

BROWNING AS A RELIGIOUS TEACHER.

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It is not Browning as a poet, but Browning in one particular aspect, and that only in the way of a suggestive note, that this paper proposes to discuss. Browning must be judged of as a poet, not as a philosopher, or as a teacher of art or science or religion, although in his works he deals with all. Bacon was called the "greatest, wisest, meanest of mankind," and if we were to take the verdict of critics, we might pronounce Browning the strongest and weakest, the most educative, and the most unintelligible of modern poets. A strange estimate of what he is and what he has done might be given by compiling the varied opinions of his critics. "Sense is sacrificed to sound," says one, "pages of absolute nonsense," says another, "obscurity is his prevailing weakness," say many, arising, one says, from his conciseness, another says from his garrulity. And what has happened to his mode of expression has also happened to what he expresses. One entitles him the champion of the purest love, another represents him as the advocate of the most unrestrained licentiousness. Were one only to read about Browning instead of reading Browning himself, one might avoid his writings, on the one hand, as deleterious poison, and on the other, as unedifying rubbish, and one would lose thereby one of intellect's greatest treats and one of religion's strongest bulwarks. It is in his attitude towards religion that I am specially to speak of him in this short paper, and all I can undertake is to allude, in a preface, as it were, to possibly following papers, to the underlying current, or, as the German would put it, the main "motif" of his writings.

Browning is essentially an optimist in religious faith and teaching—yet his optimism is of such a kind that even a fairly orthodox Christian of the old school has little reason for complaint. Various views have been taken with regard to Brown-