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978-1-108-00451-0 - On the Relation Between Science and Religion

George Combe

Excerpt

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ON THE
RELATION BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE PRESENT STATE OF THE RELATION BETWEEN SCIENCE
AND RELIGION.

THE Reformation in the sixteenth century produced a powerful effect on the European mind. The miracles, precepts, and sublime devotional effusions of the Old and New Testaments, excited, with deep intensity, the religious sentiments of the people, and introduced ardent discussions on temporal and eternal interests, which, unfortunately, were followed by furious and desolating wars. Freedom on earth, and salvation in heaven or perdition in hell, were the mighty topics which then engaged public attention.

In the beginning of the seventeenth century, a generation born and educated under these exciting influences, appeared upon the stage. The Reformation was then consummated, but the duty remained of acting it out in deeds. The new generation had read in the Books of the Old Testament of a people whose king was God; whose national councils were guided by omniscience, and whose enterprises, whether in peace or war, were aided and accomplished by omnipotence employing means altogether apart from the ordinary course of nature. The New Testament presented records of a continued exercise of similar supernatural powers; and the great lesson taught in both seemed to that generation to be, that the power of God was exercised as a shield to protect, and an irresistible influence to lead to success and victory in secular affairs, *those who believed and worshipped aright*, who embraced cordially the doctrines revealed in the sacred volumes, who abjured all self-righteousness and self-reliance, and who threw themselves in perfect confidence and humility on Him as their King, protector, and avenger.

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In the first half of the seventeenth century, the active members of society in England and Scotland embraced these views as principles not only of faith but of practice. With that profound earnestness of purpose which is inspired by sincere conviction of religious truth, they desired to realize in deeds what they professed as faith. As remarked by Thomas Carlyle, that generation "attempted to bring the Divine law of the Bible into actual practice in men's affairs on the earth." In the contests between Cromwell and the Covenanters, we observe both parties claiming to be "the people of God;" both asserting that they were directed by Divine influence, and supported by Divine power, even when in hostile collision with each other. It is necessary only to read attentively Cromwell's letters and speeches, and the contemporary narratives of the Covenanters, to be satisfied of this fact. Each party ascribed its successes to the Divine approval of its conduct and belief, and its calamities to displeasure with its unbelief or other sins. When Cromwell overthrew the Scotch, and "had the execution of them," in other words, the slaughter of them, for many miles in the pursuit, he called it "a sweet mercy," vouchsafed to him by God, to whom he devoutly ascribed the glory. After mentioning his victory at Dunbar, the trophies of which were about "three thousand Scotch slain," "near ten thousand prisoners," "the whole baggage and train taken," with "all their artillery, great and small," he adds, "It is easy to see the Lord hath done this. It would do you good to see and hear our poor foot to go up and down making their boast of God."*

The Covenanters held the same belief; but, somewhat inconsistently, while they confessed that their own religious unworthiness had brought upon them the Divine displeasure, they denied to Cromwell the right to interpret the victory as a manifestation of the Divine approval of *his* faith, principles, and practice:—They endeavoured to represent it as merely "an event;" for which Cromwell rebukes them in the following words:—"You (the men of the Covenant) say that you have not so learned Christ 'as to hang the equity of your cause upon events.' We (for our part) could wish that blindness had not been cast upon your eyes to all those marvellous dispensations which God hath lately wrought in England. But did you not solemnly appeal (to God) and pray? Did not we do so too? And ought not you and we to think, with fear and trembling, of the hand of the great God in this mighty and strange appearance of His, instead of slightly

* Letter XCII., Cromwell to Lenthal, dated "Dunbar, 4th September 1650." (Carlyle's Cromwell, vol. ii. p. 41.)

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calling it an 'event?' Were not both your and our expectations renewed from time to time whilst we waited upon God, to see which way He would manifest himself upon our appeals? And shall we, after all these our prayers, fastings, tears, expectations, and solemn appeals, call these bare 'events?' The Lord pity you."*

While the people of that age entertained these views of the manner of God's administration of secular affairs, they were equally convinced of the supernatural agency of the devil, and with similar earnestness acted on this conviction. They ascribed their sins to Satanic influence on their minds, and attributed to the exercise of Satanic power many of the physical evils under which they suffered. They imagined that this power was exercised by the devil through the instrumentality of human beings, and burned thousands of these supposed agents of the fiend, under the name of witches. This belief lingered among the Scotch people a century later. In February 1743 the "Associate Presbytery" of the Secession Church passed an "Act for renewing the National Covenant;" and among other national sins which they confessed and vowed to renounce is mentioned, "The Repeal of the Penal Statutes against Witchcraft, contrary to the express laws of God, and for which a holy God may be provoked, in a way of righteous judgment, to leave those who are already ensnared to be hardened more and more, and to permit Satan to tempt and seduce others to the same wicked and dangerous snare."

These were the views of God's providence entertained by the religious men of the seventeenth century. Those who were not penetrated by a deep sentiment of religion acted then, as the same class does now, on the views of the order of nature with which their own experience and observation, aided by those of others, had supplied them. They did not trouble themselves with much inquiry whether this order was systematic or incidental, moral, or irrespective of morality; but acted as their views of expediency dictated at the moment. It is with the opinions of the religious and earnest men of that century that we are now principally engaged.

In commenting on that period, Thomas Carlyle observes, in his own quaint style, that "the nobility and gentry of England were then a very strange body of men. The English squire of the seventeenth century clearly appears to have believed in God, not as a figure of speech, but as a very fact, very awful to the heart of the English squire." He adds,

* Letter XCIV., Cromwell to "The Governor of Edinburgh Castle," dated "Edinburgh, 12th September 1650." *Lib. cit.*, vol. ii. p. 65.

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“ We have wandered far away from the ideas which guided us in that century, and, indeed, which had guided us in all preceding centuries ; but of which that century was the ultimate manifestation. We have wandered very far, and must endeavour to return and connect ourselves therewith again.”*

I ask, How shall we return ? This is a grave question, and the answer demands serious consideration.

The grand characteristic of the Jewish dispensation, on which chiefly these views of the Divine government of the world were founded, was, that it was special and supernatural. In the seventeenth century the people possessed very little correct scientific knowledge of the elements, agencies, and laws of inorganic and organic nature. The Scriptures constituted almost the sole storehouse of deep reflection and profound emotion for that age ; and in the absence of scientific knowledge, they fell naturally into the belief that, as the Scriptures were given for guides to human conduct, the same scheme of Providence, physical and moral, which had prevailed in ancient times, must still continue in force. Their conviction on this point appears to have been profound and sincere, and they attempted to act it out in deeds.

But was there no error of apprehension here ? Were they not mistaken in believing that the course of Providence was the same in their day as it is described to have been among the Jews in the times of the Scripture records ? A brief consideration of their actions, and the results of them, will perhaps throw some light on this question.

They assumed that the supernatural agencies which Scripture told them had been manifested under the Jewish dispensation might still be evoked, and would, in some form or other, be exerted for their guidance and support, if they appealed to God, and called for them in a right spirit. Hence, instead of studying and conforming to the laws of nature, they resorted to fastings, humiliations, praise, and prayers, as practical means not only of gaining battles and establishing political power, but of obtaining Divine direction in all the serious affairs of life. Their *theology* and their science, so far as they had any science, were in harmony. They did not recognize an established and regular order of nature as the means through which God governs the world, and to which He requires man to conform his conduct ; but regarded every element of physical nature, and every faculty of the human mind, as under the administration of a special and supernatural providence.

* *Lib. cit.*, vol. i. pp. 3 and 87.

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They viewed God as wielding all these elements arbitrarily, according to His will; *and on that will they believed they could operate by religious faith and observances.* In principle, their view of the nature of the Divine administration of the world was similar to that entertained by the Greeks and Romans. Homer's priests and heroes offered supplications to the gods for direct interference in favour of their schemes, and their prayers are represented to have been occasionally successful in eliciting supernatural aid. Cromwell, and the men of his age, with more true and exalted conceptions of God, believed in His still administering the affairs of men, not by means of a regular order of causes and effects, but by direct exercises of special power.

I should say that in this condition of mind they were inspired by pure and exalted religious emotions, but misled by great errors in theology. It was under the influence of such views of the Divine administration, that the existing standards of the Church of England, and of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, were framed; and hence perhaps arose the very meagre recognition of the order of God's providence in the course of nature, as *religious* truth, and as a system of practical instruction for the guidance of human conduct, which characterizes them.

After that age, however, the human understanding, by a profounder and more exact study of nature, obtained a different view of the course of Providence in the administration of temporal affairs. Science revealed a system in which every object, animate and inanimate, appears to be endowed with peculiar qualities and agencies, which it preserves and exerts with undeviating regularity, as long as its circumstances continue unchanged; and in which each object is adapted, with wisdom and benevolence, to the others, and all to man. In the words of the Rev. Mr Sedgwick, science unfolded a fixed order of creation, so clear and intelligible that "we are justified in saying that, in the moral as in the physical world, God seems to govern by general laws."—"I am not now," says he, "contending for the doctrine of moral necessity; but I do affirm, that the moral government of God is by general laws, and *that it is our bounden duty to study those laws, and, as far as we can, to turn them to account.*"*

Here, then, an important revolution has been effected in the views of profound thinkers, in regard to the mode in which Providence administers this world. Science has banished from their minds belief in the exercise, by the Deity, in our

* A Discourse on the Studies of the University (of Cambridge). By Adam Sedgwick, M.A., &c., 3d edition.

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day, of special acts of supernatural power, as a means of influencing human affairs, and it has presented a systematic order of nature, which man may study, comprehend, and follow, as a guide to his practical conduct. In point of fact, the new faith has already partially taken the place of the old. In everything physical, men now act more on the belief that this world's administration is conducted on the principle of an established order of nature, in which objects and agencies are presented to man for his study,—are to some extent placed under his control,—and are wisely calculated to promote his instruction and enjoyment. Some individuals adopt the same view in regard even to moral affairs. The creed of the modern man of science is well expressed by Mr Sedgwick in the following words:—"If there be a superintending Providence, and if His will be manifested by general laws, operating both on the physical and moral world, *then must a violation of these laws be a violation of His will, and be pregnant with inevitable misery.* Nothing can, in the end, be expedient for man, *except it be subordinate to those laws the Author of Nature has thought fit to impress on his moral and physical creation.*" Other clergymen also embrace the same view. The Rev. Dr Thomas Guthrie, in his pamphlet, "A Plea for Ragged Schools," observes, that "They commit a grave mistake, who forget that injury as inevitably results from flying in the face of a moral or mental, as of a physical law."

This revolution in practical belief, however, is only partial; and the great characteristic of the religious mind at the present day is its aversion to the doctrine of an intelligible, moral, and practical system of government revealed by God to man in the order of nature for the guidance of his conduct, and that correct expositions of this system possess the character of *religious truths*. This unbelief in an intelligible and practically useful Divine government in nature affects our religion, our literature, and our conduct. I put the following questions in all earnestness:—Are the fertility of the soil, the health of the body, the prosperity of individuals and of nations—in short, the great secular interests of mankind—now governed by special acts of supernatural power? Science answers that they are not. Are they, then, governed by any regular and comprehensible natural laws? If they are not, then is this world a theatre of anarchy, and consequently of atheism; it is a world without the practical manifestation of a God. If, on the other hand, such laws exist as science proclaims, they must be of Divine institution, and worthy of all reverence; and I ask, In the standards of what church, from the pulpits of what sect, and in the schools of what deno-

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mination of Christians, are these laws taught to either the young or old as religious truths of Divine authority, and as practical guides for conduct in this world's affairs? If we do not now live under a special supernatural government of the world, but under a government by natural laws, and if these laws are not studied, honoured, and obeyed as God's laws, are we not actually a nation without a religion in harmony with the true order of Providence, and therefore without a religion adapted to practical purposes?

The answer will probably be that this argument is infidelity; but, with all deference, I reply that the denial of a regular, intelligible, wisely adapted, and divinely appointed order of nature, as a guide to human conduct in this world, is practical atheism; while the acknowledgment of the existence of such an order, accompanied by the nearly universal neglect of teaching and obeying its requirements, is real infidelity, disrespectful to God, and injurious to the best interests of man. We cannot consistently believe that God answers the *prayers* of the Mahommedans, Hindoos, Persians, and Chinese, for we deny the soundness of their faith; nor that, as in the case of the ancient Jews, He exercises a special providence for their guidance to temporal prosperity, and for their consolation in affliction and in the hour of death: and yet, if God really governs the world, his laws must apply to these nations as well as to ourselves.

The churches which have at all recognised the order of nature, have attached to it a lower character than truly belongs to it. They do not recognise it as religious, *i.e.*, as an administration of Divine origin, deserving of reverential obedience. They have treated science and secular knowledge chiefly as objects of curiosity and sources of gain, and have given to actions intelligently founded on them the character of prudence. So humble has been their estimate of the importance of science, that they have not systematically called in the influence of the religious sentiments to hallow, elevate, and enforce the teachings of nature. In most of their schools the elucidation of the relations of science to human conduct is omitted altogether, and catechisms of human invention usurp its place.

Society, meantime, including the Calvinistic world itself, proceeds in its secular enterprises on the basis of natural science, so far as it has been able to discover it. If practical men send a ship to sea, they endeavour to render it staunch and strong, and to place in it an expert crew and an able commander, as conditions of safety, dictated by their conviction of the order of nature in flood and storm. If they are sick, they resort to a physician to restore them to health,

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according to the ordinary laws of organization. If they suffer famine from wet seasons, they drain their lands; and so forth. All these practices and observances are taught and enforced by men of science and the secular press, as measures of practical prudence; but few churches recognise the order of nature on which they are founded, as an object of reverence, and a becoming subject of religious instruction.

On the contrary, from the days of Galileo to the present time, religious professors have too often made war on science, on scientific teachers, and on the order of nature, and many of them still adhere, as far as the reason and light of the public mind will permit them, to their old doctrine of an inherent disorder reigning in the natural world. That disorder prevails is undeniable; but science proclaims that it is to a great extent owing to man's ignorance of his own nature, and that of the external world, and to his neglect of their relations. Many theologians do not recognise such views, but proceed as if human affairs were, somehow or other, still, in our day, influenced by special manifestations of Divine power. Mr Plumptre is reported, in the *Times*, to have said, in his place in Parliament, while discussing the famine in Ireland in 1846-7, through the failure of the potato crop, that "He did not mean to enter at large into the question where the guilt which had drawn down upon them this tremendous dispensation lay, whether that guilt lay with the people or the rulers; but he could not help expressing what he considered to be a well-founded opinion, that the rulers of this country had deeply offended, by some acts which they had recently placed on the statute-book, and which, in his belief, were calculated to bring down the Divine displeasure on the land; but into this he would not enter."

It is conjectured that this Honourable Gentleman had in view the grant to the Roman Catholic College of Maynooth, or the repeal of the corn-laws, as the "act" which, in his opinion, was calculated to bring down the Divine displeasure on the land. Be the acts what they may, the speech implied that, in his opinion, sin in the people, or in their rulers, had led to a special deflection of physical nature from the ordinary course, in order to produce a famine, for the punishment, not of the special offenders, but of men, women, and children promiscuously, many of whom had no control over the transactions. These notions would be unworthy of notice, except that they are still embraced as religion by large numbers of our people. In the olden time, eclipses were viewed as portentous announcements of Heaven's wrath against the sins of men; but the discovery of unswerving physical laws, by

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which the motions of the heavenly bodies are regulated, and in virtue of which the certain occurrence of eclipses can be predicted, has expunged that superstition from the civilized mind. Nevertheless the same blind love of the wonderful and mysterious, which led our ancestors to quail before a natural and normal obscuration of the sun, leads the unenlightened mind in our day to see in sin the causes of such visitations as cholera and agricultural blights, instead of looking for them in physical conditions presented to our understandings as problems to be solved, and to be then turned to account in avoiding future evils. Examples are frequently occurring of this conflict between the views of men who acknowledge a practical natural Providence, and those who do not.

Archbishop Whately, in his "Address to the Clergy and other Members of the Established Church on the use and abuse of the present occasion" (the famine in Ireland in 1846-47), says—

"But advantage has been taken of the existing calamity to inculcate, with a view to the conversion of persons whom I believe to be in error, doctrines which I cannot but think utterly unsound, and of dangerous tendency, by arguments which will not stand the test of calm and rational examination. There are some who represent the present famine (as indeed they did the cholera some years back) as a Divine judgment sent for the punishment of what they designate as national sins, especially the degree of toleration and favour shewn to the members of the Church of Rome. Now this procedure, the attributing to such and such causes the supposed Divine wrath, is likely, when those of a different creed from our own are thus addressed, to be by some of them rejected as profane presumption, and by others *retorted*. When once men begin to take upon them the office of inspired prophets, and to pronounce boldly what are the counsels of the Most High, it is as easy to do this on the one side as on the other. Roman Catholics who are told that a pestilence or a famine are sent as judgments on the land for the toleration of Romanism, may contend that, on the contrary, it is the Protestantism that is the national sin. And without the evidence of a sensible miracle to appeal to, neither party can expect to convince the other.

"When Israel was afflicted with a famine, in the days of Elijah, on account of the idolatry of those of the people who had offended the Lord by worshipping Baal, the idolaters might have contended that the judgment was sent by Baal against the worshippers of Jehovah, *had not* the prophet expressly denounced that judgment *beforehand*, and foretold both the commencement, and afterwards the termination, of the drought, besides calling down the fire from heaven upon the altar. This it is that enables us to pronounce that that famine was a Divine judgment sent for the sin of Israel, and for *what* sin. And it is the same with the many similar cases that are recorded in Scripture. That Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed on account of their abominable wickedness *we know*, because Scripture tells us so. And that Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead for tempting the Spirit of God *we know*, and all present knew, because the Apostle Peter announced beforehand their fate, and declared the crime which called it

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down. But for any uninspired man to take upon him to make similar declarations respecting any one of his neighbours who may die suddenly, or concerning any city that may be destroyed by a volcano or an earthquake, is as irrational and presumptuous as it is uncharitable and unchristian."

Another example is presented by a letter addressed by Lord Palmerston, as Home Secretary, to the Presbytery of Edinburgh, in answer to their inquiry whether he intended to advise the Queen to order a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer, to be held in Scotland, in order to supplicate Divine Providence to stay the cholera which afflicted the people in 1854:—

"The Maker of the universe has established certain laws of nature for the planet in which we live, and the weal or woe of mankind depends upon the observance or the neglect of those laws. One of those laws connects health with the absence of those gaseous exhalations which proceed from over-crowded human beings, or from decomposing substances, whether animal or vegetable; and those same laws render sickness the almost inevitable consequence of exposure to those noxious influences. But it has at the same time pleased Providence to place it within the power of man to make such arrangements as will prevent or disperse such exhalations, so as to render them harmless; and it is the duty of man to attend to those laws of nature, and to exert the faculties which Providence has thus given to man for his own welfare.

"The recent visitation of cholera, which has for the moment been mercifully checked, is an awful warning given to the people of this realm, that they have too much neglected their duty in this respect, and that those persons with whom it rested to purify towns and cities, and to prevent or remove the causes of disease, have not been sufficiently active in regard to such matters. Lord Palmerston would, therefore, suggest that the best course which the people of this country can pursue to deserve that the further progress of the cholera should be stayed, will be to employ the interval that will elapse between the present time and the beginning of next spring in planning and executing measures by which those portions of their towns and cities which are inhabited by the poorest classes, and which, from the nature of things, must most need purification and improvement, may be freed from those causes and sources of contagion, which, if allowed to remain, will infallibly breed pestilence, and be fruitful in death, in spite of all the prayers and fastings of a united but inactive nation. When man has done his utmost for his own safety, then is the time to invoke the blessing of Heaven to give effect to his exertions."

The majority of the Presbytery expressed great dissatisfaction with this communication, and refused to acknowledge that cleansing the town would be a becoming substitute for a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer, as a means of averting cholera. The civic rulers of Edinburgh, however, acted on it, and with very beneficial effects; for the disease fell far more lightly on the city on this occasion than at the previous visitation in 1831.

It is impossible that the public mind can advance in sound and self-consistent practical principles of action in this world's