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THE SPIRITUAL SERFDOM

OF

THE LAITY.

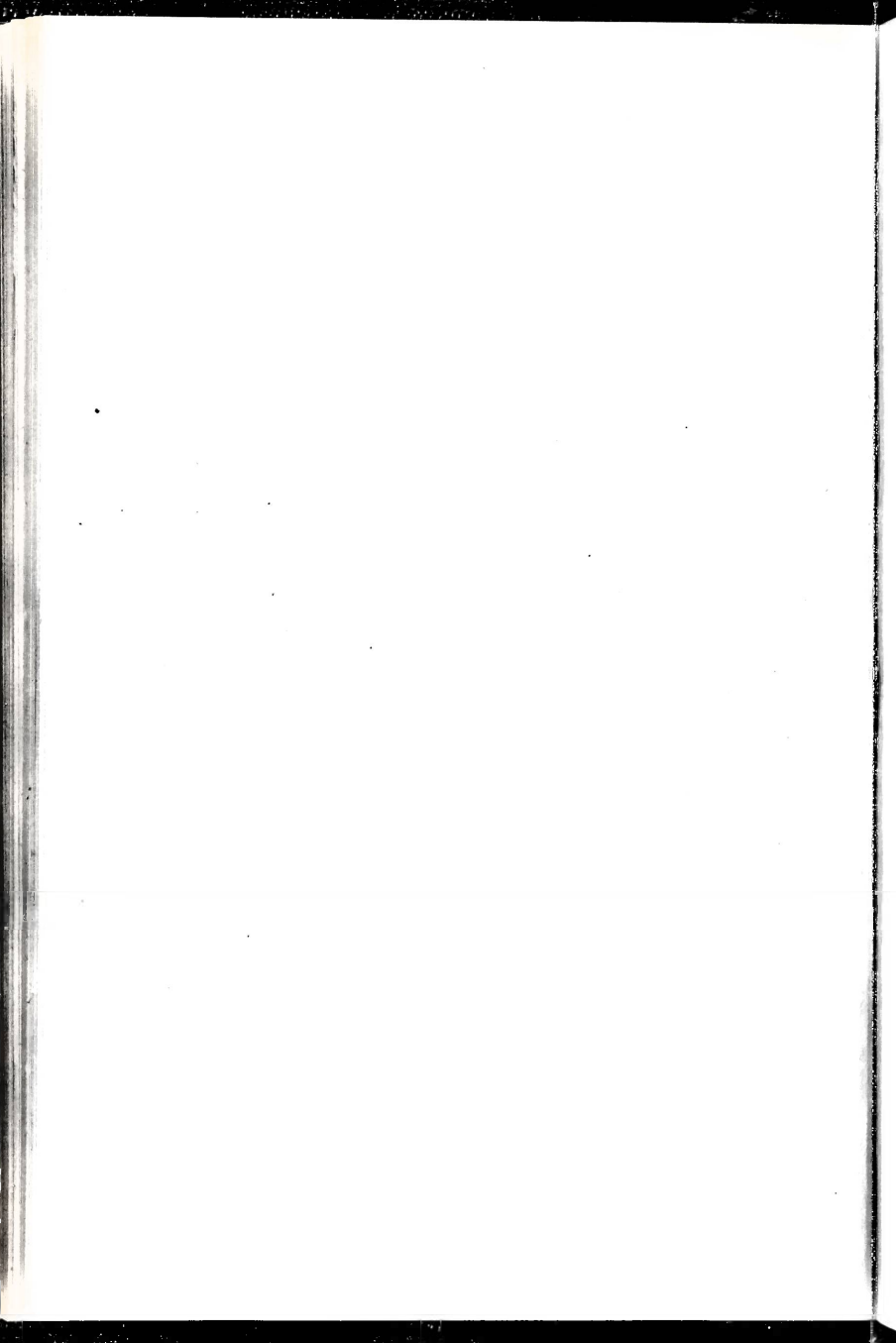
BY

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THE SPIRITUAL SERFDOM OF THE LAITY.

I N view of the interest and sympathy with which our people have been for some time gazing on the tragedy enacted in a neighbouring country, I picture a time when they will be able to recognise tragedies at their own doors,—tragedies which, though not written in blood, are no less appalling than those that desolate smiling fields and villages. Our physical eyes are open, and can recognise terror and agony; our commercial eyes are keen to perceive the ruin of trade and financial distress; our intellectual eyes are so heavy that the wounded forms of Reason and Religion writhe before us unheeded. Could the moral and spiritual condition of England shape itself in a visible form and physiognomy, it would, I think, seem too heart-breaking for us to spare overmuch sorrow or horror for the unhappy condition of Paris. Those who have eyes to see the realities that are invisible, have beheld this nation solemnly re-establishing the grossest superstitions of barbarism as the only lawful and authoritative religion. At the end of many generations, which have struggled for liberty and light, a great nation, sitting in her highest tribunal, orders to be dragged into her presence a man who has dared to say that God is our Father, and man our brother; she tries as a criminal one who has affirmed the truth of Reason and Conscience, and in his form binds the human spirit itself, hand and foot, and casts it into outer darkness. “Go!” it has cried to the religious guides of the people,—“declare to the sorrowing world that they are all born children of Satan; tell them they are tossed between an angry God and a malignant Devil; tell

them that the laws of Nature do not exist, but only the caprice of a Giant Mechanic, who built the universe and may knock it to pieces again at his pleasure; bid them cower, bid them supplicate and whine like slaves under the lifted lash, bid them deny common sense, outrage instinct, believe the fables of savage soothsayers, and put darkness for light, that they may crawl into heaven by cowardice and save their miserable little souls!"

Such are the glad tidings of great joy which England sends by its only authorised messengers to us and to all men! So does Reason suffer this day under Pontius Hatherly!

I said the Church has cast the bound human spirit itself into outer darkness. Well for us were it also a place of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. But it is not so. The saddest thing by far relating to the fresh fetters which have been forged and imposed upon the mind of the country, is, that it has hardly elicited one groan or protest from the people. A few plaintive cries have been tortured from the more earnest and scholarly of the clergy, as the rack upon which they are stretched gives another wrench; but the laity have generally shown only a stupid servility. When Swedenborg related that in his pilgrimage through Hell he found a company of spirits there who fancied they were in Heaven, and were thankful for that beatitude, I suspect he must have been reflecting on his residence in London. The people walk the streets cheerfully with their gilt-edged prayer-books, and, so far as we hear, sit serenely in their pews; but though the Church, unsunned by Reason, be called Jerusalem, it is none the less Gehenna, and repose in it is more deplorable than anguish.

We might have supposed that the laity have felt diffident of their ability to deal with subjects blended with law and theology; but unfortunately we have just seen that in their own dealings with religious

questions in a region particularly their own, they have shown themselves utterly servile to the besotted bigotry of the times. The new school-system was the reply of the governing classes to a demand of the poor for education too stern to be longer unheeded. Its establishment was amid a general blaze of enthusiasm for the liberation of education from denominationalism, and for universal toleration. What has all this amounted to when cooled down? Simply that each man wished to keep other denominations than his own from getting the upper hand. When the question of toleration, in principle, really came up; when a party, too weak to find any defence except in that principle, arose and begged not to be compelled to help teach the children of the country as true, biblical legends and dogmas they believed false, all the denominations made common cause with each other, to scorn their entreaty and protest. It was not a convocation of clergy, but a School-board controlled by the laity which, at the last discussion on the subject in Guildhall, set before the country a miserable scene of religious oppression and triumphant bigotry. The most eminent man on the London School-board* stood earnestly pleading, in behalf of the helpless children of the nation, that they should not be taught what is notoriously false, and infamously obscene, simply because it is written in the Bible. Shall little children be taught on the authority of God that things are true which every thinker knows to be false? Shall we pick up poor children from the gutters only to defile their minds in the moral gutters of all the crimes, the grossnesses, committed by a semi-barbarous eastern people? Is it educating little children to put into their hands stories of incest, murder, butchery, anecdotes replete with every detail of prurience and cruelty, and say, these are the sacred revelations of God?

The advocate of the revelations pleaded to a heart

* Professor Huxley.

of stone, for he pleaded to superstition. The massacre of the innocents under king Herod is a fable ; but the massacre of innocent minds and tender hearts by the agents of king Bigotry is no fable ; that goes on, and will go on until from the hearts and homes of the people there shall a cry be heard, as of mothers weeping for their children, who will not be comforted so long as the very light in them is turned to darkness.

Since this event in our chief Parliament of Education, I have concluded that we have said enough, if not too much, of the unfaithfulness of the clergy. They cannot indeed be excused. They are the beneficiaries of the Church, and owe to the people truth in payment for their livings. They are the accredited religious guides of the masses ; they have advantages for knowing, and opportunities for speaking, which others have not. Nay, they occupy the position of moral trustees ; and as we expect a banker to be honest in money matters, or a statesman to be faithful to public interests, so we have a right to demand truth from ministers of truth, and simple rectitude from the preachers of righteousness. But for all this we must remember that the cultivated clergyman has a vast mass of fetish worshippers to deal with. If the very educational representatives of the people insist that the story of the incest of Lot, and of the feline treachery and cruelty of Jael shall be made a national school-book, what must be the impenetrable hardness of the stratum beneath them ? We must remember, too, that the clergyman who by study has discovered the falsehood of the popular dogmas, has extraordinary temptations to suppress his light. When a layman changes his opinion it does not mean to him or his family a loss of home, and of the means of livelihood ; nay, the layman in his private position has not even the popular persecution of evil tongues to face. But if the clergyman becomes heretical, in that moment

his whole life and prospect are revolutionized ; his home, his study, crumble around him ; his earthly prospects vanish, and he must begin life anew in some field for which his studies have not prepared him. The trial may not be so severe with men of eminent genius, but even with them there remains the severe trial of the dissolution of the ties and friendships which have been knit by life and religious sympathy. Hitherto we have seen this trying position of the clergyman acting not so much to suppress his light altogether, as in causing it to be reflected in indirect ways, investing creeds and formulas with unreal meanings, and so managing to suggest the truth he dare not openly and plainly espouse.

I take this to be the reason why great religious renovations have so rarely in history originated with members of the priestly class. In every age it is not from Jerusalem but from the wilderness that the voice is more likely to come proclaiming the axe laid at the root of the evil tree. A Chinese grain-inspector, Kungfutzee by name,—or Confucius as we call him,—finds that the people need another kind of bread than is made of grain. And in recalling his fore-runners he looks beyond generations of priests to a certain man of the people named E-Yin. In times of disorder E-Yin chose his opportunity for service. He said, "Heaven hath given life to this people, and sent them who are first enlightened to enlighten those who are last, and hath sent those who are first aroused to arouse those who are last. These doctrines which have aroused me will I bear to the people to arouse them." He thought that if there was a single man or woman in the empire who was not benefited by the higher truth, he was "guilty of pushing them in a ditch." Buddha was a prince who made himself of no reputation that he might save men, and became the poorest of wayside wanderers. Mahomet was a soldier. Then we have the carpenter's gospel, with fishermen for its first disciples, and a lawyer for

its chief apostle. When the priesthood had made it "more lawful in Athens to do men harm than good," they had lost the force of any higher evolution from their own order, and the next step must be made by a sculptor, named Socrates, and a travelling scholar, Plato. Mr Mill advised the young students at St. Andrews to stay in the Church so long as they could manage to do so, because an institution can be more powerfully influenced and reformed from within than from without. But history seems to show that the inside reformers—like Savonarola, like Wesley, or, in our own time, Father Hyacinthe and Dean Stanley—have never been able to give a complete utterance or do a rounded and permanent work. So much of a man as is covered by a surplice must be lost to the task set by the ideal order, which demands the whole man. So I fancy we must look to our philosophers and poets, our men of letters and of science, to found the new Church, and, for a long time, to build upon the foundation. A blind conservatism among the masses, and the habit of conceding to priests the keeping of their consciences, and doing their religious thinking for them, inherited from ages of clerical domination, constitute the disparaging conditions under which they have to labour.

I do not think that the apathy of the laity towards the great works of religious liberation, arises from a preponderant belief among them in the superstitions of the Churches. Mr Kirkman, in his masterly pamphlet on "The Infidelity of Orthodoxy," published in this series, by Thomas Scott of Ramsgate, tells a pregnant story of a workman who, receiving his babe after the Vicar had baptised it, kissed it fondly, and exclaimed, "I never kissed it before because I knowed it was not the child of God; but I kiss it now because I know it is." The incident reveals the horrible ignorance which prevails in the lower classes—a heathenism as pitiable as any in the lands to which the benighted workman gives his pennies to send missionaries. But

it is incredible that the middle and upper classes believe the dogmas of orthodoxy. Every smile on their faces contradicts the supposition. The cheerful crowd on the streets, the gay companies at the theatre and the concert, do not believe that they or their children or friends are suspended over everlasting fires, or live under the threat of an angry God. Their sneers at Spirit-rappings, their incredulity at ghost-stories, show them no believers in miracles, and their laws against fortune-tellers and pretended witches show that they disbelieve the possibility of such sorceries as are related on many pages of the Bible. I imagine that the real attitude of the more intelligent laity towards the Church which they support is expressed by a story which was vouched for by the gentleman who related it in my hearing. A distinguished Unitarian from America was a guest in the house of a London merchant, and was pleased to find that they were in complete harmony in their religious convictions. Nevertheless, when Sunday came the merchant made ready to accompany his family to the Church. The Unitarian said, "I am astonished that after you have ridiculed the doctrines of the Church you should still go to it." The merchant replied, "I go to it because it's the established thing, and if you'll get your damned thing established I'll go to that." The busy layman does not regard it as within his province to think and examine religious subjects at any time, and the general broil of the theological world renders the duty of entering it particularly uninviting just now. In trade he may indulge in new stocks, but in religion he prefers to invest in the old consols. Why does he have his daughter married by a service coarse enough to call a protest to her heart and a blush to her cheek? It is the established thing. Is it consoling, as he stands beside the grave of his child to be told by the chaplain that his darling has been consumed by God's anger, or does his heart respond to the thanksgiving

there (so consistently !) offered up that it has been taken out of this sinful world ? No ; but it is the established thing.

I may be asked, why all this indignation against a creed which is not believed ? I answer, that among a large class of the ignorant it is believed, and on these the cruel creed sits, a ghoul feeding on the heart of childhood, despoiling the poor of the cheerful faith in a divine Father that might light up a lot which drudgery and superstition too often combine to make hopelessly dark : (2), That where the creeds are not believed, but are supported, there is a loss of sincerity more injurious to character, than to the mind were the gloom of ignorant credulity : (3), Whether believed or disbelieved, the establishment of superstition and falsehood in institutions enables error to occupy the place where true religion might be. To those who believe that religion is essentially a phantom, the sight of false dogmas organised in powerful churches and priesthoods is far less appalling than to those whose eyes behold the spirit of Truth waiting without, waiting ever from age to age, her voice drowned by the screaming of fanaticism and the droning of formalism, her drooping wings, appealing eyes, and proffered gifts, all unrecognised. To eyes that see this vision hovering over every cathedral, church, or chapel, that has been raised to defend the phantasms of barbarous ages, such church or chapel, however ornate its architecture, darkens to a dungeon unclean and hateful, and to such, the worshippers walking the aisles, audibly clank their chains.

That woe which of old was pronounced against those who frame iniquity in law, must be revived in this generation against those who establish irreligion on the throne of religion, and make apparent infidelity the only real fidelity. It is utterly impossible that the true temple can be erected so long as the whole ground where it must stand is occupied by the temple of Error. It is that national

establishment of dogmas which every thinker has abjured inwardly, if not openly,—and of which all other dogmatic oppressions are copies,—which must fall. It is that which now plainly blocks the path. It is that which while we plough and sow and reap by aid of the advanced knowledge of our own age, holds us in the field of religious culture toiling along with the barbaric implements of ancient Syria. It is that which takes the man who for six days has been travelling by steam, and flashing his thought ten thousand miles in a moment by the grand device of science, and consigns him on the seventh to the religious methods of savage ages. The Englishman must here mount his donkey of dogma, or his humped camel of tradition, and journey across the thirsty deserts of mythology, while all around him living fountains are playing, and the sunlight waits to weave around him a religious civilisation corresponding to the grandeur of his material progress. The popular creed contains no idea won, no discovery achieved, this thousand years. The Home Secretary, Mr Bruce, says five thousand. For the defenders of the Established Church have such faith in the religious petrification of the country, that they are ready to adopt theological unprogressiveness as the next article of the new Downing Street Creed. Mr Miall, in the course of the recent debate on Disestablishment, having drawn a contrast between the scientific and the religious progress of the country to the disparagement of the latter, is promptly put down by Mr Bruce with the oracular statement—“The end of science will never be reached; but theology is in its very nature and essence stationary.” Whatever confusion may beset the Home Secretary’s intellect when he is regulating cabs, he seems to have an easy omniscience when attending to things divine and eternal. “The relations of man to God remain now as they were 5000 years ago.” Therefore, argues Mr Bruce, our knowledge of those relations is at an end. “Hear,

hear," followed these profound statements; and when afterwards Sir Roundell Palmer said, "You cannot make new discoveries in religion," there were actually cheers! These gentlemen do not represent Colney Hatch, and we must assume that in repudiating the idea of any possible increase of religious enlightenment they speak the mind of the average defenders of their Church. The Church then boasts of being stationary, and we must sorrowfully accord its claim. Its thoughts do not widen with the process of the suns. Religious progress if it occur must be out of and away from it. Its dogmas of the terrible God, and the almost equally terrible Devil, of the blood-redemption, and hell, and miracles, did not require such confessions to make of the proudest cathedral to the eye of Reason a pre-historic hut, or cavern, wherein fashionably-dressed men and women are spiritually clad in the skins of wild beasts. The magnificent inventions and discoveries of to-day find our religion untold generations behind them: and there it will remain, for the masses of the people, until they themselves shall be seized with a deep discontent at the anomaly, and from their vigorous training in the work of the world, bring the sinews of heart and brain which shall reassure the timid pulpit and the time-serving press. "The clock of the universe has always somewhere an alarm bell," said Heber. It sounded for one part of Europe when the Pope declared his infallibility, and it ere long tolled the demise of his power. Heavy are our ears if we cannot hear its ominous strokes in the re-establishment of irrational creeds, the imposition of superstitious tests on the student, and the claim that religion is the one thing unimprovable, put forth by the Church of England; and it must surely sound the knell of the Church or that of the spiritual liberty of the people.

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