

that if a man had "some God or another," this would satisfy the conscience and religious instincts of those for whom he was speaking.

What shall we say of the sincerity of the religious resistance to the entrance of the member for Northampton into the House, when it was distinctly avowed that if in the first instance, he had come to the table and proposed to take the oath, no opposition would have been offered to his doing it? His opinions were as notorious then as they are now. Every ground, every reason, for objecting to his presence in the House was known then as perfectly as it is known now. But if he had not asked to be permitted to affirm; if he had consented, at first, to make that tremendous appeal to God which, on his lips, could have no significance—he would have been allowed to take his seat without protest. It is enough to freeze one's blood to see the most august and awful cause insulted, outraged, humiliated, and profaned by a defence like this.

What course will be taken by Parliament to solve the grave constitutional question which the recent proceedings have left unsolved, I do not know. It is the contention of the Prime Minister that the member for Northampton is under a statutory obligation to take the oath or to affirm, and that under the statute enforcing the oath of allegiance Parliament has no authority to intercept him in the discharge of that obligation. This is not the place to discuss nice questions of law.

The objection from our point of view to the oath being taken in the present case is obvious and grave. There is profanity in an appeal to God on the part of a man who does not believe that God exists. But if the law imposes the oath on a member elected to the House of Commons, the House has no legal right while the law is unrepealed to prevent him from obeying it. The profanity has been committed too often already. The member for Northampton declares he is willing to commit it again. Now that we are brought face to face with the facts, a swift remedy should be found; either the law imposing an oath should be repealed altogether, or any man who claims exemption from it should be permitted to affirm.

I may be told that this would be a dangerous relaxation of securities which are necessary for the public safety; that in courts of justice many a reckless, irreligious, immoral man is restrained from giving false testimony by a certain dread of the religious sanctions attaching to an oath; and that, similarly, a traitor to the crown might consent to affirm his allegiance, and yet shrink from confirming it by swearing. There is some force in the plea. The authority of Superstition survives the authority of Faith, and those who so dishonour Faith as to regard it as nothing more than an effective agent of police, may, without scruple, accept the service of Superstition when Faith has vanished. There was a conspiracy of one of the great families of Florence against Lorenzo and Giuliano Medici: a brigand undertook to commit the murder at a banquet, but declined to attempt the murder in the Cathedral. Certain of the clergy, says an old historian "who were familiar with the sacred place and consequently had no fear" consented to act in his stead. The clergy were unable to complete the crime. The superstition of the brigand caused the partial failure of the conspiracy. For a man who has a real faith in the living God a declaration is as binding as an oath; for a man who has no belief in the divine existence a declaration is as binding as an oath. For a superstitious man an oath may have binding authority when a declaration has none. Whether in courts of justice we should consent to employ this appeal to superstition in order to secure honest testimony, is a question of public policy. A true reverence for the majesty of God makes us shrink from it. In the House of Commons I believe that the oath is valueless. We were reminded last week that the oath of allegiance to the Hanoverian dynasty did not prevent the followers of the Stuarts from entering Parliament. The circumstances and position of a member required to declare his allegiance to the crown are wholly different from the circumstances of witnesses called upon to give testimony in a court of justice, for or against their friends and neighbours, on matters which affect life, property, and freedom. The solemn affirmation of allegiance gives us all the guarantees of loyalty which need be asked for.

But the question returns whether morality—and the kind of morality necessary for the right discharge of the grave duties of a member of the House of Commons—does not lose one of its chief defences if the existence of God is denied. It does. It loses more than that. It loses the inspiration, the dignity, the breadth which come from religious faith. But does the oath secure these nobler and firmer morals? You have had the oath for three centuries. Have the members of the English Parliament stood conspicuous before the nation for their lofty conception of duty, for the purity of their lives, for their fidelity to the law of God? Has the oath secured you against that fierceness of party strife in which the interests of the nation and the laws of justice and truth are forgotten? Has it secured you against iniquitous legislation in the interest of powerful classes in the state? Has it secured you against unjust and cruel wars? Has it secured you against the selfish ambition of party leaders, who, to win power and place, have been careless of all moral restraints? What is it that you fear? It is not an opinion. It is moral conduct which is uncontrolled by the authority of God; practical Atheism; an habitual dis-

regard of the divine laws; an habitual indifference to the divine approval and the divine anger. And against practical Atheism no oath can protect you. What the apostle James thought of the moral and religious value of that bare acknowledgment of the divine existence, to which some good men attribute such immense importance, appears in the text: "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well; the devils believe and tremble." Under the fires of that superb and awful scorn religious formalism should be utterly consumed. Had the apostle been in the House of Commons last week, his indignation would have been fiercer and more terrible than Mr. Bright's.

The oath, as now interpreted, contains no guarantee of morality. It may be taken by a Deist, whose God is remote and inaccessible: who created the universe, indeed, but has left it to work itself like a great machine, and never interferes in the moral government of mankind. The God of the Deist ought not to satisfy you. How far will you go? You and I believe that the loftiest principles and surest supports of morality are to be found in the Christian revelation; and if in the interests of morality we have a right to impose any religious tests on members of the House of Commons, we ought in consistency to require them to be Christians. Will you, then, revert to the legislation of former years, and exclude Jews from Parliament? We are Protestants, and believe that the intervention of the authority of the Church and of the priest between the individual soul and God must impair the vigour of the moral life and have disastrous moral results. Do you propose, in the interests of morality, to revive the oath which excluded Roman Catholics from the House of Commons? You and I believe that the revelation of judgment to come, and the promise of eternal life to those that are loyal to Christ, and the menace of eternal destruction against those who are not, add immeasurably to the strength of the motives to right doing and of the restraints from sin. Are you prepared to require the members of the House of Commons to declare their rejection of the doctrine of universal restoration? We believe—and this after all is the gravest question of all—we believe that it is only a living Faith in Christ that can give the highest energy and noblest development to the moral life, and that a dead faith is worthless. Do you propose to insist that every member of the House of Commons should give satisfactory proof of his personal faith and devoutness? We Evangelical Nonconformists have been contending for the spirit and reality of the religion of Christ for three hundred years. We are recreant to all our principles and traditions, if we now sink into formalism. If we ask for faith at all it must be for faith of a real and energetic kind—the faith that roots the life of man in the life of God.

I ask again—How far will you go? It is with the electors that the ultimate control of the Government of England rests. Within the last three months we have seen a strong Government and a strong majority in the House of Commons broken, scattered, and destroyed, and, as the result, our national policy is wholly changed. That immense revolution was the work, not of the members of the House, but of the constituencies. It is they who determine the aims and principles by which the legislation and policy of the government are controlled; and the same guarantees that are necessary for the morality of members are necessary for the morality of electors.

We must begin in the constituencies. But if we are to begin there it must not be with oaths and tests, but with that religious reformation which is pressed upon us with new and augmented urgency by these disastrous discussions. I know of no method of securing the morality of Parliament but one—secure the morality of the nation. I know of no method of securing the religious loyalty of Parliament but one—secure the religious loyalty of the people. We have had it forced upon our minds that among our countrymen there are men who can find no evidence that God exists. We knew it, indeed, before. For many years this great debate as to the existence of the living God has been going on in every part of England among all ranks and conditions of the people. Those who have regarded this conflict with indifference may now begin to see the magnitude of its issues. But the speculative controversy—vast as it is—is almost lost in a wider, deeper and more awful question. Among men who confess the Divine existence—and these are the immense majority of the nation—is there real and living Faith in God, or is their Faith—however fair to look upon, powerless, lifeless—a corpse which unless quickened by the inspiration of God must soon turn to rotteness and dust? That is the question which we have to confront; and whatever may be our judgment as to the extent to which a practical atheism has taken possession of the English people, there is enough of it to create in us the keenest distress, and to demand from us the most earnest efforts to make known to our countrymen the authority and the love of God. That is the lesson of this controversy. Practical atheism is as terrible as theoretical atheism, and is far more widely spread. We ourselves must begin afresh to live as in the eye of God; for us His will must be supreme; and then we should attempt, with new and more energetic earnestness, to bring our countrymen to God.

Do good, and leave behind you a monument of virtue that the storm of time can never destroy. Write your name in kindness, love and mercy on the hearts of the thousands you come in contact with year by year; you will never be forgotten. No, your name, your deeds, will be as legible on the hearts you leave behind as the stars on the brow of evening.—*Dr. Chalmers.*