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What is God?

BY ALLEN DAVEOPORT.

You ask me, What is God? and I
Am no way puzzled to reply.
My inward lights so clearly shine,
That heavenly things I can define,
And though but a finite creature,
Tell what is God and what is Nature.
Whatever can be seen or felt,
Whatever can be heard or smelt,
Whatever can be tasted, and
All that the mind can understand,
All that our wisdom can conceive,
All that in which we can believe,
All o'er where fancy ever trod,
Is Nature; all the rest is God.
—Freethought Readings.

The Right To Express Opinions.

BY HORACE SEAVER.

ONE of the most important rights which human beings possess, abstractly, and which ought to be guaranteed to them by the society of which they are members, is the right to express opinions, without fear or molestation. That men ought to possess this right, not only as a matter of abstract justice, but as a matter of political expediency, is a proposition which carries its own evidence along with it. The right to think freely upon all subjects belongs to us naturally, and no government can deprive us of it. Now the right to think involves the right to express our opinions; for if we were to be deprived of the power of communicating our ideas to each other, we should be unable to benefit society by developing truths which we might discover.

The right to express opinions on all subjects, save religion and politics, is conceded by almost all governments to their people. The autocracy of Russia, and the paternal despotism of Austria, prohibit discussion among the people on political affairs, and England and our own country sometimes punish those who dare to express opinions derogatory to Christianity. The persecution of Abner Kneeland for blasphemy—the statute against which unmeaning crime is not even yet repealed—proves the correctness of the latter statement. A brief examination of the principal arguments usually urged in defence of such prosecutions, may suffice to show their injustice, and to place the right of man to the unrestricted expression of opinion in a clear light:—

1.—It is said that if men were permitted to publish opinions derogatory to religion, the public would be induced to regard it with contempt. To this it may be replied, that religion must be a thing which are obnoxious to reason, and contrary to common sense? Does

in its self contemptible, or the public intellect must be very defectively educated, or such an effect would never be produced. Every prosecution for the undefinable crime of blasphemy, therefore, is a tacit acknowledgment that the government and the priesthood have not done their duty in educating the people; or it is a tacit acknowledgment that religion is not founded in argument, and that it requires the terrors of corporal punishment for its support. Hence all such prosecutions are the most bitter and galling satires which could be launched against the government, priests, and religion.

2.—It has been urged that the moral sense of the community is outraged by the publication of libels on religion, and that it is fitting and right that the publishers of such libels should be prosecuted. We see no force in this argument, because almost everything that a man might say of religion, while exercising his right of free inquiry, could be construed by the law and the church into a libel. Now it is well known that free inquiry has been instrumental in establishing science, in reforming jurisprudence, and in effecting the partial abolition of superstitious absurdities. It cannot therefore, do any harm to religion, if religion is founded in truth; and if not, free inquiry will expose its errors, and consequently ought to be encouraged. Moreover the nature of belief is involuntary and proportionate to the amount and clearness of the evidence presented to the mind; hence it is unjust to punish a man for entertaining any opinion. Besides, as the individual right to inquire after truth obviously implies the right to express without fear the results of inquiry; so it may be argued that those who could restrict the free expression of opinion must either deny the abstract right of man to inquire after truth, or act inconsistently by denying in practice the right which the former involves. And finally, as truth is always beneficial, and error always pernicious to society, and as inquiry is the only mode by which we can ever arrive at truth, so all attempts to restrict inquiry are wrong and unjust.

These are some of the grounds upon which the right to free inquiry and to the free expression of opinion may be defended. And in view of them we may ask, why allow statutes to remain unrepealed which Christianity require the strong arm of the law to prop it up? We should think not, if it is from Heaven. Why then, do professed Christians persecute unbelievers? For no other purpose, it would seem, than to gratify a thirst for vengeance, which their principles and religion are unable to repress.—

Man's Past and Present.

BY DR. L. BUCHNER.

Man, created by God, passed from the hands of the creator as a perfect work, complete in body and spirit. Whatever may be the degradation of many men, civilization is their final goal, as it was their original state.—Count de Salles.

It is difficult to conceive," says Quatrefages, "upon what facts this author relies." In point of fact, such an opinion as this having sprung solely from theoretical considerations, can only appeal to theoretical grounds, whilst it is in the plainest contradiction to every known fact. If the men now living were really only the degenerate and partially corrupted descendants of a former higher and better race, it would be difficult to understand how the human race could still exist, as it is a law generally recognized and proved by experience that degenerate or degraded tribes and individuals are never of long duration, but that they gradually disappear.

Lyell argues admirably against this view in the following words: "But had the original stock of mankind been really endowed with such superior intellectual power and with inspired knowledge, and had they possessed the same improvable nature as their posterity, the point of advancement to which they would have reached ere this would be immeasurably higher. We cannot ascertain at present the limits, whether of the beginning or of the end, of the first stone period, when man co-existed with the extinct mammalia, but that it was of great duration we cannot doubt. During those ages there would have been time for progress of which we can scarcely form a conception, and very different would have been the character of the works of art which we should now be endeavoring to interpret,—those relics which we are now disinterring from the old gravel-pits of St. Acheul, or from the Liege caves. In them, or in the upraised bed of the Mediterranean, on the south coast of Sardinia, instead of the rudest pottery or flint tools so irregular in form as to cause the unpracticed eye to doubt whether they are unmistakable evidence of design, we should now be finding sculptured forms, surpassing in beauty the masterpieces of Phidias or Praxitiles; lines of buried railways or electric telegraphs, from which the best engineers of our day might gain invaluable hints; astronomical instruments and micro-

scopes of more advanced construction than any known in Europe, and other indications of perfection in the arts and sciences, such as the nineteenth century has not yet witnessed. Still farther would the triumph of inventive genius be found to have been carried, when the later deposits, now assigned to the ages of bronze and iron, were formed. Vainly should we be straining our imaginations to guess the possible uses and meaning of such relics—machines, perhaps, for navigating the air or exploring the depths of the ocean, or for calculating arithmetical problems, beyond the wants or even the conception of living mathematicians."

Now we do not find in the depths of the earth such things as are here described by Lyell, but in all cases just the reverse, and we must therefore feel convinced that man did not, in accordance with this opinion which we find coming to the surface from time to time, commence with great things to end with small, but that beginning with small things, he has ended with great, as indeed is the rule in almost all human affairs.

Which of the opinions here described is not merely the more probable, but the more encouraging and satisfactory, the author may well leave to the judgment of the reader. It is only by a complete misapprehension of the truth and of right sentiments that so many men have been induced to reject the view here developed of the antiquity and origin of our race upon the earth as being repulsive and discouraging, and to imagine that if it be adopted the elevated sentiment of the dignity of human nature must be endangered. We do not know how to combat this false pride which regards a lowly origin as something contemptible and degrading better than in the admirable words of Prof. Huxley, who speaks as follows in his remarkable memoir on the "Place of Man in Nature": "Thoughtful men, once escaped from the blinding influence of traditional prejudice, will find in the lowly stock whence man has sprung the best evidence of the of the splendor of his capacities; and will discern in his long progress through the past a reasonable of faith in his attainment of a nobler futhre."

In reality the humbler our origin, the more elevated is our present place in nature! the smaller the commencement, the greater is the termination! the harder the strug-

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