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FREE THOUGHT IN ENGLAND.

THREE causes postpone in England the triumph of wild ideas over such as are traditional and decorous. The first is the long habit of Constitutionalism, which gives free play to individual opinions, and so dissipates their energy and extravagance. The second is the "respectable" Established Church, which being interwoven by clerical marriages with the middle classes, keeps up the sentiment of Christianity throughout the country. And the third is a certain staidness of natural character which objects to being disturbed by mere chimeras. It is undeniable that in England there is just as much free thought as there is in Germany, in Russia, or anywhere else; but there is no distemper of revolt, no rudeness of irreligion, still less any combination to upset. Tranquillity of indifference is the prevailing phase. "There may be, or there may not be, infallible truth, but it is too difficult an inquiry to be gone into," is the popular English phrase of free thought. In conversation there is immense energy of dispute, but the energy is dissipated by conversation. What Tcherniscerski said of the Russian modern temperament is perhaps equally true of the modern English: "The rising generation shows a great tendency for idleness, and a great liking for conversation and discussions. It has two defects: it is too easily excited, and never thoroughly investigates a subject." But the excitement in the English temperament seldom goes beyond words; it does not take form in blows or in conspiracies. This is, perhaps, as much due both to political and religious accidents—that is, to the institutions of the country—as it is due to the normally British dislike for being disturbed

without practical gain. Nor does any fact in English history shake this estimate. Thus, we must not look upon the Reformation as being English in tone, for it was purely political and compulsory. Nor must we regard the Cromwell outbreak as being English in tone, for it was evanescent in spirit and circumstance. Besides, both these wild epochs were quasi-Christian. It must be remembered, to the great credit of the English people, that their revolutions have been professedly religious. Professed skepticism has never once made a revolt. There has been always the affectation of religious conviction at the bottom of the most disorderly absurdities. No section of English people has ever put forth such a programme as that which Herzen presumed to promulgate in 1848: "Liberty will have no peace till all that is religious and political has become simply human, and submissive to criticism and negation. . . . Our work is to demolish all faith, to remove existing hope in what is old, and to destroy all prejudices without concessions or mercy." The truth is that it would be impossible for such a programme to find approvers unless Socialism and Nihilism had joined hands. Political Nihilism could not possibly prevail unless Socialism had first prepared the way. It is invariably the Nihilism of the moral order which develops the Nihilism of the political order. Victor Hugo has called French Socialism Nihilism, and no doubt he is to a certain extent right. The death of the moral order is the death of every other order. But in England there has never been the death of the moral order. There have been frantic outbursts of anti-Catholicism and Puritanism; there have been hideous politico-religious persecutions; but there has never been revolutionary Socialism. This is a grand gain to English credit. It is also a grand promise for the English future. Modern thought, as it pompously styles itself, may loosen the links of the religious life; but the past shows that, though the English may become crazy, they are not likely to renounce Christianity.

It would be a mistake to suppose that the growth of free thought in England is due to greater study, greater learning. It is due, to tell the truth, to simple laziness. Free thought is not intellectual, it is slothful. It is the cutting the intellect loose from nine-tenths of those restraints which even the natural laws of creation prove divine. This disposition necessarily involves pride and vanity, and therefore a diseased moral state. The two great restraints which the Catholic Church has always supplied against the wayward conceits of free thought are ecclesiastical authority and "supernaturalism," the latter being indeed the *raison d'être* of the former, and the two being divinely inseparable. But though free thought has not dared to do away with authority,—in certain

abstract or theoretical forms,—it has stripped authority of that one only sovereign grace which rendered it at once dignified and beautiful. If we recognize authority as conferred by the Creator, we feel honored in submitting ourselves to it; but if we recognize authority as conferred only by ourselves, we look down on it with paternal complacency. This is what the Socialists do; what all freethinkers do, more or less; what every class of Protestant Christian must always do, though in a very different sense to the freethinker. Protestantism is only free thought in regard to interpretation, for it admits the infallibility of Revelation; it accepts the authority of the lawgiver, but insists on interpreting His law; and though logically such free thought leads to skepticism, happily few Protestants are logicians. Those Protestants who have the misfortune to be logicians, develop necessarily more or less into skeptics. This development has now ripened in the higher classes, that is, in the classes which are educated; and since few men have the energy to become Catholics, they fall back on the indolence of freethinking. At Oxford there is quite as much free thought as there is at Berlin, or St. Petersburg; but the refinements of education, and the interests of social life, keep it scholarly, tranquil, well-bred. This is equally true of the teachers and the taught. What Dr. Jowett, the Master of Baliol, meant by that sentence (which he preached to the undergraduates at St. Mary's): "The time is coming when we must be Christians indeed, if we are to be at all; for conventional Christianity is beginning to pass away," was simply this,—that all ecclesiastical authority might be rejected by every member of his Church. He affirmed this, when he added: "I think therefore we had better put aside this vexed question of miracles, as not belonging to our time, and also as tending to raise an irreconcilable quarrel between revelation and science;" and he further affirmed it by speaking of God, less as a person than as an abstraction; resting content with the exquisite beauty of the divine idea; precisely in the same way as the Buddhist or the Parsee might speak of the beauty of holiness. This is the rankest degree of free thought which is even possible for a "Master," who professes to be also an Anglican clergyman. Yet it is as common among the clergy as among the laity. It is rampant among the Oxford undergraduates. Huber, who tells us that our English Universities were "a bequest from Catholic to Protestant England," and who adds that "later times cannot produce a concentration of men, eminent in all the learning and science of the age, such as Oxford and Cambridge poured forth in the ninth century, mightily influencing the intellectual development of all Western Christendom," would probably have thought that modern masters of Baliol were hardly worthy of their Catholic

predecessors. But the "conventional Christianity," which Dr. Jowett disesteemed, but which was the only Christianity he understood, has not only passed away from Oxford life, but has been replaced by a cold, heartless skepticism. The Oxford Commissioners told us several years ago that the tendency of Oxford philosophy was skepticism; and that happy was he who, after three years of residence, could still believe in the divinity of Christ. This is indeed inevitable, when the Oxford heads of houses may preach that "the question of miracles should be put aside," that God is a beautiful idea, and that the only way to make sure of being a Christian is to judge all Christian doctrines for oneself.

It is not easy to find anything to admire in the intellectual or moral aspects of free thought. Perhaps its least inviting phase is its love of ignorance. When Goethe said, "I know not myself, and God forbid I should," he probably meant that he did not wish to know the littleness of even the highest intellectual achievements. But the formula in which most freethinkers would express their sentiments would be: "I know little of myself; and as to God, I am content to know less." Free thought is not the product of the passionate longing to know God, but the desire to remain in tranquil ignorance of Him. It is a combination of indifference and pride. If a man is a Catholic he must conform to certain duties; he must obey both with his mind and with his body; he must submit his mental and moral being to a certain discipline of habit, which habit is just a little above nature. But if he is a freethinker he may sit in his armchair, never go to early Mass, or to confession, never bridle his interior thought or interior yearning, but may live like a gentlemanly heathen. And it is obviously affectation to affirm that such free thought is either aspiring or sincere. As was said just above, free thought is simply laziness; it is not intellectual, it is slothful. For even when it takes the Rationalist form, such form is the gratification of vanity; it is not the hard work of the subjection of the will, the hard work of the contemplative or the ascetic; nor is it the hard work of the true Christian philosopher, who aims at synthesis of every branch of true knowledge; it is the indulgence of the caprices of the intellect, without the faintest moral object, nor any charitable one. No good was ever done by the writings of a freethinker, no heart was ever rendered less unhappy, no sorrow was ever solaced, no character uplifted, no immortal aspiration implanted. Grovelling, burrowing, undermining, and wrecking are the unlovely aspirations of the freethinker. He has no care if, in the presence of young persons, he says things which may shatter Christian hope, and sow the seeds of a life's loosening or misgiving. He has no care if, to show off his superior knowledge,—about some fragment

of material lore,—he writes a book which half-educated young men will adopt as their apology for heathenism. He is brutally unthinking, inhumanly selfish, without instinct of love or compassion. Slothfulness in the moral nature, and vanity in the intellectual, with cruelty towards the whole world save his own sect, are the unlovable characteristics of his vocation. Individually there are amiable freethinkers ; but collectively they are the enemies of mankind.

They are also the enemies of their own happiness. It is totally impossible for any man to be happy whose mind is disjointed or out of harmony. And it must be said that want of harmony is the most conspicuous of the defects of every man who professes to be a freethinker. Such men see only bits of creation, *disjecta membra* of the unities of the universe, isolated purposes and judgments ; they do not consider the whole, nor even a half. It is perfectly true that the Catholic Christian alone can enjoy the appreciation of perfect harmony ; because he alone knows the fitness of the supernatural to the wants of the natural life. Catholicism is the sublime fulness of reparation for all the injuries wrought by sin on the natural order. Yet freethinkers are to blame for not studying the Catholic philosophy so as to master its intellectual harmony. They will persist in judging the things that are of God by their own meagre standard of human evidence. Take one example—that of recent magazine articles, written to cast doubt on the Resurrection. The writers speak of the evidence as insufficient ; wholly ignoring the perfect harmony of its spirit with the spirit of the whole Gospel teaching. They complain that the supernatural is not natural, and that Divine faith is not made easy as human credence. In short, they ignore the harmonies of the supernatural. In the same way the freethinkers write on what they call the Petrine claims ; and muddle together the accidents of purely natural disorder with the divine unity of institution and story. This comes from want of appreciation of harmony, from a natural preference for fragments to unities ; whereas, the Catholic, knowing the harmony of the Christian philosophy, can put the fragments of human disorder into their proper place. In private life it is not easy for a Catholic to make answer to the objections of the free talker, because the Catholic has to explain that there are three laws,—or rather three lines of different effects of different causes,—those of nature, of sin, and of grace ; and that these three run concurrently yet transversely, and are to be harmonized solely by Catholic philosophy. It is the fragmentary state of mind of the freethinker which it is so difficult to argue with or to influence ; not the philosophy which is built on the whole, but the philosophy which is built on little bits. Yet the freethinkers always argue as if they

alone knew all science; as if St. Augustine and St. Thomas, St. Ambrose and St. Bernard, and all the hosts of canonized intellects and wills had been infants and sucklings in reach of thought, and without knowledge of what the freethinkers can suggest to them. This is an assumption quite as baseless as it is vain. What is called modern thought has not supplied a single novelty to the well-worn armory of the revolt of the conscience; it has only acquired greater boldness by the license of a free press, and by being permitted to publish blasphemy—without the pillory.

The most recent of the examples of this boldness in England is the election of the atheist, Mr. Bradlaugh, to a seat in the British House of Commons. "The Free Thought Publication Company" has published a pamphlet by Mr. Bradlaugh, of which the title is *A Plea for the Atheist*; and yet this gentleman is invited to be a counsellor of the Queen, who reigns "by the Grace of God," who is "Defender of the Faith," and who took an oath at her coronation to maintain religion. The necessary sequence of this election, if the principle were worked out, would be that every member of both Houses, as well as the reigning Sovereign, might be now, and evermore, professed atheists. And since the extreme of unbelief would be pronounced to be "constitutional," so would be the extreme of any belief. There could not be invidious distinctions. So that we might look to see, in the House of Commons, an altar reared to Venus, or to Minerva, or to the genial Bacchus, as a substitute for the "afternoon prayers," which hitherto a Christian chaplain has read. This would be the proper development of free thought. But the English, it may be replied, are only "generous" in their free thought; they only permit the same liberty which they claim; they are not, as a people, inclined to wickedness, but only magnificently liberal or concessive. And this is undoubtedly true. Yet, a few weeks ago, the most dangerous of all the freethinkers who have ever been begotten of modern license, Monsieur Ernest Renan of French celebrity, was invited to give lectures in London, and gave them to "crowded and appreciative audiences." This writer and lecturer is perhaps the most offensive of all the modern assailants of Christianity, for the very reason that he applauds Christianity, and patronizes its spirit and good points. He is much given to such adjectives as "charmant," "delicieux," "ravissant," "exquis," "enivrant;" and speaks of our Blessed Lord with the kindest admiration, being quite sorry that His disciples misunderstood Him. His arguments against the Resurrection give a clue to his tone of mind (or to what is certainly his very conspicuously "free" thought); for he assumes what he wishes to believe, and dismisses what is unfavorable to his preconception. The Resurrection was not true, because M. Renan dislikes it, and there-

fore, the disciples must have been deceived. "But love and enthusiasm," says M. Renan, "know no such thing as situations without an issue. They laugh at the impossible, and rather than abandon hope will do violence to reality." *Ergo*, there was no Resurrection. Q.E.D. The *Riforme Intellectuelle et Morale*, though intentionally political sketches, might certainly have included some suggestions for reform in M. Renan's and in his disciples' freedom of thought. Yet this kind of licentiousness is not unwelcome to many Englishmen, who like liberty provided it is decorous. And M. Renan is exquisitely decorous. He is, too, so imaginative and poetical. His cloudy Utopias, his elegant language, his emotional and sentimental religiosity are exactly what suit that very large class of Englishmen who are quite ready to feel but not to believe. M. Renan's lectures in London were much admired. "We cannot quite agree with him," was the normal newspaper criticism, "but there can be no doubt that he has a scholarly mind." So the impiety must be condoned by its pretty dressing. And, after all, M. Renan only goes just one step further than some of the most distinguished Anglican preachers. It would puzzle any one, for example, to draw the exact distinction between M. Renan and the Dean of Westminster. This last dignitary has recently published a work, of which the object is to show that the "variations of Catholicism" have at least equalled the variations of Protestantism; and that it is all the better that they should have done so, since, as the *Saturday Review* expresses it, in language of which the satire is well merited: "How great a blessing it is to the world that Christianity should be split up into some hundreds of conflicting sects, and that all of them—the Roman Communion included, if she could only recognize her true blessedness—are habitually inconsistent, not only with each other, but with themselves." The Dean of Westminster, notwithstanding what the *Saturday Review* calls his "ineradicable confusion of thought," is much admired, like M. Renan, for his "scholarliness;" yet between the two perhaps the most marked of all distinctions is that the one is a clergyman, the other is not.

It seems invidious to call any Protestant a freethinker, since Protestantism is essentially free thought—up to the point of rejection of Church authority. Take two very different types, the poetical Mr. Matthew Arnold, and the controversial High Churchman, Dr. Littledale. Between Mr. Arnold and M. Renan there is doubtless a wide gulf, though we would rather not have to measure its exact compass. Mr. Arnold's great objection to theology is that "there is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve." The only hope for the Christian is "poetry;" "for poetry the idea is everything; the

rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry." This makes free thought very pretty; for we can think in stanzas about our possible salvation. Belief is emotion, and piety is sentiment, and sin is bad verses and false quantities. Dr. Littledale, on the other hand, is a stern, unflinching critic, who smashes authority to pieces—while believing (theoretically) that there is authority; and shows that there cannot possibly be dogma—though his Church (theoretically) teaches it. Both these gentlemen are heroes of free thought; quite as much as is M. Hyacinthe Loyson, Rector of the Gallican Church, Paris; or Dr. Riley, Old Catholic Bishop of Mexico; or Dr. Plunket, Bishop of the Irish Episcopalian Church; which three gentlemen have just been conducting an Old Catholic Synod at Geneva, with the sole object of increasing schism and heresy. What is, or what is not, free thought, in this enlightened and very progressive age is a question which no non-Catholic could answer. It seems impossible to give any other reply than that it is disloyalty to the authority of the Church.

And this estimate seems to be justified by the "loyalty" of all freethinkers to *some* authority, *some* substitute for principle—provided that the divine Church be ignored. Socialism, Nihilism, Communism, Collectivism—from the hideous extremes of the Carbonari to the gentle (first) intentions of the International—were all founded on some theory of union, and all worked on some promise of allegiance. The young Russian who took an oath to kill the Czar was loyal to his sect and to its headquarters. So that the Catholicism of revolt (for, as Father Faber has expressed it, "The devil has his Catholic Church") has certain principles in common with divine Catholicism, though it uses those principles to oppose the Church. Freethinkers believe both in union and in authority, provided only that Christian dogma be left out. They believe even in what they call natural laws. Nay, they go so far even as to admit that such laws *may be* divine; while they assert of all the laws as to religion, that they are not and cannot be divine. Let us take an illustration of our meaning. Freethinkers may agree with Father Secchi, that the billows of the sea of flame which surround the sun, to a depth of at least five thousand miles, rise to many thousand miles in height; and that the waves in that sea of fire rush continuously with a swiftness of about a hundred and sixty miles per second; and they would even be disposed to allow that such natural phenomena *may be* controlled by a divine will; but they scoff at Father Secchi when he tells them that the spiritual laws, which are to regulate man's conduct on earth, are quite as exquisite, quite as terrible, as are any natural laws. In short, free-

thinkers will let God have His way in the natural order, but will not hear of His interfering with created reason. God may be possibly recognized in such an endowment as, say, natural foresight, which bids us not to run our head against a brick wall, but He must be ousted from every attempt at interference with our right to live as heathens, if we prefer it. And because this estimate of the creature's freedom is found convenient,—suited the "sloth," to which we have attributed free thought,—therefore the freethinker assumes it for a postulate: "There is not a divine teacher on earth." Just as Monsieur Renan argues against the Resurrection, on the ground that the pious disciples naturally wished it, so the freethinkers argue against divine authority, on the ground that they naturally do *not* wish it. Divine authority would interfere with free thought, therefore divine authority must be a myth. "I think it better," said an English gentleman, a few days ago, to the present writer, "to let my children grow up without any religion, and then, when they are old enough to judge for themselves, they can adopt any religion they like best." This paternal liberality takes it for granted, first, that there is not a divine religion; secondly, that, if there were one, it would be as easy to "adopt" it after twenty years of animal indifference as after twenty years of earnestness of life; thirdly, that a father owes no duty to his son in the way of directing his aspirations. It moreover reverses the dictum of St. Augustine, that "faith is a condition of knowledge," and affirms that knowledge is the one condition of faith. It proposes to feed the intellect, the heart, the intuition, during the seedtime of impressionable youth, with what Charles Lamb called "the innutritive phantoms of unbelief," and then, when long habits have bred paganism, to say, "*now* you are quite fit to find out God." It ignores the whole moral side of the intelligence by which mainly the intelligence receives truth. "There seems to be no reason," wrote Butler, in his *Analogy*, "why we may not be in a state of moral probation with regard to the exercise of our understanding upon the subject of religion, as we are with regard to our behavior in common affairs." But freethinking ignores moral probation. It prefers to let the intelligence develop itself, "subject," as Kant expressed it, "to inevitable delusion;" and then, when the intelligence has become defiled, to say to it, "Truth is now reflected in your pure mirror."

Indeed, the most cruel part of freethinking is its slaughter of the innocents, its downright brutal disregard of youthful souls. Whereas the Catholic Church takes a child from its cradle and pursues it with winning love to its deathbed; freethinking cares nothing if the very earliest blossom be nipped by its unnatural philosophy. And when just at the age in which vanity or passion,

indolence or misdirected zeal, play most easily on the impressionable heart, freethinking bids the young to postpone all religion as being too "scientific" for mere tyros. It fills youthful heads with the idle babble about agnosticism, and with the big words of so-called modern science, and never tells them that, as Pascal said, "it is grace and not reason which enables the intellect to find truth." It dismisses the study of the synthesis of the divine laws,—of what Kepler called the *harmonia mundi*,—and chatters before young people about "osmosis" and "protoplasm," as if these were the foundations of eternal knowledge. Mistaking scientific "assumptions," as Owen and Faraday have pointed out, for the truths which immense experience can only demonstrate, it will not let children learn wisdom from the Catholic Church,—which, as all the greatest historians have borne witness, "saved letters and learning from the barbarian, founded universities in all lands, and made her cloisters the sanctuaries both of divine and human philosophy,"—but prefers to let them pick up garbage on the roadside of worldly life, from battling sects, from injurious books, from secular newspapers. In England the publication of skeptical literature has reached a point which could with difficulty be surpassed; and it would be far better if immoral literature were permitted to be disseminated, than the literature which "poisons the wells." Destroy faith, destroy reverence for holy things, destroy the sentiment of religion in any young heart, and you have cut away the roots from which, in after days, a fresh spring of saving religion might have sprung up. The horrible purpose of the freethinkers is to tear religion out by the roots, so that young persons cannot possibly recover themselves; but, having lost their first love, must be compelled to fall back on some purely Rationalistic invention. This is what we see now in England. Not only young men, but young women, chatter free thought; and, while knowing absolutely nothing of Christian philosophy, pretend to assail it with ripe wisdom.
