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978-1-108-04423-3 - Essay on Superstition: Being an Inquiry into the Effects of Physical Influence on the Mind in the Production of Dreams, Visions, Ghosts, and Other Supernatural Appearances

William Newnham

Excerpt

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## ESSAY ON SUPERSTITION.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### *Introductory Remarks.*

BEFORE inviting the attention of my readers to a series of illustrations on the manifold and varied forms in which the offspring of superstition cross our path, I must claim their indulgence should I sometimes impugn the truth of any long-cherished prejudices; and, especially, should I frequently refer to a *bodily cause, effects* which some of them may have attributed to a purely spiritual agency: and therefore I think it necessary to prefix to this inquiry, the principles upon which it is undertaken.

I. The cause of true religion always loses ground, in proportion as it is associated with any system of irrational belief.

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II. The cause of true religion always gains an accession of influence, and obtains an extension of its benefits, in proportion as the faith of its disciples is supported by knowledge, enlightened by the torch of scientific research, and chastened by the delicacy of true taste.

III. The honour of God is vindicated, and the kingdom of Christ is enlarged; the faith of the humble and the sincere is confirmed; the prejudices of such as are satisfied with this world's wisdom are subdued; the fears of the ignorant are superseded; and the hope and confidence of the just are supported by being placed on a basis of scientific and rational explanation, rather than on the fears of ignorance, or on a measure of belief which was never designed for a revelation addressed to God's rational creatures.

It would contribute to the happiness and welfare of mankind, if the sincerely religious would condescend to be aided in their inquiries by the light of true science; and if scientific investigators would, in the conscious humility of Christian feeling, submit their feeble judgment to the guidance of the Holy Spirit: so that the highest knowledge might be adorned by the lesser, but not trifling, beauties of intellect; while the Colossus of literature might be

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rendered estimable by subordinating his stores of wisdom to the promotion of genuine piety in himself and others.

These propositions require a little farther development ; and *first*, the cause of true religion in the world always loses ground, in proportion as it is associated with any system of irrational belief. Reflection teaches us, that thus it must be ; for since revealed religion was designed for God's most perfect work, and as it was destined to restore man to the image of God, in order that he might show forth the glory of his Creator and Redeemer ; it is manifest that this object will be accomplished only in proportion as he resembles his Maker. And since perfect knowledge forms one of the attributes of the Divine character, his creatures will be like him in this respect, only as the clouds of ignorance have been chased away by the influence of the Holy Spirit, upon the exertion of those talents which man has received ; as the undefined forms of twilight are rendered visible in all their proportions by the result of increasing acquaintance ; as his hopes are enlarged by being placed on a firmer basis ; as his affections are invigorated by discoveries of the infinite care and goodness, and love of his Heavenly Father ; as his intellectual powers are

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strengthened and matured by constant exercise on a wider and a more successful field of inquiry and observation ; and as he is enabled to explain phenomena, and account for circumstances which have been termed supernatural, and to know the wise and rational agency of that good Providence which upholds and governs all things by the word of the Divine power.

*Experience* confirms this award of reflection. Let us cast our eyes upon the Roman Catholic devotee ; let us look to his standard maxim of “ I believe, because it is incredible ; ” let us contemplate the homage which he offers to his priest,—not on the score of influence arising from superior sacredness of character,—from intellectual and moral worth, or in return for the instruction he receives ; for all these may be wanting : he may be grossly and openly profligate, profoundly ignorant, and wholly careless of the real wants of his flock ; yet homage, (might I not almost say *adoration* ?) is yielded to his ministerial character as a confessor, and as possessing the power of granting or withholding absolution, rescuing his supplicant from the torments of purgatory, or suffering him to experience its prolonged punishments. Let us advert to his belief in the power of the

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priest to forgive sins, upon being paid for it, although it is declared that none can forgive sins except God alone; let us contemplate the catalogue of faults which includes murder, theft, adultery, and the like, as admitting of pecuniary atonement; nay, farther, let us estimate the prospective indulgence which may be obtained to commit sin in future, upon a scale proportioned to the wealth of the individuals; let us look to the mummery of his religion, to its imposing ceremonial, and its dread of the circulation of the Bible; let us accurately weigh its favourite doctrine of *transubstantiation*, and of the real presence; its constant hostility to the diffusion of intellectual culture; its claim to infallibility for all its decisions, and its permanent substitution of a belief in the church for faith in Christ, and of penances and pilgrimages for holiness of life; and then let us see whether all the loveliness and spirituality, and almost all the influence of Christianity, be not lost by its degrading association with that which is irrational. Witness again the effect of this system upon the will and upon the intellect: man loses his free-agency and individual accountability; his mind is grasped by the terrors of superstition, as by a chain of adamant; he has no will but that of his priest, and no occa-

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sion for the exercise of judgment, or of the other intellectual faculties; he is fast bound by the thralldom of the most enthralling power; his conscience is directed by the interest of his spiritual pastor, and the fear of his resentment, rather than the love of his Heavenly Father, and the desire of obedience to his commands. Effects, similar in kind to these, though not in degree, are produced wherever a spirit of Roman Catholicism is abroad throughout the world, and under every possible disguise; that is, whenever any thing short of the pure and simple evangelical piety of the Bible is substituted as the ground of hope, or the rule of conduct; whenever any irrational attachment to forms and ceremonies is placed in the room of the worship of the Most High God.

If it were necessary to accumulate proofs of this position, they might readily be found in the system of religious belief of the Mohammedan—in the endless and sensual mythology of the Hindoo—or in the still less enlightened notions of the North American Indian; all tending to show, that in proportion as man departs from that which is reasonable, he becomes the willing victim of ignorance, the debased slave of his passions, and still further and further

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alienated from the God of his life; experience thus affording the strongest confirmation of our position.

II. The cause of true religion always gains an accession of influence, and obtains an extension of its benefits, in proportion as the faith of its disciples is supported by knowledge, enlightened by the torch of scientific research, and chastened by the delicacy of true taste. Real Christianity always gains by inquiry: once get a man to think over his state, and the suitableness of religion to his wants; once enlist his understanding in the pursuit, and let him be truly in earnest in asking what is his duty towards God and his neighbour; and there is every hope for him. The great mischief is, that he will not think; that he will not consider; and that he will be contented with a few irrational services, placing these in the room of principled obedience.

Prejudice is diminished by the association of the understanding with religious belief. While the man of science and intellectual attainment can persuade himself that religion consists in a certain influence upon the passions and affections, exerted he knows not how, and by a mysterious agency, the very existence of which he almost hesitates to acknowledge, he considers

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it only as the heritage of weak minds, and designed to govern the ignorant: but when he sees its doctrines embraced upon conviction, by individuals of whose intellectual capacity he can entertain no doubt; and when he perceives that such minds are only energised in the pursuit of knowledge, and refined, and purified; when the powers of the judgment are confessedly deepened, and the benevolent affections are expanded; when argument is called in to the defence of their opinions, and all the resources of learning are placed in requisition to prove the reality, as well as the reasonable ground, of their convictions;—he is assured that religion is not that contracting study which he once thought it, but that it possesses the power even of ennobling the mind; and thus the veil of prejudice is blown aside, the film of visual delusion is dissipated, and at least the soil is prepared for the reception of Divine truth.

Again; learning, and the majesty of cultivated mind, exert an astonishing influence over popular opinion, and must therefore add strength to the cause of Christianity, in proportion to the extent of such agency. And this will operate both in the way of precept and example: the opinion of the reputed wise is quoted by the majority of those who think not for them-



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selves ; their powers of persuasion are very great ; and their example is bounded only by the extent to which it can be seen.

The employment of these talents and researches upon Biblical Criticism has not been thrown away ; many seeming incongruities have been explained ; many difficulties have been removed ; light has beamed upon that which was obscure ; the appearance of contradiction has been reconciled ; and the harmony of the Scriptures has been fully established : the objections of the infidel have been answered ; and while it has been allowed that there are mysteries in religion far beyond the comprehension of a finite capacity, it has also been shown that the same law attaches to all the productions of nature ; and precisely because the human mind, formed originally with capacities to comprehend the rationale of its own phenomena, has lost that power by the debasing influence to which it has been subjected. It has been shown, too, that the difficulties of infidelity involve an exercise of belief far greater than the mysteries of religion, and monstrous in proportion to the cheerless annihilation with which they are connected : the doubts of feeble and unconvinced but sincere inquirers have been chased away, like the sum-

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mer's mist which has still lingered on the crest of our hills, till it has vanished before the light and heat of the full-born day: and the faith and hope, and love, and joy of the Christian have been deepened in their hold upon his heart, while they have expanded into all that is virtuous in principle, all that is pure and benevolent in feeling, all that is lovely and excellent in conduct.

Moreover, Christianity will derive an accession of strength from the delicacy of true taste: its influence upon the mind will be, to give it a more extensive hold upon the sympathies of others; while to the man of simple literary taste, it will come recommended and adorned with its genuine qualities, instead of being associated with that which is opposed to its real nature; and thus its agency will be extended both above and below, from the giant of literature to the least expanded intellect among the sincere and simple-hearted, the poor and illiterate. Besides, there will be developed a delicate perception, by which the finer shades of moral beauty will be seized and appropriated; an acquaintance with mind, and its powers and operations, will be widened; the removal of prejudice will unveil the wide field of mental research; all that is sublime