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978-1-108-00069-7 - History of the Conflict between Religion and Science

John William Draper

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HISTORY OF THE CONFLICT BETWEEN RELIGION AND SCIENCE

BY

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AND AUTHOR OF 'A TREATISE ON HUMAN PHYSIOLOGY'

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P R E F A C E .

WHOEVER has had an opportunity of becoming acquainted with the mental condition of the intelligent classes in Europe and America, must have perceived that there is a great and rapidly-increasing departure from the public religious faith, and that, while among the more frank this divergence is not concealed, there is a far more extensive and far more dangerous secession, private and unacknowledged.

So wide-spread and so powerful is this secession, that it can neither be treated with contempt nor with punishment. It cannot be extinguished by derision, by vituperation, or by force. The time is rapidly approaching when it will give rise to serious political results.

Ecclesiastical spirit no longer inspires the policy of the world. Military fervor in behalf of faith has disappeared. Its only souvenirs are the marble effigies of crusading knights, reposing in the silent crypts of churches on their tombs.

That a crisis is impending is shown by the attitude of the great powers toward the papacy. The papacy

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represents the ideas and aspirations of two-thirds of the population of Europe. It insists on a political supremacy in accordance with its claims to a divine origin and mission, and a restoration of the mediæval order of things, loudly declaring that it will accept no reconciliation with modern civilization.

The antagonism we thus witness between Religion and Science is the continuation of a struggle that commenced when Christianity began to attain political power. A divine revelation must necessarily be intolerant of contradiction; it must repudiate all improvement in itself, and view with disdain that arising from the progressive intellectual development of man. But our opinions on every subject are continually liable to modification, from the irresistible advance of human knowledge.

Can we exaggerate the importance of a contention in which every thoughtful person must take part whether he will or not? In a matter so solemn as that of religion, all men, whose temporal interests are not involved in existing institutions, earnestly desire to find the truth. They seek information as to the subjects in dispute, and as to the conduct of the disputants.

The history of Science is not a mere record of isolated discoveries; it is a narrative of the conflict of two contending powers, the expansive force of the human intellect on one side, and the compression arising from traditionary faith and human interests on the other.

No one has hitherto treated the subject from this

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point of view. Yet from this point it presents itself to us as a living issue—in fact, as the most important of all living issues.

A few years ago, it was the politic and therefore the proper course to abstain from all allusion to this controversy, and to keep it as far as possible in the background. The tranquillity of society depends so much on the stability of its religious convictions, that no one can be justified in wantonly disturbing them. But faith is in its nature unchangeable, stationary; Science is in its nature progressive; and eventually a divergence between them, impossible to conceal, must take place. It then becomes the duty of those whose lives have made them familiar with both modes of thought, to present modestly, but firmly, their views; to compare the antagonistic pretensions calmly, impartially, philosophically. History shows that, if this be not done, social misfortunes, disastrous and enduring, will ensue. When the old mythological religion of Europe broke down under the weight of its own inconsistencies, neither the Roman emperors nor the philosophers of those times did any thing adequate for the guidance of public opinion. They left religious affairs to take their chance, and accordingly those affairs fell into the hands of ignorant and infuriated ecclesiastics, parasites, eunuchs, and slaves.

The intellectual night which settled on Europe, in consequence of that great neglect of duty, is passing away; we live in the daybreak of better things. So-

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ciety is anxiously expecting light, to see in what direction it is drifting. It plainly discerns that the track along which the voyage of civilization has thus far been made, has been left; and that a new departure, on an unknown sea, has been taken.

Though deeply impressed with such thoughts, I should not have presumed to write this book, or to intrude on the public the ideas it presents, had I not made the facts with which it deals a subject of long and earnest meditation. And I have gathered a strong incentive to undertake this duty from the circumstance that a "History of the Intellectual Development of Europe," published by me several years ago, which has passed through many editions in America, and has been reprinted in numerous European languages, English, French, German, Russian, Polish, Servian, etc., is everywhere received with favor.

In collecting and arranging the materials for the volumes I published under the title of "A History of the American Civil War," a work of very great labor, I had become accustomed to the comparison of conflicting statements, the adjustment of conflicting claims. The approval with which that book has been received by the American public, a critical judge of the events considered, has inspired me with additional confidence. I had also devoted much attention to the experimental investigation of natural phenomena, and had published many well-known memoirs on such subjects. And perhaps no one can give himself to these pursuits, and spend

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a large part of his life in the public teaching of science, without partaking of that love of impartiality and truth which Philosophy incites. She inspires us with a desire to dedicate our days to the good of our race, so that in the fading light of life's evening we may not, on looking back, be forced to acknowledge how unsubstantial and useless are the objects that we have pursued.

Though I have spared no pains in the composition of this book, I am very sensible how unequal it is to the subject, to do justice to which a knowledge of science, history, theology, politics, is required; every page should be alive with intelligence and glistening with facts. But then I have remembered that this is only as it were the preface, or forerunner, of a body of literature, which the events and wants of our times will call forth. We have come to the brink of a great intellectual change. Much of the frivolous reading of the present will be supplanted by a thoughtful and austere literature, vivified by endangered interests, and made fervid by ecclesiastical passion.

What I have sought to do is, to present a clear and impartial statement of the views and acts of the two contending parties. In one sense I have tried to identify myself with each, so as to comprehend thoroughly their motives; but in another and higher sense I have endeavored to stand aloof, and relate with impartiality their actions.

I therefore trust that those, who may be disposed to criticise this book, will bear in mind that its object is

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not to advocate the views and pretensions of either party, but to explain clearly, and without shrinking, those of both. In the management of each chapter I have usually set forth the orthodox view first, and then followed it with that of its opponents.

In thus treating the subject it has not been necessary to pay much regard to more moderate or intermediate opinions, for, though they may be intrinsically of great value, in conflicts of this kind it is not with the moderates but with the extremists that the impartial reader is mainly concerned. Their movements determine the issue.

For this reason I have had little to say respecting the two great Christian confessions, the Protestant and Greek Churches. As to the latter, it has never, since the restoration of science, arrayed itself in opposition to the advancement of knowledge. On the contrary, it has always met it with welcome. It has observed a reverential attitude to truth, from whatever quarter it might come. Recognizing the apparent discrepancies between its interpretations of revealed truth and the discoveries of science, it has always expected that satisfactory explanations and reconciliations would ensue, and in this it has not been disappointed. It would have been well for modern civilization if the Roman Church had done the same.

In speaking of Christianity, reference is generally made to the Roman Church, partly because its adherents compose the majority of Christendom, partly because

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its demands are the most pretentious, and partly because it has commonly sought to enforce those demands by the civil power. None of the Protestant Churches has ever occupied a position so imperious—none has ever had such wide-spread political influence. For the most part they have been averse to constraint, and except in very few instances their opposition has not passed beyond the exciting of theological odium.

As to Science, she has never sought to ally herself to civil power. She has never attempted to throw odium or inflict social ruin on any human being. She has never subjected any one to mental torment, physical torture, least of all to death, for the purpose of upholding or promoting her ideas. She presents herself unstained by cruelties and crimes. But in the Vatican—we have only to recall the Inquisition—the hands that are now raised in appeals to the Most Merciful are crimsoned. They have been steeped in blood!

There are two modes of historical composition, the artistic and the scientific. The former implies that men give origin to events; it therefore selects some prominent individual, pictures him under a fanciful form, and makes him the hero of a romance. The latter, insisting that human affairs present an unbroken chain, in which each fact is the offspring of some preceding fact, and the parent of some subsequent fact, declares that men do not control events, but that events control men. The former gives origin to compositions, which, however much they may interest or delight us, are but a grade

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above novels; the latter is austere, perhaps even repulsive, for it sternly impresses us with a conviction of the irresistible dominion of law, and the insignificance of human exertions. In a subject so solemn as that to which this book is devoted, the romantic and the popular are altogether out of place. He who presumes to treat of it must fix his eyes steadfastly on that chain of destiny which universal history displays; he must turn with disdain from the phantom impostures of pontiffs and statesmen and kings.

If any thing were needed to show us the untrustworthiness of artistic historical compositions, our personal experience would furnish it. How often do our most intimate friends fail to perceive the real motives of our every-day actions; how frequently they misinterpret our intentions! If this be the case in what is passing before our eyes, may we not be satisfied that it is impossible to comprehend justly the doings of persons who lived many years ago, and whom we have never seen.

In selecting and arranging the topics now to be presented, I have been guided in part by "the Confession" of the late Vatican Council, and in part by the order of events in history. Not without interest will the reader remark that the subjects offer themselves to us now as they did to the old philosophers of Greece. We still deal with the same questions about which they disputed. What is God? What is the soul? What is the world? How is it governed? Have we any standard or criterion of truth? And the thoughtful reader

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will earnestly ask, "Are our solutions of these problems any better than theirs?"

The general argument of this book, then, is as follows:

I first direct attention to the origin of modern science as distinguished from ancient, by depending on observation, experiment, and mathematical discussion, instead of mere speculation, and shall show that it was a consequence of the Macedonian campaigns, which brought Asia and Europe into contact. A brief sketch of those campaigns, and of the Museum of Alexandria, illustrates its character.

Then with brevity I recall the well-known origin of Christianity, and show its advance to the attainment of imperial power, the transformation it underwent by its incorporation with paganism, the existing religion of the Roman Empire. A clear conception of its incompatibility with science caused it to suppress forcibly the Schools of Alexandria. It was constrained to this by the political necessities of its position.

The parties to the conflict thus placed, I next relate the story of their first open struggle; it is the first or Southern Reformation. The point in dispute had respect to the nature of God. It involved the rise of Mohammedanism. Its result was, that much of Asia and Africa, with the historic cities Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Carthage, were wrenched from Christendom, and the doctrine of the Unity of God established in the larger portion of what had been the Roman Empire.

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This political event was followed by the restoration of science, the establishment of colleges, schools, libraries, throughout the dominions of the Arabians. Those conquerors, pressing forward rapidly in their intellectual development, rejected the anthropomorphic ideas of the nature of God remaining in their popular belief, and accepted other more philosophical ones, akin to those that had long previously been attained to in India. The result of this was a second conflict, that respecting the nature of the soul. Under the designation of Averroism, there came into prominence the theories of Emanation and Absorption. At the close of the middle ages the Inquisition succeeded in excluding those doctrines from Europe, and now the Vatican Council has formally and solemnly anathematized them.

Meantime, through the cultivation of astronomy, geography, and other sciences, correct views had been gained as to the position and relations of the earth, and as to the structure of the world; and since Religion, resting itself on what was assumed to be the proper interpretation of the Scriptures, insisted that the earth is the central and most important part of the universe, a third conflict broke out. In this Galileo led the way on the part of Science. Its issue was the overthrow of the Church on the question in dispute. Subsequently a subordinate controversy arose respecting the age of the world, the Church insisting that it is only about six thousand years old. In this she was again overthrown.

The light of history and of science had been gradu-

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ally spreading over Europe. In the sixteenth century the prestige of Roman Christianity was greatly diminished by the intellectual reverses it had experienced, and also by its political and moral condition. It was clearly seen by many pious men that Religion was not accountable for the false position in which she was found, but that the misfortune was directly traceable to the alliance she had of old contracted with Roman paganism. The obvious remedy, therefore, was a return to primitive purity. Thus arose the fourth conflict, known to us as the Reformation—the second or Northern Reformation. The special form it assumed was a contest respecting the standard or criterion of truth, whether it is to be found in the Church or in the Bible. The determination of this involved a settlement of the rights of reason, or intellectual freedom. Luther, who is the conspicuous man of the epoch, carried into effect his intention with no inconsiderable success; and at the close of the struggle it was found that Northern Europe was lost to Roman Christianity.

We are now in the midst of a controversy respecting the mode of government of the world, whether it be by incessant divine intervention, or by the operation of primordial and unchangeable law. The intellectual movement of Christendom has reached that point which Arabism had attained to in the tenth and eleventh centuries; and doctrines which were then discussed are presenting themselves again for review; such are those of Evolution, Creation, Development.

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Offered under these general titles, I think it will be found that all the essential points of this great controversy are included. By grouping under these comprehensive heads the facts to be considered, and dealing with each group separately, we shall doubtless acquire clear views of their inter-connection and their historical succession.

I have treated of these conflicts as nearly as I conveniently could in their proper chronological order, and, for the sake of completeness, have added chapters on—

An examination of what Latin Christianity has done for modern civilization.

A corresponding examination of what Science has done.

The attitude of Roman Christianity in the impending conflict, as defined by the Vatican Council.

The attention of many truth-seeking persons has been so exclusively given to the details of sectarian dissensions, that the long strife, to the history of which these pages are devoted, is popularly but little known. Having tried to keep steadfastly in view the determination to write this work in an impartial spirit, to speak with respect of the contending parties, but never to conceal the truth, I commit it to the considerate judgment of the thoughtful reader.

JOHN WILLIAM DRAPER.

UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK, *December*, 1873.

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