

denying wordly amusements; or the Socialists disallowing the appropriation of more than a ratable or sufficient portion of wealth.

The line of argument which I first venture to submit, is derived, as I before said, from the very *nature* and character of Christian opinions. The essence of the Christian's faith—as we all know—is God, a future state, a revelation, sin, redemption, and a final judgment. Now, I admit that, in so far as we claim a right to punish the ridicule of Christian tenets, on the ground of their divine character, we deny Mr. Mill's theory of the perfect equality of opinion in the just view of liberty, and assert or insist on the soundness, or the right to assume the soundness, of our own as against those of the infidel, though we claim no right to *persecute* or be *intolerant*. If the law cannot take cognizance of the fact that Christian opinions have, or claim, Divine sanction, it cannot, on the mere ground of their alleged orthodoxy, deem the irreverent aspersion of those opinions a crime; or supposing that the law could so treat it, then, upon the hypothesis I have mentioned, it must equally punish any contumely of the opinions of the infidel.

This, then, is the position of the argument:—There is no attempt to proscribe freedom of opinion, as such; and for the purpose of the enjoyment of that freedom, it is agreed to be assumed, that the opinions commonly deemed orthodox *may* prove *wrong*, and those of the unbeliever sound. But, when the greater license of derision and reproach is claimed, those who refuse to concede it, rely, though not exclusively, on the assumption that there is something in the protected creed which the State is at liberty to take notice of, as entitling it to that protection, and that in this respect the creed of the infidel cannot be treated as on a level with it. Undoubtedly, then, I am concerned to show that the sanctions of Christianity are matters which the State, *i. e.* the nation at large, may, for some purposes of police, inform itself of, without unduly infringing on what all allow to be the just liberty of opinion, and, therefore, of infidelity.

I shall desire to consider this question in a manner and on grounds strictly logical, without calling in aid matters of *feeling* and *sentiment* which, however legitimate, and even necessary in a *Christian* view, *opponents* could not be expected to share in.

Now one thing, at all events, it may be expected the objector to our laws against blasphemy will concede:—The questions involved in religion *may* be of eternal moment. *His own* position is, that we can never be sure of our opinion being a sound opinion, or another's a false one. He says, that we cannot call any proposition certain, because we are not the judges of certainty. He says that creeds fluctuate, and that we find an improvement in the character of successive creeds. Now, this being his own view of opinions generally, he will admit that the Christian *may* be right, when he declares that religion is of eternal moment, and that Christianity furnishes the means of knowing what are the obligations, what the perils, and what the rewards of religion.

It is therefore, a fact, which no license of opinion can dissemble, that a most serious, indeed, an awful choice, is presented when the rival opinions are Christianity on the one hand, and infidelity on the other. To say that this is a case merely of *opinion against opinion* is deceptive. Granted, for the purpose of argument, that *either* may be true: yet there is this difference—the one *offers* nothing, *entails* nothing, *involves* no risk of *losing* anything: it is a simple *negation*, and presents a mere *blank*:—the other *warns*, *promises*, and holds out *consequences of never-ending* importance to every one to whom the choice is tendered.

Now, does it not flow from this, that the treatment which the mass of opinion ought to receive, must be such as is suitable to the more complicated, as well as to the simplest, of the two sets of opinions—in other words, ought to be measured by the conditions of that opinion which involves *responsibility*,—

which professes to involve loss, deprivation, perdition; and not merely of that which claims to produce no sanctions, and entail no consequences.

The two sets of opinions, in other words, exist under altogether different conditions. There is an atmosphere in which the one set of opinions could not *live* even as *opinions*, which, nevertheless, would be quite compatible with the vitality of the other set of opinions. *Reverence* is essential to the one, but it is altogether *indifferent* to the other. What, then, does the very liberty of opinion itself require, on which the objector prides himself? It requires that these several rival opinions should be allowed to exist under conditions suitable to each. It is not equality, not liberty, to deny to the more complicated opinion any other range of existence or of action than that which suffices for the balder one.

This being so, the State rightly enough, is called upon to take notice of each of these rival sentiments, and to allow them due play. It learns, therefore, the nature of each opinion, and the sanctions which it claims for itself. It is called upon to take care not to interfere unnecessarily with the propagation or action of either set of opinions. It agrees to do this. It sees the tremendous seriousness in particular of the Christian opinion, according to its own description of itself. It at once acknowledges that, seeing what Christian opinions are, both the ordinary liberty of opinion, and the very nature of those opinions in themselves, require that they should enjoy a reverent medium of communication with the public. It acknowledges that *irreverence* conflicts with what is of their very essence and is fatal to their free action as opinions.

But the State has a more special duty even than this. The great bulk of the community are in a condition which entitles them to *protection* on the part of the State. The great mass are composed of the *young*, the *ignorant*, and the *poor*. Towards these classes, the position of the State is this:—It is bound to take care that those opinions, between which they are to choose, shall come to them, or have the means of reaching them, in their true character, without any illicit interference or poisonous adulteration. Especially must this be so with regard to that particular set of opinions which are alleged to carry in their train eternal consequences of good or evil. Shall these be prevented from finding access to the poor, the ignorant, and the young, in their true garb, and with the freedom and purity which their own nature requires?

Now, how is it consistent with the fair and free action of religious opinions upon those who are unprotected, and not of sufficient intellectual or social strength to cast off all illicit influences, to allow those religious opinions to be publicly ridiculed and held up to scorn? Where is the liberty of opinion? where the fairness? where the equality? if unbridled irreverence stalks abroad to bias and prejudice and intimidate the weak and the unwary. Irreverence and contempt, be it observed, involve not merely an improper prejudice against Christian opinions, but poison the very atmosphere of those opinions. The spirit of ridicule is itself destructive of the very conditions under which alone religious opinions can live merely as *opinions*. Christianity and irreverence are absolutely incompatible. And yet, irreverence cannot pretend to be an *opinion*. It cannot shelter itself under a claim to be treated, itself, as an independent *opinion*.

Perhaps to this it may be answered, that persons need not be affected by the ridicule or the scoffing *unless they like*, and that there is no harm in leaving them to feel and do as they *like* in this respect. But to this again I answer, that the common mass of the people are not those who know and understand all that can be said *on both sides*. It cannot be expected that they *should* do so. The common mass are the weak and the unprotected, and no state of the world can be anticipated, in which people generally shall be able to erect a *barrier* for *themselves* against irreverent influences, by first critically ex-