive by the Deity being presented to the mind "to be courted with a mockery of affection." He regards the sensualist as more worthy than the selfish of another life. He says the difference in Paley's case is "in the scale of selfish gain; it is a greater quantity of physical enjoyment which he has in view." It is a singular fact that many great writers, in attacking each other's views, strike at the root of the religion they profess, and seem to be unconscious of it. Everybody might be supposed to know that the hope of heaven and the fear of hell are the motive-powers of Christianity. Yet Dr. Brown lashes Paley in

no unmeasured terms for maintaining the fundamental principles of the Christian faith. His logical mind, not being influenced at the time by the fear of God or the Devil, could discern that the system is below the highest form of Pagan morality—in fact, he prefers the sensualist in his brutal stupidity to the devout Christian who, through fear of hell, and for the sake of everlasting happiness, conducts himself according to the will of God.

It is a notable fact that the words "pure religion" occur only once in the Christian records, and, strange to say, it is defined without any reference to a belief in God or a future state; but is strictly confined to moral action between man and man. Why the word religion is introduced at all, and under what circumstances, I am unable to explain; but its meaning is expressed as follows: "To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." This is described by James as "pure religion and undefiled." Would it be too severe on all existing religions to say that they are not the genuine article, and that mankind are the victims of adulterated religions?

SECTION IV.

RELIGION AND THE ORDER OF NATURE.

THE basis of popular religion is God, and its interpreters to man are the Bible and the Church. The God has been described by Dr. Southwood Smith as "stern and sullen, retiring in awful gloom from his creatures; not to be approached but with groans, not to be appeased but by blood." There appears in the world an extraordinary agent, the Son of God, assisted by angels, to carry out the decrees of God, and also a Devil to prevent them being carried out. By those agents the course of

nature is altered and fashioned to obtain their particular ends. Common sense is set at defiance, and the rational faculties are bewildered by stories of marvels and miracles. In the early days the Christian lived in a kind of supernatural world; his dreams came direct from heaven; every emotion of his heart was a Divine inspiration, and every incident in his life was a miracle. God interfered in season and out of season, and the operations of nature were nothing but a succession of little miracles, intermixed with an occasional big one.

These absurd and contradictory fictions are now chiefly found in Catholic countries; but in a modified form they appear among "our dear Dissenting brethren," the Revivalists, and also among the followers of the late Mr. Joseph Smith. Fashionable people in the Church only *read* St. James's Epistle; they do not *believe* in it. The pious George Combe says: "Science has banished the belief in the exercise by the Deity, in our day, of special acts of supernatural power as a means of influencing human affairs." Again, he says: "Disguise the fact as we will, the order of nature—in other words, God's secular providence—is a power which in this world shapes our destinies for weal or woe." He says that this position cannot be met with cries of "Infidelity," and appeals to bigotry and passion, as in days gone by; for even Calvinists themselves proceed now on the basis of natural science when they are sick, when wet seasons come, and when they send a ship to sea. The orthodox may decry science, but they enjoy its benefits. They may call the lightning-conductor "the heretical stake," but they affix one even to the spire of "the house of God," which they might be expected to believe would be protected by him—

> "Whose power o'er moving worlds presides,
> Whose voice created, and whose wisdom guides."

George Combe says he knows of no sect or church, nor any body of religious instructors, who have recognised "the order of nature" as the basis for practical precepts, or as the road to secular virtue and prosperity. Not one Christian nation—not one example is known since the promulgation of Christianity. Science attempts it, but the preachers pronounce that "godless."

Archbishop Whately was a man of considerable mental

power. He could see that the assertion, that God sent pestilence and famine in consequence of Romanism in Ireland, could be used by the Catholic as an argument against the permission of Protestantism to pollute the sacred soil of St. Patrick. He believed in all the cases mentioned in the Bible; but the declarations of the "uninspired" men in question he denounced as "irrational, uncharitable, and un-Christian." Whately wrote a book on logic, and might be expected to understand that by assuming the existence of one source of power we are compelled to trace all causes of good and evil to that one source, which he believed to exercise supreme influence over both Catholics and Protestants. While the assertion of one source of power destroys the possible existence of one source absolutely good, the alternative is the banishment, as Combe calls it, of all interference by the only source of power either on the side of Catholics or Protestants, or against either of them. Of course, a rational conclusion of this kind, however logical it may be, is not the conclusion that either sect is capable of arriving at.

There is a general conception of the order of nature in the theological mind that it is under special personal guidance. If water assumes a globular shape in falling, as in the case of rain, or a tear from the human eye, it is because some unseen and omnipotent personal power is behind, shaping the rain and the tears. In the advanced school of theological thought the movements of nature are conceived as under law. But what are termed "the laws of nature" are assumed to be under the great law-giver and law-maker. Hence there are three separate existences—the law-maker, the law, and nature, the ruled. All that is really known may be described as nature and the modes or "methods of nature:" the latter words convey all that is meant by "the laws of nature." Nature and how she acts are too simple for the theological mind. It must have nature governed by laws—that is, when water runs down the hill, it does so by order of a Divine Act of Parliament, enforced by the King of Kings, instead of by his own hand, as formerly. These ideas are what I call fictions of the imagination, and the only purpose they can serve, that I see, is to magnify the importance of the office held by persons paid to maintain them.

Those who admit the existence of an invariable law of what they call "physical nature" still claim an exception for what they call the human soul and her affections. It is somewhat remarkable that Dr. Priestley and Dr. Guthrie, both preachers of the Gospel, acknowledged the existence of mental and moral laws as well as physical laws. One objection to the admission of the intellect or the soul to the government of an invariable order of nature is that the soul would become necessarily the subject of change—that is, it would live and die. This would prevent it becoming an inhabitant of a heaven built on pride, or a hell built on spite. There is the same objection to the idea that the brain thinks. The brain, being the subject of life and death, would be necessarily limited in its operations to this life and this globe; in other words, the man who thinks is one and not two beings, and is thus mortal—that is, ceases to exist as a thinking being at death.

The theologians whose minds are overcome by the facts of science take refuge in miracle. They say: "We quite admit that man, as at present constituted, must fall in with the invariable order of things: he must die, but he will rise again." Of course, this is mere assertion, without a single fact in nature to support it. The illustrations given by theologians from nature, including the one found in the New Testament itself, are too inappropriate to deserve notice. They put a grain of wheat in the ground, and from it get a number of grains in an ear of wheat; but by putting a man in the ground do they secure the production of a bunch of men, or even a single one? The expectancy is built on miracle, and finds no support or illustration in nature, so far as I know. Of course, those who believe in the miracle of creation out of nothing may believe in the miracle of re-creation out of the remains of man; but such beliefs have no claim on the scientific mind, or on the attention of the rational inquirer. An *assertion* made for the purpose of giving negative support to this theory is that all the faculties of man are not in harmony with this present existence; while *the fact is* that the more we know of man and nature, the more clearly we see the adaptation of all his faculties to this globe and this life —that our orbit is all our task, and sufficient to interest and occupy millions of generations of men. The writers

who claim the authority of miracles as a proof of the truth of any doctrine admit that the early Apostles would not have been believed, or even listened to, if they had not urged that miracles had been worked. Baden Powell, M.A., F.R.S., says: "Thus, if miracles were, in the estimation of a former age, among the chief *supports* of Christianity, they are at present among the main *difficulties*, and are hindrances to its acceptance."

The inductive philosopher accepts the invariable order of phenomena, and can only believe that which can be demonstrated to be in harmony therewith. Testimony cannot square the circle, or discover perpetual motion; it avails nothing against reason. It is alleged that the assertion of miracles was a necessity in the beginning in order to obtain adherents to Christianity, because of the incredulity of the age in which the system was first introduced. My reading is that it was an age of credulity, or the miracles would not have obtained credence. The disposition to accept anything marvellous, at the time referred to, appears to have been very general among all classes of men. The sceptical disposition in matters religious was not generally manifested for 1,600 years after the promulgation of Christianity. The few who were bold enough to question anything were met with the orthodox demand to give up either their liberty or their life. After generations of experience, the Christians not only persecuted their avowed enemies, but they also imprisoned and burnt one another. The idea of liberty of conscience never entered their heads; it was no part of their faith. The absurdity of the argument for miracles, or an interference with the order of nature, based on their necessity for the conversion of unbelievers, is obvious, since now unbelievers multiply and miracles diminish, heresy increases and the miraculous decreases. That when miracles abound believers abound is quite true; but by the introduction of Sceptics the miracles get a poor time of it—they lose their importance; and, as believers in an invariable order of nature continue to increase, the probabilties are strongly in favour of the total extinction of miracles.

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