

WHAT IS RELIGION?

A VINDICATION OF FREETHOUGHT

By C. N.

ANNOTATED BY

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WITH AN APPENDIX ON

*HYLO-IDEALISM; OR, THE BRAIN THEORY OF MIND AND
MATTER, THE CREED OF PHYSICS, PHYSIC
AND PHILOSOPHY.*

'Take the Godhead into your own being,
And he abdicates his heavenly throne.'—

SCHILLER, *Life and the Ideal.*

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LIFE AND MIND:

ON THE BASIS OF MODERN MEDICINE.

By ROBERT LEWINS, M.D.

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'Dr. Lewins' tractate is an attempt to formulate a consistent and rational theory of existence from a materialistic point of view. He puts his case with clearness and ability.—*Westminster Review*, October 1873.

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WHAT IS RELIGION?



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And He abdicates His heavenly throne.'

SCHILLER'S *Life and the Ideal*.¹

To exponents of a rational system of thought and practice, suited to the spirit and requirements of our age, and freed from the anachronisms of pre-scientific times, no question can be more important than that which stands at the head of this paper. Its meaning is as follows:—Has religion been a supernatural, formative influence, moulding the lives of men and the history of the world, and standing stedfast amid the changes of which it was the primal cause; or is it a product of the human brain itself, reacting upon the destinies of its creator, yet modified by every variation in his mode of life, and serving as a sensitive index by which the state of his circumstances and character may at any time be determined? The last clause of this question needs, indeed, some revision, for it may more fitly be inquired whether religion has had any practical existence at all in national or public affairs for the last two hundred years. For the present, however, we will simply ask: 'Can there be any genuine division between the spiritual and the secular? Can the former live if dissociated from the latter? Has it any pure and irresistible force which it can oppose

¹ In his correspondence, the immortal Suabian poet and thinker dwells much on the great philosophical significance of this *Lehr-gedicht*, as he terms it, under its original title, in the *Horen* for 1795, of the 'Realm of Shadows' [Phenomena].—R. L.

to mere carnal weapons, whether these be the pen or the sword?' John Stuart Mill has said that the Church of Rome has befriended human freedom by the 'separation, unknown to antiquity, between temporal and spiritual authority. . . . The separation between temporal and spiritual is founded on the idea that material force has no right, no hold, over the mind, over conviction, over truth.' This, at first sight, seems plausible; but the confusion of thought soon becomes evident when we investigate the means by which 'spiritual authority' was enforced, and the manner in which the so-called separation was carried out. The fair ideal of an empire of conscience, upheld by no baser forces than righteousness and truth, will melt into thin air when we find that the Church emancipated herself from the control of the State only to usurp its power. The Church was no pure immaterial essence, inspiring the souls of men and ruling them by divine love or divine law, but a very tangible political agent, a diplomatist, a warrior, and, in short, the fitting earthly representative of a monarchical deity. Here was no separation, but a partial transference of function; for what was lost by the secular was gained by the ecclesiastical State. The ends to be obtained were somewhat altered; the means used remained the same. After the first young enthusiasm for Christianity had passed away, the threat of hell and the promise of heaven ceased to exercise any general or paramount influence over the minds of men, unless supported by some more mundane force; and when a band of heretics dared to assert the supremacy of conscience and conviction, they were brought to their right mind, not by argument or persuasion, not by empty anathemas, but by fire, sword, and famine. Spiritual authority separated from temporal is the law without the magistrate. In theory the two may be dissociated; in practice they are ever one. Influence, inspiration, or gentle guidance can only be exercised when there is substantial harmony between the leader and the led; while the very

word 'authority' implies the possibility of resistance, and, therefore, the possibility of its forcible suppression.¹

The career of Gregory VII., in whom were incarnated the ambition, the intellect, and the piety of Romanism in its most glorious days, aptly illustrates the dependence of religion upon the temporal power, and its utter impotence when deprived of all save its own proper resources. Dean Milman eloquently describes the ideas which inspired that stern yet politic reformer of the Roman hierarchy: 'The first, the avowed object of Gregory's pontificate was the absolute independence of the clergy, of the Pope, of the great prelates throughout Latin Christendom down to the lowest functionary whose person was to become sacred; that independence under which lurked the undisguised pretensions to superiority. His remote and somewhat more indistinct vision was the foundation of a vast spiritual authority in the person of the Pope, who was to rule mankind by the consentient but subordinate authority of the clergy throughout the world. For this end the clergy were to become still more completely a separate, inviolable caste, their property equally sacred with their persons. Each in his separate sphere, the Pope above all and comprehending all, was to be sovereign arbiter of all disputes; to hold in his hands the supreme mediation in questions of war and peace; to adjudge contested successions to kingdoms; to be a great feudal lord, to whom other kings became beneficiaries. His own arms were to be chiefly spiritual; but the temporal power was to be always ready to execute the ecclesiastical behest against the ungodly rebels who might revolt from its authority; nor did the Church refuse alto-

¹ Of course, I do not here include such ideas as the 'authority of tradition,' 'of custom,' etc., which imply merely that influence of our environment from which it is so hard to free ourselves, but which can exercise no compulsion upon an independent mind and a strong will. This dead-weight is essentially different from that active and resistless control necessary for the mental or moral government of a community.