

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF PROTESTANTISM.



HERE are crises in the world's history when the minds of men seem but to await the falling of a spark to break out into a fearful explosion." That such a crisis was reached

at the time of the religious movement of the XVI century, and that the revolution which followed and spread so rapidly was the effect of vicious principles, itself a sedition, and not a legitimate reform capable of correcting existing abuses in the Church, it is the attempt of this brief summary to show.

There are four principal accounts of this movement. By Protestants the so-called reformation is considered the birthday of liberty of thought and conscience, the bursting of the bonds of "superstition" and thralldom of the mind for untrammelled liberty of thought and independence of private judgement. Among Catholics some assign as its cause the disappointment of Luther in the matter of indulgences and his spiteful rebellion in consequence, aggravated by the refusal of the Pope to recognize Henry VIII's divorce. Others make these only the occasion, proposing as a more patent cause the general repugnance to spiritual authority and a spirit of independence of at least two centuries growth. The other contingent, of which Dr. Brownson is the chief exponent, allowing the efficiency of the causes mentioned, lay more stress upon the odiousness to German nations of submission to a foreign authority so Romanic as the Church then was. The Protestant view we disprove, on the grounds that it was not the rise of *liberty* but *license*, a freedom resulting in slavery more abject by far than submission to the restraint of lawful authority, without which society could not exist. Of the three views held by Catholics, the last most nearly covers the ground, as it comprehends the others and adds a third cause which must have played an important part in producing the conditions favorable for the inception of the

movement. A momentary event, such as Luther's matter of indulgences or Henry's divorce could not have brought on such convulsions in European society, whose system was supported by the traditions of so many centuries, had there not been a disposition of popular feeling favorable for its reception; and we shall see that these events were "but sparks falling upon materials already disposed for combustion."

About the beginning of the XIV century, Europe was a spiritual commonwealth of nations with a single head; an entire continent embracing many separate powers, all reverencing and obeying as sovereign, the successor of Peter "the depository and interpreter of Christian law." The nations of Christianity were the members of one head, and held common principles; they all obeyed the Church, which was their conscience, and held the same standards of right and wrong. And although this sovereignty had suffered many severe shocks, it had thus far triumphed, for men were yet Christians at heart and recognized the voice of God in the voice of the Church; indifferentism had not yet effected the separation of religion from every-day realities.

This order of things is soon to end. The spiritual dominion heretofore voluntarily obeyed by the nations begins to be replaced by material force, developing into the modern system of balance of power. A spirit of independence arises among the princes, a desire of independence which does not brook restraint. We will endeavor to sum up in the fewest possible words the causes of it.

In the first place the times were immoral; licentiousness was becoming rife and the natural repugnance to authority in a prince already powerful would urge him to reject the only authority which stood between him and the gratification of his passions. Again, the papal power in consequence of its wide radiation had bishops or legates at every court who were often the subject of large benefices making them temporal princes