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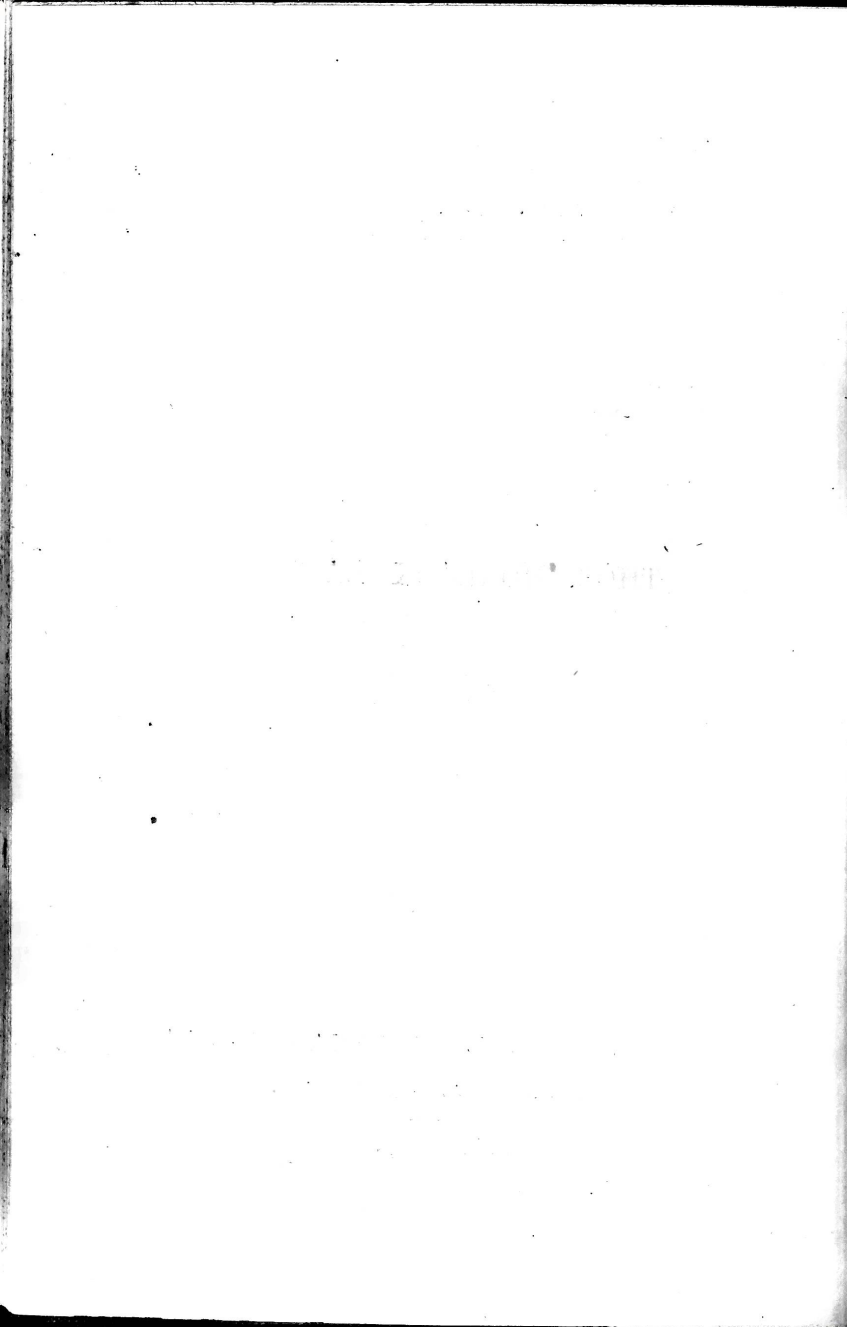
SCEPTICISM
AND
SOCIAL JUSTICE.

BY
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SCEPTICISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE.

THE time seems clearly to have arrived when something ought to be settled between the two parties now admitted to exist—one upholding the inspiration of the Old and New Testaments, and the other denying it—as to the position which each party is entitled to hold, and the social rights and interests that each may claim. Much difficulty will arise before the matter can be properly adjusted ; but the necessity for it has become obvious, if justice to both parties alike is to be observed.

The case, as it stands, may be briefly stated as follows : Up to a certain period, we have been historically taught that the writings known as the Holy Scriptures were—as to the Old Testament by the Jews, and as to the Old and New Testaments by Christians—received as having emanated by inspiration from the supernatural power, named and described in both Testaments as God ; and this teaching was almost universally acquiesced in throughout what was known as the Christian world. In this matter, indeed, until a comparatively late period, there was little option allowed, for such were the severe laws against all doubt on the subject that no open questioning of the

the opinions of these writers to be not well founded, in order that those who think so may still, if they can, prove such to be the case. I only desire to state so much as will, in my judgment, show what constitutes a fair justification of the opinions held by free-thinkers, and what they have a right in justice to demand both from the national laws and from society. The believers in inspiration have, by their mere numbers, and by social and clerical support, hitherto stood on vantage ground, which has permitted them with impunity most unjustly to denounce, and force into hypocritical silence, those who have, by honest investigation, arrived at the conclusion that the works composing the Bible could only have been written by men, whose knowledge was derived from worldly experience alone; and the main object now to be attained is to settle whether the former have any right to a supremacy for their opinions, and to prevent the latter from holding and expressing theirs.

I have not mentioned works by foreign writers, such as those of Spinoza, Strauss, Rénan, and others, as not likely to have been read by the generality of English people, and I also pass over those works I have referred to, which are written in a deeply argumentative style, and thus not likely to be attractive to, and make an impression on, common readers; but coming to those of a more popular description, and of recent date, I take up first the 'Task of To-day,' by Major Evans Bell, an officer of some repute in the East Indian Service. This work was published in 1852, at a price which made it widely accessible, and is written in a style so plain and popular that it is suited to the comprehension of all classes of readers. It calmly examines the statements of the Scripture records relating to the creation, miracles, and prophecies of the Old Testament, compares them with statements in the Koran, so similar that they give

the appearance of a common origin, and points out startling discrepancies and errors that seem palpably inconsistent with what must have been dictated by unerring wisdom. It also criticises in the same manner the New Testament, which the writer's arguments tend to show is open to charges of inaccuracies, errors, and incredibilities, as equally unbelievable to have emanated from divine knowledge, as those of the Old Testament; and the whole book is written in a strain so telling that it can hardly fail to lead a large number of readers to acquiescence in its views. Now if the arguments and reasoning of this author proceed from false grounds and are calculated to be harmful, how can those whose duty it is to prevent readers from being misled, and who profess to have the full requisite information for the purpose, leave his work unrefuted? I come next to a book by an anonymous writer, entitled, 'A Was I Hind,' or a 'Voice from the Ganges,' and published in 1861. It is of much the same character as the 'Task of To-day,' in regard to popularity of style, but it concerns itself only with the New Testament, in which the author alleges, with great plainness, are to be found wrong translations, misinterpretations, and even interpolations, tending to stagger belief in its authenticity, as a book written under knowledge inspired by God. He also points out such variations and contradictory statements, between the different Gospel writers, that it makes the whole book look like fiction; and thus we have another forcible work, which, if the views instilled by the author are wrong and groundless, is calculated seriously to mislead, and therefore ought to be refuted.

It would take up too much space to particularise separately, even in a brief way, all the other works I have named, but I must state that in that popular work, the 'Constitution of Man,' by George Combe, and in 'Science and Religion,' another of his works,

he plainly demonstrates that a force has been given to the laws of nature which supersedes the necessity of their being supplemented by revealed laws; that Mr J. S. Mill's work on 'Liberty' contends not only for freedom to think, but freedom to utter opinions on matters affecting religious faith, as well as on secular subjects; that in 'Philo.—Socrates,' by Mr William Ellis, the propriety of making the Old and New Testaments schoolbooks is questioned on account of their bad morality; that the 'Essays and Reviews' (mostly written by clergymen), the works of Professor F. W. Newman, the Rev. Professor Baden Powell, and others resort to criticisms of the Bible greatly tending to shake faith in it, and go far to set the intellect, as a guide to conduct, above Revelation; and, lastly, that all these publications are written in a style suited to the comprehension of people of ordinary intelligence, and the more, therefore, require refutation, if their reasonings lead to unsound views of the Bible.

I now proceed to notice the numerous publications that have been issued by Mr Thomas Scott, of Ramsgate. To give a list of them even would require no small space, and some of them are, perhaps, not very important. But this cannot be said of such serious and carefully written treatises as 'The English Life of Jesus,' with its attack on the credibility of the Gospel narrative, and another entitled 'The Errors and Discrepancies and Contradictions of the Gospel Records,' both of which are by Mr Scott; or of those treatises written by Presbyterian Anglicanus on 'Eternal Punishment;' by R. W. Mackay (the author of 'The Progress of the Intellect') on 'The Eternal Gospel;' by Mr John Robertson, of Coupar Angus, on 'The Finding of the Book,' and other subjects; by Mr Rathbone Greg on 'Truth and Edification;' by Dr Hinds, late Bishop of Norwich, on 'The Free Discussion of Religious Subjects'—a very dispassionate

essay—or of several others which are of great importance to free inquiry. But I must stop here, although I could add many more to the list by men of weight and position, and all written in a style and manner likely to attract the serious attention of those who peruse them.

However lightly these treatises may be held by those who are opposed to their teachings, and to any question of revelation being raised—foremost amongst whom, of course, are the clergy—it should be borne in mind that their issues are plainly stated, and they are written in a perfectly calm tone of investigation and truth-seeking, which entitles them to respectful discussion. Further, that they are very numerous, and, by Mr Scott's liberality, have a wide circulation amongst all classes of the people; and if their teachings are false, and can be controverted, it is the duty of divines of all sects to perform this labour, whilst their omission to do so leads to the natural inference, that it is a task they fear to undertake. With regard to Bishop Colenso's works, it surely cannot be necessary to do more than refer to the reception they met with, and the extraordinary interest they excited, in order to show the importance which has been attached to them by the public. But has not their grand result been to diminish the number of believers in inspiration? And what have the clergy put forth to weaken the position the Bishop takes up, beyond the treatise published by Dr McCaul, which I have never heard regarded as being in the slightest degree successful?

Having glanced at the writings of a large number of authors who have questioned the inspiration of the Scriptures, and in support of their doubts have given reasons the value of which may be weighed and discussed; and having strong grounds for believing that, in the absence of any convincing proofs of the fallacy of these works, their teachings

have made a profound impression on a very large and intelligent portion of the public, the grave questions arise of how long this state of things is to continue? and what are henceforth to be the legal and social rights of those persons who have come to the conclusion that the Old and New Testaments were not written under any supernatural inspiration? At present the latter are prevented from an open and candid avowal of their sentiments by fear of the ill consequences it may bring on their social positions and worldly prospects; and, where their sentiments are suspected, they have to lie under a sort of stigma on their characters, for which, I contend, there is no justification, unless their honesty is doubted, since mere error in judgment, in the views they have formed on the Bible statements and narratives, cannot be a sin. On the contrary, the fault rests with their opponents, who are quite confident of being in the right, and yet have failed to prove it.

As I have before stated, I do not wish to make this a vehicle of attack on the Scriptures, or on those holding what are termed orthodox views; but I must give some illustration of the difficulties of sceptics, as shown in the works I have cited. For instance, in Genesis there are two distinct accounts of the creation of woman, which are perfectly at variance with each other, and both cannot be right. Then, according to the description given of the world—the little planet in which we live—it is flat, with a firmament above, in which the stars are fixed as lights to it, and heaven is above the whole, whilst the sun is made to revolve round the earth as a sort of appendage to it, like the moon; and both the sun and stars are treated as subservient to the uses of this planet alone. Added to this we find allusions to ascending to heaven, and descending to hell, which are obviously inconsistent with a round and rapidly revolving body like the world. Now in regard to the

double creation of woman, it is unintelligible how such could have proceeded from inspired wisdom; and it is equally difficult to conceive that the accounts of the creation, as well as those of the flood and the ark—so utterly at variance with what science has disclosed to us as possible—could have been written under the inspiration of all-wise and unerring God. And, contemplating also God as all-just and conscientious, many other difficulties arise to the thinker, such as, in the Old Testament, the glaring immoralities related without condemnation or censure, and, in the New Testament, the variations and wonderful discrepancies of the Gospel narratives. But I forbear from particularising in a way that may be painful to unhesitating believers in inspiration, my only object in entering so far into details being to show the justification which sceptics have for their opinions in the absence of all corrective explanation.

Attempts have sometimes been made by clergymen to put down sceptical writings by asserting that their arguments are only a repetition of old ones that have been effectively replied to over and over again; but this must be of little avail, without stating where the replies are to be found,—and this they fail to do. Other clergymen dispose of the matter shortly, by declaring that they never read such works, of course, from fear of their contaminating influence. But can one who ought to be fortified by the fullest theological knowledge be justified in allowing it to be supposed that he can be thus affected? And is he not above all men bound to be aware of, and ready to meet, all sceptical attacks? Let me put this case to a clergyman, who would so evade this important subject. One of his flock,—say an intelligent young man or woman,—having read Colenso's or some similar work, and having had his or her previous faith in inspiration thereby shaken, and peace of mind disturbed, and attributing this to

inability to discover the fallibility of the writer's arguments, goes to his or her minister for help. Is the latter justified in replying to such applicants that he does not read works of the kind, because of their evil tendency, and simply advising their being eschewed? Surely he cannot in this easy way expect to remove the difficulties of reflecting persons who seek his aid, and who thus must leave him with all the facts and information they have acquired still oppressing their minds. The clergyman is the religious teacher and helper, to whom any one of his flock has as much right to apply for assistance as he or she would, in a case of illness, or legal difficulty, to apply to a doctor or lawyer; and would either of the latter be justified in replying, that "yours is a case with which I do not feel called on to make myself acquainted?"*

I have now endeavoured to show how matters stand between the two parties, one believing, and the other disbelieving in the inspiration of the Bible; and assuming that both have arrived at their opinions by honest investigation, there remains to be considered the question, whether the former are justified in assuming their opinions to be so indisputably right as to warrant them in pronouncing the latter to be not only wrong, but sinful, for the opinions which they hold, and therefore not entitled to the full enjoyment of the same rights, privileges, and advantages as themselves. Are there any grounds for the assumption of such an arbitrary authority to be found in the notion that it is not permissible to apply intelligence and reason to the consideration of matters of religious faith? If this position be allowed, then what are the means by which we can understand

* I hope I may not be understood as making attacks on the characters of the clergy. I have had too large an acquaintance with them not to be aware of the integrity which distinguishes them as a class, and my observations in the text are intended only to indicate what appears to me to be their error respecting free inquiry into Biblical matters.

what is written in the Bible, and ascertain in what to have faith, since it is only through our intellectual powers that we can know anything at all of the meaning of its words? If it be asserted that religious faith can be arrived at without using these powers, it may as well be said that it is possible to make a religious being of an idiot, or even (may the absurdity be excused) of a cow, or an oyster. No, no. God gave us our intelligent and discerning powers to enable us, when facts and information are presented to our minds, to distinguish right from wrong, and thereby to learn our duties, and how properly to conduct ourselves in all the relations of life. Besides, people cannot choose their opinions, and be of this or that opinion in obedience to will; for according as facts and data are presented to the mind, so must inevitably be the conclusions, and consequent opinions, which it is as impossible to avoid coming to, as it is to keep back the tide with a mop. Ignorance may have no opinion, but knowledge dictates opinion.

I submit that as the right of private judgment is conceded, without any limitation, to Protestants, they are fully at liberty to read and study *all* works bearing on the Bible in any way, whether upholding it as emanating from God, or whether questioning the accuracy of its statements and the possibility of their having been derived from the inspiration of a supernatural power. Further, that whatever opinions Protestants may thus be led to form, they have a right to hold and also to utter; and that, supposing such opinions to be erroneous, the only just method of proving them to be so is by argumentative refutation. I hold it to be an outrage on justice that any person, to whom the right of private judgment has been granted, should be subjected to punishment, as is still possible under old unrepealed laws, or to social hardships, on account of his or her opinions, on any other ground than that of dishonesty; and,

further, that the assumption by any one, whatever may be his station, to say to another, in a matter open to free discussion, "I am right, and you are wrong," without proving it, and the using of any power with which the former may be invested, to the prejudice of the latter, ought to be treated as a grave offence against justice and morality. It is in the arbitrary exercise of such power, and in denouncing such sceptical works, as I have specially alluded to, without first refuting them, that the clergy have placed themselves in a very false position, and exposed themselves to charges of injustice. Unfortunately a large portion of the community, who may be said rather to adopt conclusions than to arrive at them by reasoning, continue to support the clergy in the arbitrary repression of all opinions on Biblical matters contrary to their own, and thus have been instrumental in enforcing silence on their opponents, with the simple result of engendering a very unwholesome hypocrisy in many of the latter. There is a floating notion that no one in this country suffers for opinion ; but it is pretty well known that some, who have been unable to conceal their sceptical views, have been excluded from offices on this account, and it is only recently that a witness, however respectable, who objected to substantiate his oath by swearing on the Old or New Testament, has been allowed to make a simple affirmation, whilst the oath of a witness of the most abandoned character was always receivable. It is still the case that many writers of heterodox views are prevented, by family or social reasons, from signing their names to what they write ; and to these sufferers for opinion may well be added a very numerous and increasing class of persons engaged in professions and business, who are disbelievers in inspiration, but, having families dependent on them, dare not confess their opinions, and are forced to live under the constant oppression of conscientious insin-

cerity, with what advantage to Church and State I leave others to pronounce.

I must now add a few brief remarks on a new phase of the foregoing subject. Circumstances have delayed the completion of this publication, and in the meantime I have become acquainted with the effort, which the clergy have at last made, to stem the tide of scepticism and free-thinking by publishing the work entitled the 'New Bible Commentary,' which has the advantage of having been written or sanctioned by an Archbishop and seven Bishops, and other clergy of high position. The publication has, it seems, been seven years in preparation; and here one might have expected a complete and unanswerable refutation of all grounds for scepticism, and especially was it to be expected that all such works as I have alluded to would have been dealt with, and their errors clearly demonstrated. Instead of this, however, this production of the most eminent of the clergy seems directed only to fortifying those who accept the traditional interpretation of the Bible, without any verification of its narratives and statements, and the first critics of the work are able to show its failures and weakness. An examination of it by Bishop Colenso has quickly appeared, charging the authors with evasion of the main difficulties of the question, and pointing out mistakes, false reasonings, and even unworthy quibbles, which, if not replied to, must, in the eyes of the vulgar, deprive the work of all respect. This has been followed by some other publications, and by reviews in several of the London and Edinburgh newspapers, which are pretty severe in their handling of this famous commentary, whilst others in a similar strain are spoken of, and, in its results, the work seems to be of little avail in attacking the errors of sceptics.

Two very important matters, however, have been brought under consideration by the publication of

this Bible Commentary. First, it is an admission that the translations and meanings of the words of the Bible are open to discussion and examination by our intelligent and reasoning powers. Secondly, it is a yielding up of the plenary part of inspiration, inasmuch as it gives a meaning quite new, according to previous clerical teaching, of those words of the Bible which state that "the world was created in six days," by adopting the hypothesis of Hugh Miller that these "days" were, in fact, not periods of twenty-four hours, as common people suppose from the Bible words—aye, and as children were undoubtedly taught by clergymen to interpret the words, when I was at school—but "vast geological periods." Now, here we have from the clergy themselves a new version of the sense in which the Bible is to be understood, showing that reason may be used in examining the meanings of its words; and if this be allowed, then free-thinkers and sceptics can no longer be justly blamed and denounced for forming opinions adverse to inspiration, which are founded on reason; and if *certain words* in the Bible are *not* to be understood in the sense accorded to them by common acceptation, as the clergy heretofore did teach us they were to be, then such teaching was wrong, our spiritual teachers admit themselves to have been in error, and we have now to consider how far the clergy *may also* be in error in teaching us to accept, in their literal sense, *other words* of the Bible.

From what precedes this my own opinion on inspiration may easily be inferred, but the question has occurred to me whether I ought, or not, plainly to avow it, and having come to an affirmative conclusion, on the simple ground of candour, I now state that the readings and reflections of my youth, middle age, and old age—for I can refer to all three of those periods—have led me to the assurance that the Old and New

Testaments are wholly the works of erring man, and not of all-wise and all-conscientious God. The tendency to this opinion began at a very early period, and well do I recollect what a source of trouble it was for years, from a sort of undefined impression that, on such an important subject, it was wrong to entertain opinions contrary to what I had been taught, and to what were generally held around me. To counteract my supposed error, I procured first Paley's works, with which I was dissatisfied, because they only proved design. I next took up Chalmers's 'Evidences of Christianity,' but this work increased my doubts, since, in my judgment, it only showed that a person named Jesus existed at a certain time, but afforded no evidence of his divinity; and I then determined not to think of the subject, but just to go regularly to church, which I did for a certain time. Later a pious friend put into my hands a work of Bishop Horne's, in which I found as little assistance as I did from Paley and Chalmers, and I have ever since been waiting for something more forcible to appear. Instead of this, works of a contrary description have been multiplying, until the climax arrived in the publication of sceptical opinions by divines, and most of them members of the Church of England itself. First came the 'Essays and Reviews,' then the works of Bishop Colenso, with those of Bishop Hinds, Dr Davidson, and others of great weight, scarcely any of which have been replied to, except in terms of denunciation; and I must also now include the 'Speaker's Commentary,' under the highest clerical sanction and authority, in which we are told that *one word* is not to be read according to its literal meaning, but in the scientific sense given to it by geologists, the natural inference being that there must be also *other words* to be read by the light of science, and, of course, of reason. In fact, for solving the doubts of inquiring minds relative to the Bible

having been written under inspiration, no solid assistance has yet been afforded by either clergy or laity.

I now conclude with referring to the point with which I commenced, that it is time the social positions of believers and disbelievers in inspiration were settled on some fair basis; and, on behalf of the latter, I claim that they should not only be freed from all stigmas and disadvantages on account of their opinions, but esteemed according to their merits, morally viewed, and allowed to hold all positions of honour and trust, as members of the State, equally with the former. *And lastly*, I appeal to the clergy especially, and to all others who are confident of their power argumentatively to sustain the divine inspiration of the Bible, either to come forward, and show before the tribunals of common sense and justice that they are *right*, and we, who have been guided in our opinions by the teachings of the works I have cited, or by our own reflections, are *wrong*, or otherwise to admit us to be entitled to a full share of all social rights and privileges, and henceforth to let us be *honest* and *frank*.

PROPOSAL.

In the preceding part I have endeavoured to show that Sceptics and Free-thinkers are fully justified in the views they hold respecting what is called Revelation and Inspiration, inasmuch as they are supported by a large number of serious and thoughtful men and writers, both of the past and present periods, whose talents, honour, and judgment have not been impugned, and whose writings and arguments have hitherto been met only by denials and denunciations. I have also indicated the actual wrongs which some

persons suffer for their known, or supposed, sceptical views, and the painful positions in which many are placed by the forced concealment of their real opinions on inspiration.

Under these circumstances, and taking into consideration that the number of men and women who claim the right of free and independent thought and opinion, in religious as well as secular matters, is become very large,—so large, indeed, that they may be counted by thousands,—and that they are injuriously affected by the unfair prejudices to which they are subjected,—

I PROPOSE

That steps be taken to form a Society, having for its main objects the maintenance of the Right of Private Judgment in its full integrity, together with the right to hold and express opinions on religious as freely as on secular subjects, and the protection of its members from injurious attacks on their characters, or obstacles opposed to their private or social interests, on account of their opinions.

I do not suggest any working details, because it is first necessary to ascertain whether a nucleus can be found of a body ready to adopt the above, or any similar principles, as the basis of a Society.

THOS. HORLOCK BASTARD.

Charlton Marshall, Blandford,
March, 1872.

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