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LAMARTINE ON ATHEISM.

ATHEISM

AMONG

THE PEOPLE

BY

ALPHONSE DE LAMARTINE.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

Through the past year, M. de Lamartine has published a monthly journal, called The People's Counsellor, "*Le Conseiller du Peuple*." Each number of this journal contains an Essay, by him, on some specific subject, of pressing interest to the French people,—generally, some political subject.

As a companion to one of these numbers, he published the Essay which we here translate. We have thought that its interest and merit are by no means local; but, that it will be read with as much interest in America, as in France.

EDWARD E. HALE,
FRANCIS LE BARON.

Worcester, Mass. March 7, 1850.

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ATHEISM AMONG THE PEOPLE.

I.

I have often asked myself, "Why am I a Republican?—Why am I the partizan of equitable Democracy, organized and established as a good and strong Government?—Why have I a real love of the People—a love always serious, and sometimes even tender?—What has the People done for me? I was not born in the ranks of the People. I was born between the high Aristocracy and what was then called *the inferior classes*, in the days when there were classes, where are now equal citizens in various callings. I never starved in the People's famine; I never groaned, personally, in the People's miseries; I never sweat with its sweat; I was never benumbed with its cold. Why then, I repeat it, do I hunger in its hunger, thirst with its thirst, warm under its sun, freeze under its cold, grieve under its sorrows? Why should I not care for it as little as for that which passes at the antipodes?—turn away my eyes, close my ears, think of other things, and wrap myself up in that soft, thick garment of indifference and egotism, in which I can shelter myself, and indulge my separate personal tastes, without asking whether, below me,—in street, garret, or cottage, there is a rich People, or a beggar People; a religious People, or an atheistic People; a People of idlers, or of workers; a People of Helots, or of citizens?"

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And whenever I have thus questioned myself, I have thus answered myself:—"I love the people because I believe in God. For, if I did not believe in God, what would the people be to me? I should enjoy at ease that lucky throw of the dice, which chance had turned up for me, the day of my birth; and, with a secret, savage joy, I should say, 'So much the worse for the losers!—the world is a lottery. Woe to the conquered!'" I cannot, indeed, say this without shame and cruelty,—for, I repeat it, *I believe in God*.

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II.

“And what is there in common,” you will say to me, “between your belief in God and your love for the People?” I answer: My belief in God is not that vague, confused, indefinite, shadowy sentiment which compels one to suppose a principle because he sees consequences,—a cause where he contemplates effects, a source where he sees the rush of the inexhaustible river of life, of forms, of substances, absorbed for ever in the ocean, and renewed unceasingly from creation. The belief in God, which is thus perceived and conceived, is, so to speak, only a mechanical sensation of the interior eye,—an instinct of intelligence, in some sort forced and brutal,—an evidence, not reasonable, not religious, not perfect, not meritorious; but like the material evidence of light, which enters our eyes when we open them to the day; like the evidence of sound which we hear when we listen to any noise; like the evidence of touch when we plunge our limbs in the waves of the sea, and shiver at the contact. This elementary, gross, instinctive, involuntary belief in God, is not the living, intelligent, active, and legislative faith of humanity. It is almost animal. I am persuaded that if the brutes even,—if the dog, the horse, the ox, the elephant, the bird, could speak, they would confess, that, at the bottom of their nature, their instincts, their sensations, their obtuse intelligence, assisted by organs less perfect than ours, there is a clouded, secret sentiment of this existence of a superior and primordial Being, from whom all emanates, and to whom all returns,—a shadow of the divinity upon their being, a distant approach to the conception of that idea, which fills the worlds, and for which alone the worlds have been made,—the idea of God!

This may be a bold, but it is not an impious supposition. For God, having made all things for himself alone, must have placed, upon all that he made, an impress of himself; more or less clear, more or less luminous, more or less profound, a presentiment or a remembrance of a Creator. But this faith, when it stops here, is not worthy of the name. It is a species of *Pantheism*, that is to say, a confused “visibility,” a physical working together into indissoluble union of something impersonal, something blind, something fatal, and something divine, which, in the elements composing the universe, we may call GOD. But this “visibility” can give to man no moral decision,—can give to God no worship. The Pantheism of which I am accused as a philosopher and poet, that Pantheism which I have always scorned as a contradiction and as a blasphemy, resembles entirely the reasoning of the man who should say, “I see an innumerable multitude of rays, therefore there is no sun.”

III.

Faith, or reasonable and effective belief in God, proceeds, undoubtedly, from this first instinct; but in proportion as intelligence develops itself, and human thought expands, it goes from knowledge to knowledge, from conclusion to conclusion, from light to light, from sentiment to sentiment, infinitely farther and higher, in the idea of God. It does not see him with the eyes of the body, because the Infinite is not visible by a narrow window of flesh, pierced in the frontal bone of an insect called Man; but it sees Him, with a thousand times more certainty, by the spirit, that immaterial eye of the soul, which nothing blinds; and after having seen him with evidence, it reasons upon the consequences of his existence, upon the divine aims of His creation, upon the terrestrial as well as eternal destinies of His creatures, upon the nature of the homage and adoration that God expects, upon his moral laws, upon the public and private duties which he imposes on his creatures by their consciences, upon the liberty He leaves them; so that with the sufferings of conflict He may give to them the merits and the prize of virtue. Thus in man does the instinct of God become Faith. Thus man can speak the greatest word that has ever been spoken upon the earth or in the stars, the word which fills the worlds by itself alone, the word which commenced with them, and which can only end with them;—

“I believe in God!”

IV.

It is in this sense, my friends, that I say to you, “I believe in God.”

But, once having said this word with the universe of beings and of worlds, and blessed this invisible God for having rendered himself visible, sensible, evident, palpable, adorable in the mirror of weak human intelligence, made gradually more and more pure, I reason with myself on the best worship to be rendered Him in thought and action. Let me show how, by this reasoning, I am forcibly drawn to the love of the People.

I say to myself, then, “Who is this God? Is he a vain *notion*, which has no effect on the thoughts and acts of man, his creature; who inspires nothing in him; who gives him no commands; who imposes nothing upon him; who does not reward, and who does not punish?—No! God is not a

mere *notion*, an idea, an evidence;—God is a *law*,—the living law, the supreme law, the universal law, the eternal law. Because God is a law on high, he is a duty on the earth; and when man says, ‘I believe in God,’ he says, at the same time, ‘I believe in my duty towards God,—I believe in my duty towards man.’ God is a government!”

And what are these duties? They are of three sorts:—

Duty towards God,—that is to say, the duty of developing, as much as possible, my intelligence and my reason, to arrive at the purest idea and the highest worship of the Supreme Being, by whom and for whom all is, all exists:—*Religion*.

Private Duties,—that is to say, the exact and tender discharge of all sentiments to which form has been given, either in written or unwritten laws, which bind me to those, to whom, in the order of nature, I hold most closely,—the nearest to myself in the human group—father, mother, brothers, sisters, wife, children, friends, neighbors:—*the Family*.

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Collective Duties,—that is to say, devotions, even to the sacrifice of myself, even to death, to the progress, the well-being, the preservation, the amelioration of this great human family, of which my family, and my country, are only parts; and of which I myself am only a miserable and vanishing fraction, a leaf of a summer, which vegetates and withers on a branch of the immense trunk of the human race:—*Society*.

Let us speak to-day only of these last duties,—because, now we are occupied with politics alone.

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V.

God, when one believes in Him as you and I do, imposes then on man a duty towards the society of which he makes a part. You admit it, do you not?

Then follow, and analyze with me this society. Of whom, and how, is it composed?

It is composed, at the same time, of strong and weak, conquerors and conquered, victors and vanquished, oppressors and oppressed, masters and slaves, nobles and serfs, of citizens and bondmen or subjects disinherited and enslaved, considered as living furniture, as tools and laughing-stocks to their fellow-men, as were the Blacks in our colonies before the Republic.

Thanks to the increase of general reason, to the light of philosophy, to the inspiration of Christianity, to the progress of the idea of justice, of charity, and of fraternity, in laws, manners, and religion, society in America, in Europe, and in France, especially since the Revolution, has broken down all these barriers, all these denominations of caste, all these injurious distinctions among men. Society is composed only of various conditions, professions, functions, and ways of life, among those who form what we call a Nation; of proprietors of the soil, and proprietors of houses; of investments, of handicrafts, of merchants, of manufacturers, of farmers; of day-laborers becoming farmers, manufacturers, merchants, or possessors of houses or capital, in their turn; of the rich, of those in easy circumstances, of the poor, of workmen with their hands, workmen with their minds; of day-laborers, of those in need, of a small number of men enjoying considerable acquired or inherited wealth, of others of a smaller fortune painfully increased and improved, of others with property only sufficient for their needs; there are some, finally, without any personal possession but their hands, and gleaning for themselves and for their families, in the workshop, or the field, and at the threshold of the homes of others on the earth, the asylum, the wages, the bread, the instruction, the tools, the daily pay, all those means of existence which they have neither inherited, saved, nor acquired. These last are what have been improperly called *the People*. This name is extended now; it embraces really all the People; but still it is used as the name of the indigent and suffering part of the People.

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It is more especially of this class that I intend to speak, in saying to you, “To love the People, it is necessary to believe in God.”

VI.

The love of the People, the conscience of the citizen, the sentiment which induces the individual to lose himself in the mass, to submit himself to the community, to sacrifice himself to its needs, —his interest, his individuality, his egotism, his ambition, his pride, his fortune, his blood, his life, his reputation even, sometimes, to the safety of his country, to the happiness of the People, to the good of humanity, of which he is a member in the sight of God,—in one word, all these virtues, necessary under every form of government,—useful under a monarchy, indispensable under a republic,—never have been derived, and never can be derived, from any thing but that single sentence, pronounced with religious faith, at the commencement, in the middle, at the end of all our patriotic acts:—“I believe in God!”

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The People who do not believe strongly, efficaciously in this first principle, in this supreme original, in this last end of all existence, cannot have a faith superior to their individual

selfishness.

The People who cannot have a principle superior to their individual selfishness, in their acts as citizens, cannot have national virtue.

The People who cannot have national virtue cannot be free; for they can have neither the courage which enables them to defend their own liberty, nor the conscience which forces them to respect the liberty of others, and to obey the laws, not as an outward force, but as a second conscience. [Pg 23]

The People who can neither defend their liberty, nor restrain it, may be, by turns, slaves or tyrants, but they can never be republicans.

Therefore, Atheism in the People is the most invincible obstacle to the establishment and consolidation of that sublime form of government, the idol of all ages, the tendency of all perfect civilization, the dream of every sage, the model of all great souls,—the government of the entire People by the reason and conscience of each citizen,—otherwise called the REPUBLIC.

VII.

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Must I demonstrate to you so simple a truth? Can you not comprehend, without explanation of mine, that a nation, where each citizen thinks only of his own private well-being here below, and sacrifices constantly the general good to his personal and narrow interest;—where the powerful man wishes to preserve all the power for himself alone, without making an equitable and proportional division to the weak;—where the weak wishes to conquer at any price, that he may tyrannize in his turn;—where the rich wishes to acquire and concentrate the greatest possible amount of wealth, to enjoy it alone, and even without circulating it in work, in wages, in assistance, in benevolence, in good deeds to his brothers;—where the poor wishes to dispossess violently and unjustly those who possess more than himself, instead of recognizing that diversity of chances, of conditions, of professions, of fortunes, of which human life is composed,—instead of acquiring prosperity for his family, in his turn and degree, by effort, by order, by labor, by economy, by the assistance of borrowed capital, by the law of inheritance, by the free transfer of real estate, by free entrance into different callings and trades, by free competition in the money market;—where each class of citizens declares itself an enemy to every other, and heaps upon each other all manner of evil, instead of doing all the good in its power, and uniting in the holy harmony of social unity;—where each individual draws around him, for himself alone, the common mantle, willing to tear it in pieces for himself, and thus leave the whole world naked,—do you not understand, I say, that such a People, having no God but its selfishness, no judge but interest, no conscience but cupidity, will fall, in a short time, into complete destruction, and, being incapable of a Republican government, because it casts aside the government of God himself, will rush headlong into the government of the brute: the government of the strongest, the despotism of the sword, the divinity of the cannon,—that last resort of anarchy, which is at once the remedy and the death of nations without God! [Pg 25]

Now has not this weakening of the sentiment of God in the soul of the People been, from year to year, from century to century, indeed, I might say, the most discouraging and threatening symptom, in the eyes of those who desire the progress of their race, who aspire to the moral perfection of the human spirit, who hope in Republican institutions, who love the People, who wish to cultivate their reason, who desire that the People should understand themselves, respect themselves, and, finally, by their enlightenment, their conscientiousness, their moderation and virtue, give the lie to those who declare them in a state of perpetual infancy, perpetual madness, or perpetual weakness? [Pg 26]

Yes, this is but too true: men have been blotting out God, for a century past, from the souls of the People, and more especially in latter years. The masses have been driven to Atheism, they have been driven on every side and by every hand. [Pg 27]

Sometimes, by blasphemies, such as were never heard upon the earth, until an insult to the Creator became a means of popularity among His creatures; blasphemies which would have darkened the sun and extinguished the stars, if God had not commanded His creation to pass unnoticed the revolt of a blind and foolish insect against Infinity, and refused Himself to sink to the foolishness of avenging impiety! Read those lines which I dare not write, those lines where an apostle of Atheism effaces the name of God from the beautiful creation and endeavors to substitute his own! * * * [Pg 28]

VIII.

Sometimes the masses have been driven to Atheism by science. There are some geometers great in paradox, men who, of all the senses that the Creator has given to his creatures, have cultivated only one, the sense of touch,—leaving out entirely that chief sense, which connects and confirms all others,—*the sense of the invisible*, the *moral sense*. These *savans*, geometers, physicians, arithmeticians, mathematicians, chemists, astronomers, measurers of distances, calculators of [Pg 29]

numbers, have early acquired the habit of believing only in the *tangible*. These are the beings who, so to speak, live and think in the dark; all, which is not palpable, does not exist for them. They measure the earth, and say, "We have not met God in any league of its surface!" They heat the alembic, and say, "We have not perceived God in the smoke of any of our experiments!" They dissect dead bodies, and say, "We have not found God, or thought, in any bundle of muscles or nerves in our dissection!" They calculate columns of figures, long as the firmament, and say, "We have not seen God in the sum of any of our additions!" They pierce, with eye and glass, into the dazzling mysteries of night, to discover, across thousands and thousands of leagues, the groups and the evolutions of the celestial worlds, and say, "We have not discovered God at the end of our telescopes! The existence of God does not concern us; it is no affair of ours!"—Madmen! They do not suspect that the knowledge and adoration of God are, at bottom, the only business of the creature; and that all these distances, these globes, these numbers, these mysteries of the living being, this dissected mechanism of the dead, these compositions and decompositions of combined elements, these hosts of stars, and these eternal evolutions of suns around the divine hand which guides them, have no other reason for existence, for movement, and for duration, than to compel the acknowledgment, fear, admiration, and adoration of God, by that supreme sense, that sense superior to all other senses, that sense imponderable and impalpable, invisible yet beholding all things,—that sense which we call *intelligence*!

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Alas! it is not that God has denied this sense to these men of figures, of science, and calculation; but they have blinded themselves, they have cultivated the other senses so much, that they have weakened this. They have believed too much in matter, and so they have lost the eye of the spirit. These men, we are told, have made great progress in experimental science, but they have made good, evil, to the People, by saying to them, "We, who are so high, we cannot see God!—blind men! what do you see, then?"

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IX.

Besides these men, there is still another class,—inventors of another science, which they call "*Political Economy*." This is the class of *Economists*. I do not, indeed, speak of all of them: there are among them some who are as spiritual as Fenelon, and these are, perhaps, at this day, the greater number. I speak only of those who, considering this world alone, have been driven, voluntarily or involuntarily, to Atheism in another way. Leaving the eternal and fastidious metaphysical and religious disputes in which the theologians of past centuries wasted the time, the good sense, and the blood of men, to honor their pretended God by immolating to Him the enemies of their faith, these *false economists* have said to governments and people, "Leave all this; there is only one science which is good for any thing: it is the science of Wealth. All else is vanity and vexation of spirit." This is the famous cry, the cry of a materialistic society:—"Grow rich!" The economists of this school, now highly enlightened, legitimate children of the materialists of the Eighteenth Century, see in humanity, only matter and the things that belong to matter; in men, only consumers and producers; in the social functions, only labor of the hands:—to labor, to sow, to reap, to hew, to build, to forge, to weave, to barter, to exchange, to sell, to buy, to acquire, to beget,—this is, according to these disciples of Malthus, the whole of man! These are the Lycurguses and the Moseses, the legislators of a trading People: the moral, intellectual, spiritual, religious man does not exist for them. They love liberty, not because it ennobles human nature; exercises free will, the most sublime of man's vital functions; cultivates his highest faculty,—conscience; purifies religion, the fundamental idea of mankind, from the superstitions that debase and dishonor it; sanctifies human society, by leading it to the knowledge and worship of God;—they love it because it abolishes Custom House duties! All legislation, all civilization, all religion, is reduced by them to a well-balanced account! *To have* and *to owe*, these are the only two words in their language! What matter to them the spirit, the soul, virtue, sentiment?—What the moral and consoling beliefs, the divine hopes, the supernatural certainties, revealed or proved, or the immortal destiny, of man?—What the present intellectual life, and the future immaterial life of these harvests of human generations, which God sows that they may bear fruit in his name, may adore his grandeur,—which Death cuts down to bear them, ripe in faith and virtue, up to Heaven? All this can neither be bought nor sold; all this has neither stated price nor net revenue; all this is not current on the Exchange,—therefore it is nothing!

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Thus these men count for nothing the forms of worship and the forms of government. They are neither followers of Brama, of Confucius, of Mahomet, of Plato, or of Rousseau; neither absolute monarchists, constitutional royalists, nor republicans. They are of the politics, and of the religion, in which they can manufacture most, buy and sell easiest, trade the best, multiply fastest! Their civilization is traffic; their God is the dollar! This sect, useful in administering intelligently the affairs of commerce, has been a shadow over intellectual civilization; for it has forgotten heavenly things, and, in forgetting them, has contributed to make the People also forget them.

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X.

But that People which forgets God, forgets itself. What right has it to be a People, if it have not its origin and hope in Him? How can the men of any nation expect tyrants to remember and respect its destiny, if they themselves debase this destiny to that of a machine with ten fingers, destined to weave the greatest possible number of yards of cloth in seventy years, to people as many hundred acres as possible with creatures as much to be pitied and as miserable as themselves, and to serve, from generation to generation, as human manure for the land, to fertilize the soil of their birth, their life, and their graves? How can the moral spiritualism of a People long resist such theories? Where can they find God in this workshop of matter?

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XI.

But even this is nothing. The French Revolution came in 1789. It came to put an end to a double philosophy,—the spiritual philosophy of Rousseau's school, founded in reason and religion, the material philosophy of the school of Helvetius, Diderot, and their disciples, atheistic and cynical. The thought of the first of these philosophies was religious at bottom. It consisted merely in freeing the luminous idea of God from the shadows by which ignorance, intolerance, the inquisition of temporal dynasties and times of barbarism had falsified it,—in freeing this idea, debased as it was,—obscured, and enchained to thrones,—so as to restore reason to its liberty, to inquiry, to the free conscience of every worship and of every soul; to revive it in the eyes of the People, by leading them to the broad light of day, the evidence of nature, the dignity and efficacy of free worship.

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But, for this, it was necessary to dispossess the Middle Ages of their temporal power, of their *mort-main* possessions, of their civil jurisdictions, of their exclusive privileges, of their legal intolerance against all other divine thoughts, and all other individual or national faith, all other forms of adoration and worship than what were imposed by the exclusive and established religion. To rally the people to this work, a work legitimate in itself, a work which the abuses of a crafty priesthood had made necessary, seven times, and whose accomplishment they had seven times partially and gradually undertaken, since the time of Charlemagne,—the philosophers of the second school, the irreligious school, the atheistic school, of Diderot and Helvetius, drove the masses from stupidity even to impiety, and the demagogues of '93 forced them from impiety to Atheism, and from Atheism to blood. Demagogues, those poisoners of liberty, corrupt every revolution in which they mingle; they defile every thing that they touch; they dishonor every truth which they profess, by polluting or perverting it. The age and philosophy, Heaven and earth, desire what we too desire,—freedom of conscience, voluntary worship,—liberty of the human mind in matters of faith,—the fraternity of altars, invoking, each in its own language, that God whom the whole earth is spelling out, and who reveals, from age to age, still another letter of His divine name.

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Instead of this, Atheists and demagogues united to persecute religion, to revenge themselves for the old persecutions of the priesthood. They profaned the temples, violated conscience, blasphemed the God of the faithful, parodied the ceremonies, cast to the winds the pious symbols of worship, and persecuted the ministers of religion.

In the name of the Revolution, and under the menace of terror, they dragged the People to these Saturnalia. They corrupted the eyes, the hands, the minds, the souls of the populace. These violences to the altar were cast back on the religious idea itself. The People, seeing the temple fall, believed that Heaven itself crumbled; and that, following the profaned image of a vanishing worship, God himself would vanish from the world, with conscience, the supernatural law, the unwritten moral law, the soul and the immortality of the human race!

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When the ignorant People no longer saw God between them and annihilation, they plunged into the boundless and bottomless abyss of Atheism, they lost their divine sense, they became brutal as the animal, who sees in the earth only a pasture ground, instead of the footstool of Jehovah.

But these irreligious abominations, and these Saturnalia of Atheism, however much injury they inflicted on the religious spirit of the People, did not effect so much, perhaps, as the reign which followed this anarchy, the reign of Bonaparte, the so-called restorer of worship. And how?

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XII.

The Republic had passed its paroxysm of fever, of demagogical madness, of persecution. The Directory had finally concentrated and regulated the republican power. This government was composed of men, naturally moderate and tolerant, or made so by the experience and the lassitude of anarchy; the moderate principles of the Revolution of 1789, and of the constituted Assembly, regained their level, thanks to a natural reaction, limited by good sense, as happens after every revolution that overshoots its mark. The priests officiated, without obstacle, in the temples restored by the municipalities to the faithful, religion was entirely free, even favored by public respect, and by that care for good morals which all serious governments feel. Faith, taking refuge in men's consciences, was, moreover, more sincere and more active, because it was

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neither constrained, nor favored, nor altered, nor profaned by the hand of government.

This was, perhaps, the moment when there was the most religion in France,—for this was the moment when, after having had its martyrs, the religious sentiment had a life in itself, and owed nothing to the partial and interested protection of the powers of the State. For, the less the State imposes upon you a God of its own fashion, or its own choice, the more does your conscience rise, and the more does it attach itself to the God of your own reason, or your own faith!

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Bonaparte, whose genius was entirely military, but who, in affairs of moral, civil, and religious government, made it a matter of policy to contradict and extinguish all the truths of the Revolution, hastened to change all this. He wished to parody Charlemagne.

Charlemagne had been the philosopher and revolutionary organizer of his time; Charlemagne had bound together the spiritual and temporal, crowning the Pontiff that he might be crowned by him in turn. Bonaparte desired a State religion, an agreement in which religion and the empire should mutually engage and mutually check each other; a Pope to subdue, to caress, to drive away, to recall, to persecute, by turns; a coronation by the hand of an enslaved Church; then a Church to chastise, when it did not obey;—in one word, all that shameful and scandalous *simony* of ancient times, when the temporal power played, in the sight of the nations, with the idea and name of God, in a manner as contemptuous as it was odious.

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The People, who saw clearly through this intrigue of an indifferent sovereign,—an Atheist at Toulon, a crafty politician at Marengo, a Mussulman in Egypt, a persecutor at Rome, an oppressor at Savona, a schismatic at Fontainebleau, a saint at Notre Dame de Paris,—protector of religion and profaner of consciences by turns,—felt their belief shaken anew. They asked themselves, “What then is God for us, poor souls, since God is such an instrument of power for great men, and such a police machine for governments?” Scorn threw them back into Atheism. This was natural.

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XIII.

This system was continued, with more sincerity on the part of government, under the dynasty of the Restoration. But the interested favors of the Court, for the higher clergy of a particular worship, irritated the minds of the populace against the priesthood.

The more it lavished power and human dignities upon priestly superiors, the more the mind of the People turned from the religious sentiment. Each favor of royal authority to the privileged Church cast thousands of souls into Atheism.

The Revolution of July suppressed the religion of the State: it was a progress towards the religion of conscience. But it favored the religion of the majority; it still leaned towards the supremacy of numbers in matters of faith. However, from the moment the State religion was suppressed, the religion of conscience gained ground in men’s hearts. From 1830 to this day, every intelligent observer gladly acknowledges an immense progress in the religious sentiment in France.—Why? Because the suppression of the official religion of the State was a progress in the liberty of conscience, and all progress in liberty of conscience is a progress of human thought toward the idea of God. Go farther still, and complete liberty will destroy Atheism in the People!

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But the evil done was immense. The cynicism of Diderot, materialism, scepticism, revolutionary impiety, the false and hypocritical piety of the empire, the concordat, the restoration of an imperial religion, and of an official and dynastic God by Napoleon, the tendency of the two Bourbon reigns to reconstruct a political church, everlastingly endowed with a monopoly of goods and of souls,—and, finally, the industrialism of the reign of Louis Philippe, turning every thought to trade, to manual labor, to worldly wealth, and making gold the true and only God of the century;—all this has borne its fruits.

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Look at these fruits at the present day, and say, if practical Atheism does not devour the souls of this People. But let us proceed.

XIV.

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For eighteen years, new sects, or, rather, posthumous sects, have disputed for the soul of the People, under the names of Fourierism, of Pantheism, of Communism, of Industrialism, of Economism, and, finally, of Terrorism. Look at them, listen to them, read them, analyze them, sift them, handle them; and say, if, with the exception of a vague deifying of every thing,—that is to say, of nothing, by the Fourierites,—there is a single one of these philosophical, social, or political sects, which is not founded on the most evident practical Atheism; which has not matter for a God; material enjoyments for morality; exclusive satisfaction of the senses for an end; purely sensual gratifications for a paradise; this world for the sole scene of existence; the body for the only condition of being; the prolonging of life a few more years for its only hope; a sharpening of the senses to material appetites for a perspective; death for the end of all things; after death, an

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assimilation with the dust of the earth for a future; annihilation for justice, for reward, and for immortality!

No, there has not been since 1830, there has not been since the Revolution, there is not at this moment, one of these schools of pretended apostles, prophets of the future, and saviors of the present, which is not Materialism in action. It is the deadly seed of the century of Helvetius, producing its poisons in the dregs of another century. It is man, deprived of his spiritual and immortal sense, reduced to a solid measure of organized matter, and seeking, not virtue, that key to his future destiny, in his soul; but, in his senses, mere enjoyment, that end of the brute, who only believes in what he can eat and drink.

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XV.

Analyze with me, if you are not overwhelmed with humiliation, the five or six Revelations of the latter days; and ask yourselves, as I have often asked myself, while listening to them, if these revealers of pretended human felicity do indeed address themselves to men, or to herds of fatted cattle! And are they astonished that the intellectual world resists them? Do they complain that the ignorant are their only disciples? Are they indignant that the ideas they attempt to spread, creep, like fetid mists, along the abysses of society, and excite, instead of enthusiasm, only the fanaticism of hunger and thirst? I can well believe it! What People is there who would become fanatics, only for their own destruction; renounce their moral nature, their divine souls, their immortal destinies, only for a morsel of more savory bread upon their table, for a larger portion of earth under their feet? No! no! enthusiasm soars aloft, it does not fall to earth. Bear me up to Heaven, if you wish to dazzle my eyes; promise me immortality, if you would offer to my soul a motive worthy of its nature, an aim worthy of its efforts, a price worthy of its virtue! But what do your systems of atheistic society show us in perspective? What do they promise us in compensation for our griefs? What do they give us in exchange for our souls? You know,—we will not speak of it.

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But, indeed, if these sects survive the month which sees and which produces them; and, if these questions which they debate, and these systems which they bring before the astonished People, are destined to serve as enigmas to posterity; what will the future say of us? It will only explain the Materialism, Atheism, and brutality of the doctrines and sects by which we have been disturbed for ten or twelve years, as the nightmare of a starving People, whose dreams have, for an object, only a frantic satisfaction of the senses. All these philosophies, or all these deliriums, are the deliriums or philosophies of the stomach! "All this epoch," future historians will say, "the French must have been a nation distressed by a terrible famine, to have forgotten, in so total an eclipse of the intellectual nature, the great and immortal ideas which have alone inspired even these, the human race, and rendered the revolutions of the People worthy of the regard of posterity, and of the blood of man. The Eighteenth Century must have been a time when avaricious Nature shut up her bosom, and the earth brought forth neither fruit nor harvests, that this great intellectual People, formerly called the French People, should have forgotten their souls for a morsel of bread, their immortality for an income, and their God for a dollar! Let us turn away our eyes and weep over that age."

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XVI.

See where we were when the Republic arose: happy was it that the People had at bottom more of the true sentiment of God than these masters and heads of sects. For, what would have become of us, if, in that total eclipse of government, of armed force, and of law, which followed the 24th of February, the People, masters of all, of the fortunes and lives of the citizens, of Heaven and earth, had been a People of Materialists, of Terrorists, and of Atheists? The Revolution would have been a pillage, the Republic a scaffold, the dynasty of the People a deluge of blood. But there was no such thing. God was there. He revealed Himself in the multitude; Materialism disappeared in enthusiasm, which always exhibits the divinity of the human heart.

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We heard but one cry,—“Honor to God! Respect for the altars! Liberty to their ministers! Self-denial, harmony, protection to the weak, inviolability of property, assistance to the miserable!” Yes,—on the first day, and during the whole time that the People was alone and burning with excitement, it was religious! It was not until after the cooling of this enthusiasm that the materialistic sects, who waited their opportunity afar off, and who now torment the People, dared to offer their sensual symbols, and to set up Capital and Interest, the organization of labor, the increase of wages, and equality of conditions in this human manger, as the sole Divinities,—dared to infuse envy against the happy, the breath of hatred as the only consolation to the hearts of the miserable, lightning vengeance against the wrongs of Providence, imprecations against society, blasphemies against the existence of God, the enjoyments and bestialities of the corporeal nature, purchased by complete forgetfulness of the moral nature, and enjoyed in a debauch of ideas, and in a deification of matter.

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This cannot last; the People will not allow themselves to be changed into hogs by the Circes of

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Atheism. Their souls will flash indignation against their transformers. A day will come when they will see that they are impoverished under the pretext of being enriched; that, when they are robbed of their souls and of God, both their titles to liberty are stolen from them. Atheism and Republicanism are two words which exclude each other. Absolutism may thrive without a God, for it needs only slaves. Republicanism cannot exist without a God, for it must have citizens. And what is it that makes citizens? Two things,—the sentiment of their rights, and the sentiment of their duties as a republican People. Where are your rights, if you have not a common Father in Heaven? Where are your duties, if you have not a Judge between your brothers and you? Republicanism draws you in both these ways to God.

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XVII.

Thus, look at every free People, from the mountains of Helvetia to the forests of America; see even the free British nation, where the Aristocracy is only the head of liberty, where the Aristocracy and Democracy mutually respect each other, and balance each other by an exchange of kindnesses and services which sanctify society while fortifying it. Atheism has fled before liberty: in proportion as despotism has receded, the divine idea has advanced in the souls of men. Liberty lives by morality. What is morality without a God? What is a law without a lawgiver?

I know well, and I shall give you the reason hereafter; I know well, and I mourn to think of it, that, even up to the present time, the French People have been the least religious People in Europe.

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Is this because the intelligence of France has not that force, and that severity, which are needed to carry long enough and far enough the idea of God,—the greatest idea of the human soul;—that idea, as it comes from all the evidences of nature, and all the depths of reflection, being the most powerful and the most grave of human intelligence,—and the intelligence of France being the most superficial, the most light, and the least reflecting of the European races?

Is it because our governments have always been charged with thinking, believing, and praying, for us?

Is it that they have always given us gods of the Court, worship according to Etiquette, and religions of State, instead of letting us form, make, and practise our faith for ourselves, by reason, by free-will, by voluntary piety, by association, by tradition, by the sympathies of the community, of worship, and of the family?

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Is it because we are, and always have been, a military People, a nation of soldiers and adventurers, led by kings, heroes, ambitious men, from battle-field to battle-field, making conquests and not keeping them, ravaging, dazzling, charming, and corrupting Europe, and bearing the manners, vices, bravado, lightness, and impiety of the camp into the homes of the People?

I do not know; but it is certain that the nation has an immense progress to make in serious thought, if it wishes to maintain its liberty. If we look at the comparative character, in matters of religious sentiment, of the great nations of Europe, America, and even Asia, the advantage is not on our side. While the great men of other nations live and die upon the scene of history, looking towards heaven, our great men seem to live and die in entire forgetfulness of the only idea for which life or death is worth any thing; they live and die looking at the spectators, or, at most, towards posterity.

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Thus, even at the present time, while we have had the greatest men, other nations have had the greatest citizens. It is great citizens that a Republic needs!

XVIII.

Open the history of America, the history of England, and the history of France; read the great lives, the great deaths, the great sufferings, the sublime words, when the ruling passion of life reveals itself in the last moments of the dying,—and compare them!

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Washington and Franklin fought, spoke, suffered; rose and fell, in their political life, from popularity to ingratitude, from glory to bitter scorn of their citizens,—always in the name of God, for whom they acted; and the liberator of America died, committing to the Divine protection, first, the liberty of his People,—and, afterwards, his own soul to His indulgent judgment.

Strafford, dying for the constitution of his country, wrote to Charles I., to entreat his consent to his punishment, that he might spare trouble to the State: "Put not your trust," wrote he, after this consent was obtained, "put not your trust in princes, or in the son of man, because salvation is not in them, but from on high." While walking to the scaffold, he stopped under the windows of his friend, the Bishop of London; he raised his head towards him, and asked, in a loud voice, the assistance of his prayers in the terrible moment to which he had come. The primate, bowed with age, and bathed in tears, gave, in a stifled voice, his tender benedictions to his unhappy friend,

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and fell, without consciousness, into the arms of his attendants. Strafford continued his way, sustained by the Divine force, descending from this invocation upon him: he spoke with resignation to the People assembled to see him die. "I fear only one thing," said he, "and that is, that this effusion of innocent blood is a bad presage for the liberty of my country!" (Alas! why did not the Convention recall these words among us, in '93?) Stafford continued:—"Now," said he, "I draw near my end. One blow will make my wife a widow, my children orphans, deprive my poor servants of an affectionate master, and separate me from my dear brother, and my friends. May God be all of these!" He disrobed himself, and placed his head on the block. "I give thanks," said he, "to my heavenly Master for helping me to await this blow without fear; for not permitting me to be cast down for a single instant by terror. I repose my head as willingly on this block as I ever laid it down to sleep." This is faith in Patriotism! See Charles I., in his turn,—that model of a kingly death. At the moment that he was to receive the blow of the axe, the edge of which he had coolly examined and touched, he raised his head, and addressed the clergyman who was present:—"Remember!" said he; as if he had said, "Remember to advise my sons never to revenge their father!"

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Sidney, the young martyr of a patriotism, guilty, because too hasty, died to expiate the dream of the freedom of his country. He said to the jailer, "May my blood purify my soul! I rejoice that I die innocent toward the king, but a victim resigned to the King of Heaven, to whom we owe all life."

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The republicans of Cromwell sought only the way of God, even in the blood of battles. Their politics is nothing but faith; their government, a prayer; their death, a holy hymn;—they sang, like the Templars, on their funeral-pile. We see, we feel, we hear God, above all, in these revolutions, in these great popular movements, and in the souls of the great citizens of these nations.

But recross the Atlantic, traverse the Channel, approach our own time, open our annals; and listen to the great political actors in the drama of our liberty. It would seem as if God was hidden from the souls of men; as if his name had never been written in the language. History will have the air of being atheistic, while recounting to posterity these *annihilations*, rather than *deaths*, of the celebrated men of the greatest years of France. The victims alone have a God; the tribunes and lictors have none.

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See Mirabeau on his death-bed. "Crown me with flowers," said he, "intoxicate me with perfumes, let me die with the sound of delicious music." Not one word of God, or of his soul! A sensual philosopher, he asks of death only a supreme sensualism; he desires to give a last pleasure even to agony.

Look at Madam Roland, that strong woman of the Revolution,—upon the car that carries her to death. She looks with scorn upon the stupid People, who kill their prophets and their sibyls. Not one glance to Heaven; only an exclamation for the earth she leaves:—"O, Liberty!"

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Approach the prison door of the Girondines: their last night is a banquet, and their last hymn is the *Marseillaise*!

Follow Camille Desmoulins to punishment:—a cold and indecent pleasantry at the tribunal; one long imprecation on the road to the guillotine;—those are the last thoughts of this dying man, about to appear on high!

Listen to Danton, upon the platform of the scaffold, one step from God and immortality:—"I have enjoyed much; let me go to sleep," he says;—then, to the executioner, "You will show my head to the People; it is worth while!" Annihilation for a confession of faith; vanity for his last sigh: such is the Frenchman of these latter days!

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What do you think of the religious sentiment of a free People, whose great characters seem to walk thus in procession to annihilation; and die, without even death, that terrible minister, recalling to their minds the fear or the promises of God?

Thus the Republic,—which had no future,—reared by these men, and mere parties, was quickly overthrown in blood. Liberty, achieved by so much heroism and genius, did not find in France a conscience to shelter it, a God to avenge it, a People to defend it, against that other Atheism called Glory! All was finished by a soldier, and by the apostacy of republicans travestied into courtiers! And what could you expect? Republican Atheism has no reason to be heroic. If it is terrified, it yields. Would one buy it, it sells itself; it would be most foolish to sacrifice itself. Who would mourn for it?—the People are ungrateful, and God does not exist.

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Thus end atheistic revolutions!

XIX.

If you wish that this revolution should not have the same end, beware of abject Materialism, degrading Sensualism, gross Socialism, of besotted Communism; of all these doctrines of flesh and blood, of meat and drink, of hunger and thirst, of wages and traffic, which these corruptors of the soul of the People preach to you, exclusively, as the sole thought, the sole hope, as the only duty, and only end of man! They will soon make you slaves of ease, serfs of your desires.

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Are you willing to have inscribed on the tomb of our French race, as on that of the *Sybarites*, this epitaph: "This People ate and drank well, while they browsed upon the earth?" No! You desire that History should write thus: "This People worshipped well, served God and humanity well,—in thought, in philosophy, in religion, in literature, in arts, in arms, in labor, in liberty, in their Aristocracies, in their Democracies, in their Monarchies, and their Republics! This nation was the spiritual laborer, the conqueror of truth; the disciple of the highest God, in all the ways of civilization,—and, to approach nearer to him, it invented the Republic, that government of duties and of rights, that rule of spiritualism, which finds in *ideas* its only sovereignty."

Seek God, then. This is your nature and your grandeur. And do not seek Him in these Materialisms! For God is not below,—he is on high! [Pg 71]

LAMARTINE,

Representative of the People.

THE END.

Transcriber's Note:

This text uses some variant spelling—for example, partizan, demagogical, apostacy, corruptors. This has been preserved as printed.

The ellipsis in this text uses asterisks rather than dots.

On page 62, the semicolon following 'rose' has been moved to follow 'suffered'—"... fought, spoke, suffered; rose and fell ..."

A repetition of the book title has been deleted.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ATHEISM AMONG THE PEOPLE ***

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