

amining all that has been written and said *for* and *against* the Christian faith.

I contend, then, that since Christianity *may* be true (which is all that I ask the infidel to allow); that since, it true, its behests are of everlasting moment to every one; that since, irreverence and ridicule are conditions inconsistent with the very nature of Christian opinions, and incompatible with their just action *as opinions*, it is the right and the duty of the State, not by *infringing* upon liberty of opinion, but on the contrary, in *pursuance* of it, and for securing it, to punish the licentious scoffer, and declare blasphemy a crime.

Let me, in conclusion of this view of the question, remind you of the touching language of Lord Erskine in *Williams' case*. Speaking of the blasphemous publication, "*Paine's Age of Reason*," he says,—"It strikes at the best, and sometimes, alas! the only refuge and consolation amidst the troubles and afflictions of the world. The poor and humble, whom it affects to pity, may be stabbed to the heart by it. They have more occasion for firm hopes beyond the grave than the rich and prosperous, who have other comforts to render life delightful. I can conceive a distressed, but virtuous man surrounded by his children looking up to him for bread, when he has none to give them; sinking under the last day's labour, and unequal to the next; yet still (supported by confidence in the hour when all tears shall be wiped from the eyes of affliction) bearing the burden laid upon him by a mysterious Providence which he adores, and anticipating with exultation, the revealed promises of his Creator, when he shall be greater than the greatest, and happier than the happiest of mankind. What a change in such a mind might be wrought by such a merciless publication!"

Another consideration which more properly belongs to this line of argument, than to the succeeding one, though perhaps in strictness to neither, arises from the particular circumstance that the great majority of people in this country profess the Christian religion. As individuals, they being Christians, cannot but acknowledge the duty of holding in veneration God and the Bible. Now, the question which I would ask is, whether they are released from this obligation because they have aggregated themselves into a state—because they are a corporation, and not units? It is, of course, conceded, that all the members of the corporation are not Christians by profession; and those I need hardly say, who are not such, we do not address in this argument. Further still, I admit that, if it were a question of *prohibiting* or *enforcing* opinions, then against those rejecting them we could make no use of the fact that the majority are Christians. But, persecution and intolerance, which are no weapons of Christianity, being out of the case, what answer is there to the suggestion that the same duty rests upon the aggregate of Christians which is acknowledged to bind them individually? How can their association in the same community with unbelievers exonerate them from performing the duty which rests upon themselves as Christians, and the performance of which, by the hypothesis, involves no breach of the just liberty of the dissentients. How can the mass who accept the Divine injunction, "at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow," allow a public and (what they must admit to be) a profane desecration of that name to go unrebuked, and that too under the tacit sanction of their own laws, merely because there are some *allied* with them in the State who *disavow* the Christian injunction, but whose liberty of opinion is not infringed by enforcing it?

Let me now proceed to those considerations which are of a mixed character, and represent *worldly* rather than *religious* interests; *secular* rather than *religious* considerations. Is the State entitled to repress blasphemy upon the basis of a foregone conclusion, that atheism or infidelity is publicly pernicious, apart from any consideration of the precise nature of Christianity?

I shall here assume (what no doubt has been denied) that some opinions may be treated as necessary to civilization; and that as regards the State, so long as there is no persecution, the usefulness or expediency of particular opinions, and not their truth merely, may be taken into consideration. It cannot be necessary when a given emergency presents itself, and the State must, in that emergency, act one way or the other, that the State should know, with infallible certainty, that its opinions on the abstract question are right. But then it is said, when we claim to look at expediency or usefulness, that even the usefulness of an opinion is itself matter of opinion! What then? Is the State to *stand still*, and *do nothing*, in all matters that can be deemed *matters of opinion*, because the truth or usefulness of the opinion may be debated? It would be idle to treat such a contention as entitled to any serious attention, were it not that such a notion seems to be countenanced by recent writers of great ability.

Now, what I am contending for is, that the state may adopt and act upon the opinion that Atheism is publicly and nationally pernicious—that when Atheism assumes the form of blasphemy it may be punished—and that, so to treat it, involves no violation of true liberty of opinion. The answer is, that the nation, *i.e.*, the majority, cannot, without assuming infallibility, be sure that Atheism is *not right*. Supposing this to be granted, is it meant that, until the certainty is obtained, all practical interests affected by the question are to be left to take care of themselves? Is history, is experience, is example, to be disregarded, so far as it warns us against infidelity? Is Government to fall to pieces—the fabric of society to totter—so far as they have been reared and built up of Christian materials, because as yet there is no one and no Government that can oracularly assume infallibility?

Now, this dilemma is expressly stated by Mr. Mill in his book on Liberty, and it is worth while to notice how explicitly he puts it. I claim the full benefit of the objection as he himself supposes it.

After arguing that all opinions are equally liable to the risk of error, he supposes some one to object thus:—

"There is no greater assumption of infallibility in forbidding the propagation of error than in any other thing which is done by public authority, on its own judgment and responsibility. Judgment is given to men that they may use it. Because it may be used erroneously, are men to be told that they ought not to use it at all? To prohibit what they think pernicious is not claiming exemption from error, but fulfilling the duty incumbent on them, although fallible, of acting on their conscientious conviction. If we were never to act on our opinions because those opinions may be wrong, we should leave all our interests uncared for, and all our duties unperformed. An objection which applies to all conduct can be no valid objection to any conduct in particular. It is the duty of Governments, and of individuals to form the truest opinions they can; to form them carefully, and never impose them upon others unless they are quite sure of being right. But when they are sure (such reasoners may say) it is not conscientiousness but cowardice to shrink from acting on their opinions, and allow doctrines which they honestly think dangerous to the welfare of mankind, either in this life or in another, to be scattered abroad without restraint. Because other people, in less enlightened times, have persecuted opinions now believed to be true, let us take care, it may be said, not to make the same mistake; but governments and nations have made mistakes in other things, which are not denied to be fit subjects for the exercise of authority: they have laid on bad taxes; made unjust wars. Ought we therefore, to lay on no taxes, and under whatever provocation, make no wars? Men and governments must act to the best of their ability. There is no such thing as absolute certainty, but there is assurance *sufficient for the purposes of human life*. We may, and must, assume our opinion to be true for the guidance of our own conduct; and it