

Reasoner Tracts.

J. P. PROUDHON'S EXTRAORDINARY VIEWS ON GOD.*

EVIL exists: on this point henceforth all the world seem to agree.

Then the stoics, the epicureans, the manicheans, the atheists have demanded, how the presence of evil agrees with the idea of a God sovereignly good, wise, and powerful? How God, whether from impotence, or negligence, or malevolence, having allowed evil to be introduced into the world, could make creatures responsible for their acts that he himself had created imperfect, and that he left thus to all the perils of their attractions? How, finally, since he promises to the just after death an unalterable happiness, or, in other words, since he gives us the idea and the desire of happiness, why does he not make us enjoy it in this life in snatching us from the temptation of evil, in place of exposing us to an eternity of punishments?

Such is, in its ancient tenor, the protestation of atheists.

To-day one hardly disputes about it: theists do not disquiet themselves any more at the logical impossibilities of their system. They will have a God, especially a providence; there is a competition for this article amongst Radicals and Jesuits. Socialists preach in the name of God happiness and virtue: in the schools those who speak the most loudly against the church are the first of mystics. The ancient Deists were more careful of their faith. They tried, if not to demonstrate it, at least to make it reasonable, feeling well, in contradiction to their successors, that out of certainty there is for the believer neither dignity or repose.

* Translated from his 'Sophisms of Political Economy.'

The fathers of the church answered then to the incredulous that evil is only the privation of a greater good, and that in reasoning always on the best, one has no resting point on which to fix, which conducts straight to absurdity. In effect every creature was necessarily limited and imperfect; God, by his infinite power, can unceasingly add to his perfections in this respect—there is always, in some degree, privation of good in the creature. Reciprocally, limited and imperfect as one supposes it from the moment that the creature exists, it enjoys a certain degree of good, better for it than nothing. Then if it is a rule that man is only judged to be good, accomplishing as much good as he can, it is not the same with God, since the obligation to do good to infinity is contradictory with the faculty of creation, perfection and creature being two terms which mutually exclude each other. God was then the only judge of the degree of perfection that it suited to give to each creature; to lay an accusation against him, in this respect, is to calumniate his justice. As to sin, that is to say moral evil, the fathers had for answer to the objection of atheists, the theories of free will, of redemption, of justification, and of grace, upon which we cannot again return.

I have no knowledge that atheists have replied in a categorical manner to this theory of the essential imperfection of the creature, a theory reproduced with brilliancy by M. Lamennais in his 'Sketch.' It was impossible in effect that they should answer it, for reasoning after a false conception of evil and free will, and in profound ignorance of the laws of humanity, they failed equally in

reasons whether to triumph over their death, or to refute believers.

Let us go out of the sphere of finite and infinite, and place ourselves in the conception of order. Can God make a round circle, a square at right angles? Assuredly.

Would God be wrong if, after having created the world according to the laws of geometry, he had put it into the mind, or only left us to believe without it being our fault, that a circle can be square, or a square circular, so that from this false opinion must result to us a series incalculable of evils? Still without doubt.

Ha well! Behold exactly what God, the God of Providence, has done in the government of humanity; behold what I accuse him of. He knew from all eternity, since after six thousand years of painful experience we mortals have discovered it, that order in society, that is to say liberty, riches, knowledge, is realised by the conciliation of contrary ideas which, taken each in particular for absolute, must precipitate us into an abyss of misery: why has he not given us warning of it? why has he not from the beginning corrected our judgment? why has he abandoned us to our imperfect logic, whilst especially our egoism gives a sanction to his injustice and perfidy? He knew, this jealous God, that in delivering us to the chances of experience, we should only find very late that security of life which makes our happiness. Why, by a revelation of our own laws, has he not abridged this long apprenticeship? why, in place of fascinating us with contradictory opinions, has he not upset our experience, in making us pass by way of analysis of synthetical ideas to their antinomial state, in place of leaving us painfully to climb up the sharp summit of antinomy to synthesis?

If, as they thought formerly, the evil which humanity suffers came only from inevitable imperfection in each creature—let us say better, if this evil had for cause only the antagonism of virtualities and inclinations which constitute our being, and that reason must teach us to master and conduct, we should have no right to raise a complaint. Our condition being that which it could be, God would be justified.

But before this involuntary illusion of our understanding, illusion that it was

so easy to dissipate, and the effects of which must be so terrible, where is the excuse of Providence? Is it not true that here grace has failed to man? God, that faith represents as a tender father and prudent master, delivers us to the fatality of our incomplete conceptions; he digs the ditch under our feet; he makes us go like blind men, and then at every fall he punishes us as wicked. What do I say? it appears to be in spite of him that in the end, all wounded in travelling, we recognise our road as if it was to offend his glory by becoming, in spite of the proofs he put us to, more intelligent and more free. Why have we need then to call incessantly on the divinity, and what do they wish, those satellites of a Providence, who, for sixty centuries, by the aid of a thousand religions, deceive us and lead us astray?

What! God, by his news-bearers and by the law that he has put into our hearts, orders us to love our neighbour as ourselves, to do to others as we would should be done to us, to render to each that which is due to him, not to be fraudulent in the salary of the labourer, and not to lend at usury; he knows, besides, that in us charity is lukewarm, the conscience vacillating, and that the least pretext appears to us always a sufficient reason to exempt us from the law; and it is with such dispositions that he engages us in the contradictions of commerce and of property, then when, by the fatality of theories, must infallibly perish charity and justice! In place of enlightening our reason upon the bearing of principles which are imposed upon it with all the empire of necessity, but the consequences of which adopted by egoism are mortal to human fraternity, he places this abused reason at the service of our passions; he destroys in us, by the seduction of the mind, the equilibrium of the conscience; he justifies in our own eyes our usurpations and our avarice; he renders inevitable, legitimate, the separation of man from his fellow; he creates between us division and hatred, in rendering equality by labour and by right of law impossible; he makes us believe that this equality law of the world, is unjust among men, and then he proscribes us in the mass for not knowing how to follow his incomprehensible precepts!

Surely I think to have proved that

the abandonment of Providence does not justify us; but whatever may be our crime; we are not guilty before it; and if there is a being who before us and more than us has merited hell, I must mention him, it is God.

When theists, to establish their dogma of Providence, allege in proof the order of nature, although this argument may be only a begging of the question, at least one cannot say that it implies contradiction, and that the fact alleged opposes against the hypothesis. Nothing, for example, in the system of the world, discovers the smallest anomaly, the slightest want of foresight, whence one can draw any prejudice against the idea of a supreme ruler, intelligent and personal. In one word, if the order of nature does not prove the reality of a Providence, it does not contradict it.

It is quite another thing in the government of humanity. Here order does not appear of the same time as matter; it has not been, as in the system of the world, created once and for ever. It develops itself gradually according to a fatal series of principles and consequences, that the human being himself, the being that it was his business to set in order, must of his own accord get rid of, by his own energy and at the solicitation of experience. No revelation in this respect is given to him. Man is submitted from his origin to a pre-established necessity, to an order absolute and irresistible. But this order it is necessary, in order to be realised, that man discover it; this necessity, he must guess it, so that it may exist. This labour of invention might be abridged; nobody, either in heaven or on earth, will come to the assistance of man; nobody will instruct him. Humanity, during hundreds of ages, will devour its generations; it will spend its force in blood and mire without the God that it adores comes once to illuminate his reason and shorten his trial. Where is here the action of divine? where is Providence?

If God did not exist—it is Voltaire, the enemy of religion, who speaks—we must invent him. Why? Because, adds the same Voltaire, if I had to do with an atheistical prince who thought it his interest to pound me in a mortar, I am very sure that I should be pounded. Strange aberration of a great mind. And if you had to do with a devout

prince, to whom his confessor commanded on the part of God to burn you alive, would not you also be very sure of being burnt? Do you forget then, you anti-Christ, the inquisition and St. Bartholomew, and the fires of Vanini and Bruno, and the tortures of Galileo, and the martyrdom of so many freethinkers? Do not come and distinguish here between the use and the abuse; for I would reply to you that from a mystical and supernatural principle, from a principle which embraces all, which explains all, which justifies all, as the idea of God, all the consequences are legitimate, and the zeal of the believer is the only judge of what is proper.

I thought formerly, said Rousseau, that one could be an honest man and do without God, but I have returned from that error. Same reasoning at bottom as that of Voltaire, same justification of intolerance. Man does good and abstains from ill only by the consideration of a Providence who watches over him; anathema to those who deny him! And to fill up the measure of nonsense, the same man who thus for our virtue calls upon the sanction of a divine and avenging deity, is also he who teaches as a dogma of faith the native goodness of man.

And I, I say: the first duty of an intelligent and free man is unceasingly to chase from his mind and his conscience the idea of God. For God, if he exists, is essentially hostile to our nature, and we are not supported at all by his authority. We arrive at knowledge in spite of him, at well-being in spite of him, to society in spite of him; every progress is a victory in which we crush the divinity. Say no more the ways of God are impenetrable. We have penetrated these ways, and have read in characters of blood the proofs of impotence, if not of the malevolence, of God. My reason, long time humiliated, rises by little and little to a level with the infinite; in time it will discover that which its inexperience takes from it; in time I shall less and less be a worker of evil, and by the lights that I shall have acquired, by the improvement of my liberty, I shall purify myself, I shall idealise my being, and I shall become the chief of creation, the equal of God. One single instance of disorder, that the all-powerful might have prevented and that he did not prevent, accuses his Providence and

puts at fault his wisdom : the least progress that man, ignorant, deserted, and betrayed, accomplishes towards good, honours him beyond measure. What right would God have still to say to me, Be holy, because I am holy? Lying spirit, I will answer him : imbecile God, thy reign is finished; seek amongst fools other victims. I know I am not, nor can I ever become, holy; and how shouldst thou be so, thou, if I resemble thee? Eternal Father, Jupiter, or Jehovah, we have learnt to know thee : thou art, thou wast, thou shalt be for ever jealous of Adam, the tyrant of Prometheus.

Thus I fall not into the sophism refuted by St. Paul, when he defends the vase by saying to the potter, Why hast thou made me thus? I reproach not the author of things having made of me an inharmonious creature, an incoherent assemblage; I could only exist on that condition. I am content to cry to him, Why dost thou deceive me? why by thy silence hast thou let loose in me egotism? Why hast thou subjected me to the torture of universal doubt, by the bitter illusion of antagonistic ideas that you have put into my understanding? Doubt of truth, doubt of justice, doubt of my conscience and of my liberty, doubt of thyself O God! and as a consequence of this doubt, the necessity of warring with myself and with my neighbour. Behold, supreme father, what thou hast done for our happiness and thy glory; behold what were from the beginning, thy will and thy government; behold the bread, saturated with blood and tears, which thou hast nourished. It is thou who makest us commit the sins of which we ask thee remission: it is thou who hast stretched the snares which we conjure thee to deliver us from, and the Satan who besieges us, this Satan is thee.

Thou triumphed and no one dared to

contradict thee, when after having tormented in his body and soul the just Job, form of our humanity, thou insulted his candid piety, his prudent and respectful ignorance. We were as nought before thy invisible majesty, to whom we gave the heaven for canopy, the earth for footstool. And behold you now dethroned and shattered. Thy name so long a time the ultimate word of the wise, the sanction of the judge, the force of the prince, the hope of the poor, the refuge of the repentant sinner. Ah well! this incommunicable name, henceforward devoted to contempt and anathema, shall be hissed amongst men. For God is foolishness and cowardice; God is hypocrisy and lie; God is tyranny and misery; God is evil. So long as humanity shall incline before an altar, humanity, slaves of kings and priests, shall be condemned; so long as a man, in the name of God, shall receive the oath of another man, society shall be founded on perjury, peace and love shall be banished among mortals. God, withdraw thyself! far from to-day, cured from thy fear and become wise, I swear, the hand stretched towards heaven, that thou art only the executioner of my reason, the ghost of my conscience. I deny the supremacy of God over mankind; I reject his providential government, whose non-existence is sufficiently established by the metaphysical and economical hallucinations of humanity, in one word by the martyrdom of our species; I withdraw the jurisdiction of the supreme being over man; I take from him his titles of father, of king, of judge, of good, wise, merciful, succourable, remunerator, and avenger. All those attributes which compose the idea of Providence, are only a caricature of humanity, irreconcilable with the anatomy of civilisation, and given the lie besides by the history of his aberrations and of his catastrophes.