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# The Freethought Review.

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## THEOLOGY AND TRUTH.

"In the present age," says Mill in his admirable essay on "Liberty"—"which has been described as 'destitute of faith, but terrified at scepticism'—in which people feel sure, not so much that their opinions are true, as that they should not know what to do without them—the claims of an opinion to be protected from public attack are rested not so much on its truth, as on its importance to society." He then goes on to argue, that "the usefulness of an opinion is itself a matter of opinion," and that "the truth of an opinion is part of its utility," and that "in the opinion, not of bad men, but of the best men, no belief which is contrary to truth can really be useful," and he continues: "Those who are on the side of received opinions, never fail to take advantage of this plea; you do not find them handling the question of utility as if it could be completely abstracted from that of truth; on the contrary, it is above all, because their doctrine is 'the truth,' that the knowledge or the belief of it is held to be so indispensable." Against whatever good Christianity may have done in the world must be set this evil among many, that coming with bribes and threats, it has made the great bulk of civilised mankind careless about truth *as truth*, and only careful to hold those opinions which seem personally pleasant. Other theological systems have no doubt had a similar effect in all ages and among all nations, but in none of them has the human intellect and conscience been so persistently perverted in this respect. In our day it is mainly to science, and the spread of political freedom, that we owe the emancipation of the human mind and any such "veracity" as exists among the mass of the people in any community. It is true that the Churches recognise truthfulness as an important moral virtue, but how rarely do preachers or orthodox writers insist upon the duty of looking facts in the face and forming our opinions according to the evidence. On the contrary, every endeavour is made by them to induce in the minds of their hearers or readers that emotional state in which purely intellectual propositions which should be examined critically, if the attainment of truth were the object, are passively accepted, and what pretend to be the evidences become the objects of belief. In the Catholic Church, as Cardinal Newman has lately reminded us, miracles are regarded as "doctrinal facts, that is, they are believed on the authority of the Church, and though this is not avowedly the case in the Protestant Churches, it is so practically. This is conspicuous in the Bishop of Peterborough's "Discourses," which have been much relied on as furnishing a complete answer to Freethinkers. The main objection to this kind of argument is that it proves too much. We have only to substitute the name of some other creed in the "Discourses" and their logic is equally sound for those who hold it. At the same time the Bishop is careful not to abandon the power of using theological threats, and says "that Christianity does warn men of certain penalties, heavy and grievous penalties, if they do not believe what Christ says," but operative as this argument is, it is usually kept in the background, for men who are beginning to be ashamed of the English "blasphemy laws," which, as Mr Justice Stephen has demonstrated, are founded on "the principle of persecution," shrink from transferring them from earth to heaven. Yet there can be no doubt that the Churches would have but little hold over men's minds did they not maintain, as the Bishop

of Peterborough puts it, that "Christianity is 'authoritative teaching, accompanied by threats of penalties.'" Probably every religious creed that ever existed held out threats of punishment for disbelief in some form or other, but it is clear that the punishment can only be incurred if the creed is true, and it is just at this point that the Bishop's argument, which attempts to draw a parallel between natural and supernatural penalties, breaks down. While Christianity says believe or suffer, nature says find out the truth or suffer, and nature, in all cases speaking by experience, says the way to find out the truth is not to believe without evidence but to search for proof. With nature as with science, to use Professor Huxley's words, "blind faith is the one unpardonable sin." Nature has taught the man of science "to believe in 'justification, not by faith but by verification.'"

It would certainly not add to the confidence reposed by the public in the decisions of our Courts of law, if the presiding Judge were to begin the proceedings by indicating what, in his opinion, the verdict should be, and assure the jury that imprisonment and torture would be their lot if they gave a different one. Yet this is practically the position taken up by orthodoxy when it condescends to argue at all, with the additional precaution of employing counsel on one side and subjecting him to similar penalties. In these circumstances the argument from authority is weakened to the utmost. The judgment of those who have really candidly investigated a complex subject ought properly to carry great weight, but of what value is an opinion which has been converted to testimony, and reduced to a minimum. Unlike scientific conclusions, even the rough and ready conclusions known as those of common sense, it has not been arrived at by any application of thought to reality at all. It is but the sickly growth of an industry protected from the open competition of the market. Directly its votaries dare to think for themselves they differ from their brethren, till, in increasingly numerous instances, the conclusions of theological experts, as to the meaning and origin of Christianity, and even as to the truth of Theism, become wide as the poles asunder. Men of the world usually regard supernatural religion as at best a respectable superstition and a useful auxiliary to the police force, which, as it does not interfere with them, they are willing to let alone. With them as with the so-called religious world, truth is a matter of comparative indifference. On different grounds they seem to have come to much the same conclusion. In each case the habit of mind thus indicated is distinctly immoral if morality means that mode of thought and conduct which conduces most to the health and consequent happiness of the social organism. The enormous influence for good which an earnest regard for truth, apart from what John Locke calls "by-ends," would have if it were once generally diffused is obvious. In philosophy, religion, politics, and social life, the mischief done by the prevailing want of veracity is incalculable. Is it unfair to attribute much of this to a theology which cultivates credulity as a virtue, and stigmatises doubt as a crime?

R.P.

## Reviews.

*The Creed of a Modern Agnostic:* By Richard Bithell, B.Sc., Ph.D., London. George Routledge and Sons, 1883.

Agnosticism, or a belief in the Unknowable, has had as large a measure of success for the time as most of the popular beliefs. As a pure negation it has appealed only to the cultured; in the quiet walks of philosophy it finds its home, where it is accepted as the final resting place of minds disturbed with doubt—the one safe generalisation which will not be upset by new discoveries. But the safety only remains to its votaries so long as they refrain from affirming anything. Mr. Herbert Spencer has gone out of his depth, as it appears to us, by predicating an Infinite and Eternal Energy, and his boldness and daring appear to be shared