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the Suppression of Vice, on Their Malignant Efforts to
Prevent a Free Enquiry After Truth and Reason, by Richard
Carlile**

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Author: Richard Carlile

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A LETTER TO THE SOCIETY FOR THE SUPPRESSION
OF VICE, ON THEIR MALIGNANT EFFORTS TO PREVENT A FREE ENQUIRY AFTER TRUTH AND REASON

A LETTER

**To The Society for the Suppression of Vice,
ON THEIR Malignant Efforts
TO PREVENT A FREE ENQUIRY
After TRUTH AND REASON**

By R. Carlile

LONDON

1819

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LETTER

Associated Persecutors,

That envenomed and malign spirit which you have so prominently displayed, during the short time since you have turned your attentions towards my publications, precludes the necessity of my offering any apology for addressing you in a public letter.

Having immured me within the walls of a prison, methinks I see a demoniac smile glide over your several cheeks with the glowing expression; of "we have now crushed him."—Be not too sanguine; feeble as my efforts may be to propagate those principles, on which, (according to my humble conceptions,) the basis of true morality and virtue must be founded, nor the fear of imprisonment, nor the fear of death shall deter me from a perseverance. What is the religion that you profess, that you are so much alarmed at every attempt to investigate its merits? What is the basis of your pretended morality and virtue, when you betray a fear of being left naked as the breeze leaves the stem of the woolly dandelion? What is that chimerical faith in which you pretend to centre your future hopes, if you fear the result of your fellow mortal's enquiry into it? On what ground must the established and dissenting codes of religion, of which you boast, (and express your determination to support, by imprisonments and punishments of such persons as shall attempt to inspect its foundation,) be raised, when a small volume of enquiry into its origin shakes its very centre, and threatens a total annihilation? Pause! ye deluded and deluding hypocrites, and I will compromise the matter with you. But how? Shall it be an instance of that nature where many individuals whom you have laid under the charge of vending, what both you and I consider obscene and objectionable books and prints, have more than once satisfied your virtuous scruples by a fee? Pray, would my paying all the expences you have incurred in this prosecution, satiate that appetite which feeds on virtue whilst it falsely affects to destroy vice? Is your answer—yes? I disdain it. Nothing but a fair exposition of both our views shall induce me to compromise this important question; rendered the more important, because a sycophantic and hypocritical society—a refined banditti attempts to crush it in its bud. No, the compromise I will make with you shall be, either, that you shall renounce those persecutions you have instituted against me, or I will expose your object in all its hideous features. Although, like the assassin, you endeavour to conceal both your names and intentions, and make a hungry Lawyer* your instrument, yet the community at large; who have been more injured than amended by your false pretences, will assist me in depicting your banditti in its real colours.

** Prichard, of Essex-street, in the Strand, whose clerks and inmates are used as informers to this Society.*

By every exertion and enquiry that I could make, I have not been able to obtain a list of your names, and am given to understand that no such thing has been published for many years past. It appears, that in the earlier part of your institution, you regularly published, your names, but that the infamy which has, of late, been attached to your proceedings, has deterred you from continuing it. As the best proof of virtue arises when it is exposed to the fangs of vice, I challenge you to proceed in your persecutions. But let us here examine how the question stands between us. I have published a book, the contents of which you charge to be impious blasphemous, and profane, tending to bring into disrepute the Christian Religion. I reply, that this book does not merit the charge instituted against it, nor has it any other tendency than that of bringing into disrepute the religions that are not supported by human reason, or divine authority.

Did any thing but vindictive malice guide your councils, you would have waited the time when I should have been placed before a jury of my own countrymen, and there receive the reward, or punishment consequent on their verdict. But no! the Society for the Suppression of Vice cannot suppress their appetite for rancorous punishment, but seize their victim, tear him from a fond and agonized family, and within two hours lodge him within the walls of Newgate. For what? for doing that, which, whether it is-an offence or not, is but matter of opinion, the publication can injure no one but those panders who prey on the vitals of their country. The publication, I admit, may be offensive to some, but not to the virtuous and well meaning part of the community; it is offensive to those persons only who are interested in supporting the corruptions and abuses of the system we live under.

You appear to be following the course which the Attorney General (Shepherd) followed towards me in 1817, in regard to the Parodies*; that is, you have no hopes of being able to obtain the verdict of a jury against the work, and you are anxious to glut your vengeance with punishment before trial.

** The writer of this letter was eighteen weeks in the King's Bench Prison for re-publishing the Parodies, and was never brought to trial; it was he who challenged the Attorney General to bring the Parodies before a jury, which led to so grand and noble a result.*

I doubt whether any of you who have instigated these Prosecutions have ever read the Theological Writings of Thomas Paine, for if you had read them, And had possessed the least conception of vice and virtue, you would have found nothing of a vicious tendency in them, you would have found nothing that came within the province of your professions to prosecute for.

Have you no priests in your Society? Why do you not set them to write a volume of the same size to refute the arguments and assertions of Paine? I will pledge myself to sell it with the other, Is there not a Bishop amongst you that can again attempt to do what Watson has vainly attempted? For shame! do not attempt to destroy by the sword of perverted law what so many bishops and clergy are so well qualified to destroy by argument and reason. For what do they receive so many thousands of the public money? For what have we universities and colleges, and so many thousand priests who have to boast of collegiate education? unless it is to support by argument, intellectual reasoning, and controversial disputation, the several doctrines and dogmas which they profess to teach, and wish us to believe. For shame! I say again, spur them on, and do not let their professions be set at 'nought by a few untutored minds. They must either do this, or raise again the

blood-stained standard of the cross, and again enforce their doctrines by the sword.

Christianity, like the material world, has had its rise, its progress, and is now experiencing its decay, but differs in this point, that there is no hope of its regenerating or revivifying. And vain will be the attempt to oppose it to human reason. The press, that dreadful park of artillery, will continue to open its destructive fire on superstition, bigotry, and religious and civil despotism; and what shall check its career?

Hear, ye promoters of theological dissensions, and tremble, whilst I tell you, that you possess the same dispositions as your ancestors, who kindled the flames in Smithfield. Would public opinion tolerate it, you would pursue me to the stake with the same satisfaction you have pursued me to a prison. Reserving for a better opportunity any further opinions and observations on your character, conduct, and views as a Society, I would beg leave to call your attention to a work lately published in London, entitled the Principles of Nature, by Elihu Palmer, the first chapter of which I will here insert as a specimen, which is strictly applicable to our relative situations, with the exception of a few of the first sentences.

PRINCIPLES OF NATURE, by Elihu Palmer

"CHAPTER I.

"The Power of Intellect, its Duty, and the Obstacles that oppose its Progress.

"The sources of hope and consolation to the human race are to be sought for in the energy of intellectual powers. To these, every specific amelioration must bear a constant and invariable reference; and whatever opposes the progress of such a power, is unquestionably in most pointed opposition to the best and most important interest of our species. The organic construction of man induces a strong conclusion that no limits can possibly be assigned to his moral and scientific improvements. The question relative to the nature and substance of the human mind, is of much less consequence than that which relates to the extent of force and capacity, and the diversified modes of beneficial application. The strength of the human understanding is incalculable, its keenness of discernment would ultimately penetrate into every part of nature, were it permitted to operate with uncontrolled and unqualified freedom. It is because this sublime principle of man has been constantly the object of the most scurrilous abuse, and the most detestable invective from superstition, that his moral existence has been buried in the gulf of ignorance, and his intellectual powers tarnished by the ferocious and impure hand of fanaticism. Although we are made capable of sublime reflections, it has hitherto been deemed a crime to think, and a still greater crime to speak our thoughts after they have been conceived. The despotism of the universe had waged war against the power of the human understanding, and for many ages successfully combated, his efforts, but the natural energy of this immortal property of human existence was incapable of being controlled by such, extraneous and degrading restraints. It burst the walls of its prison, explored the earth, discovered the properties of its component parts, analyzed their natures, and gave to them specific classification and arrangement. Not content with terrestrial researches, intellect abandoned the earth, and travelled in quest of science through the celestial regions. The heavens were explored, the stars were counted, and the revolutions of the planets subjected to mathematical calculation. All nature became the theatre of human action, and man in his unbounded and ardent desire attempted to embrace the universe. Such was the nature of his powers, such their strength and fervour, that hopes and anticipations were unqualified and unlimited. The subordinate objects in the great mass of existence were decomposed, and the essential peculiarities of their different natures delineated with astonishing accuracy and wonderful precision. Situated in the midst of a world of physical wonders and having made some progress in the analytical decomposition of material substances, and the relative position of revolving orbs, man began to turn his powers to the nice disquisitions of the subtle properties of his mental existence. Here the force of his faculties was opposed by the darkness and difficulties of the subject; and superstition, ever ready to arrest and destroy moral improvement, cast innumerable difficulties in the way, and the bewildered mind found this part of the system of nature less accessible than the physical universe, whose prominent disparities struck the understanding and presented clear discrimination. The ignorance and barbarism of former ages, it is said, furnish an awful intimation of the imbecility of our mental powers and the hopeless condition of the human race. If thought be reflected back for the purpose of recognizing through a long night of time the miseries and ignorance of the species, there will be found, no doubt, powerful causes of lamentation; but courage will be resuscitated when the energy of intellect is displayed, and the improvement of the world, which has already been made, shall be clearly exhibited to view. It is not sufficient that man acknowledge the possession of his intellectual powers, it is also necessary that these powers should be developed, and their force directed to the discovery of correct principle, and the useful application of it to social life; errors, evils, and vices every where exist, and by these the world has been rendered continually wretched; and the history of mankind furnishes the dreadful lessons, and shocks the sensibility of every human being. The ravage ferocity of, despotism has destroyed the harmony of society; the unrelenting cruelty of superstition has cut asunder the finest fibres that ever concreted the hearts of intelligent beings. It has buried beneath its gloomy vale all the moral properties of our existence, and entombed in the grave of ignorance and terror the most sublime, energies, and the purest affections of the human mind. An important duty is therefore imposed upon intellect, and a departure from its faithful performance should be ranked among the crimes which bate most disgraced and injured the felicity of the world. If the few philanthropists who have embarked in the cause of humanity, have not been adequately rewarded, it is, nevertheless, true, that the principle and force of duty remain the same, unbroken and incapable of being abrogated. It is the discovery and propagation of truth which ought to engage the attention of man, and call forth the powerful

activity of his mind.

"The nature of ancient institutions, instead of forming a reason against the activity of mind, should be considered as constituting a double stimulus; these institutions are such a complete abandonment of every just and correct principle; they have been so destructive in their operation and effects, that nothing but the strong and energetic movement of, the human understanding will be capable of subverting them. The whole earth has been made the wretched abode of ignorance and misery—and to priests and tyrants these dreadful effects are to be attributed. These are the privileged monsters who have subjugated the earth, destroyed the peace and industry of society, and committed the most atrocious of all robberies—that have robbed human nature of its intellectual property, leaving all in a state of waste and barrenness. Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus, and Mahomet, are names celebrated in history; but what are they celebrated for? Have their institutions softened the savage ferocity of man? Have they developed a clear system of principles, either moral, scientific, or philosophical? Have they encouraged the free and unqualified operation of intellect, or rather by their institutions, has not a gloom been thrown over the clearest subjects, and their examination prohibited under the severest penalties? The successors and followers of these men have adhered to the destructive lessons of their masters with undeviating tenacity. This has formed one of the most powerful obstacles to the progress of improvement, and still threatens with eternal *damnation* that man who shall call in question the truth of their *dogmas*, or the divinity of their systems.

"The political tyranny of the earth coalesced with this phalanx of religious despots, and the love of science and of virtue was nearly banished from the world. Twelve centuries of moral and political darkness, in which Europe was involved, had nearly completed the destruction of human dignity, and every thing valuable or ornamental in the character of man. During this long and doleful night of ignorance, slavery, and superstition, Christianity reigned triumphant; its doctrines and divinity were not called in question. The power of the Pope, the Clergy, and the Church, were omnipotent; nothing could restrain their phrenzy, nothing could controul the cruelty of their fanaticism; with mad enthusiasm they set on foot the most bloody and terrific crusades, the object of which was to recover from infidels the *Holy Land*. Seven hundred thousand men are said to have perished in the two first expeditions, which had been thus commenced and carried on by the pious zeal of the Christian church, and in the total amount, several millions were found numbered with the dead—the awful effects of religious fanaticism presuming upon the aid of heaven. It was then that man lost all his dignity, and sunk to the condition of a brute; it was then that intellect received a deadly blow, from which it did not recover till the fifteenth century. From that time to the present, the progress of knowledge has been constantly accelerated; independence of mind has been asserted, and opposing obstacles have been gradually diminished; The church has resigned a part of her power, the better to retain the remainder; civil tyranny has been shaken to its centre in both hemispheres; the malignity of superstition is abating, and every species of *quackery*, imposture, and imposition, are yielding to the light and power of science. An awful contest has commenced, which must terminate in the destruction of thrones and civil despotism—in the annihilation of ecclesiastical pride and domination; or, on the other hand, intellect, science, and manly virtue will be crushed in one general ruin, and the world will retrograde towards a state of ignorance, barbarism, and misery. The latter, however, is an event rendered almost impossible by the discovery of the art of printing, by the expansion of mind, and the general augmentation of knowledge. Church and State may unite to form an insurmountable barrier against the extension of thought, the moral progress of nations, and the felicity of nature; but let it be recollected, that the guarantee for moral and political emancipation is already deposited in the archives of every school and college, and in the mind of every cultivated and enlightened man of all countries. It will henceforth be a vain and fruitless attempt to reduce the earth to that state of slavery of which the history of former ages has furnished such an awful picture. The crimes of ecclesiastical despots are still corroding upon the very vitals of human society; the severities of civil power will never be forgotten. The destructive influence of ancient institutions will teach us to seek in nature and the knowledge of her laws, for the discovery of those principles whose operation alone can emancipate the world from dreadful bondage. If in the succeeding chapters we shall be able to destroy any considerable portion of human errors, and establish some solid truths, our labours will bear a relation to the progressive improvement of the human race, which, to intelligent minds, is of all considerations the most beneficial and important."

I presume, Gentlemen, since you have attempted to suppress certain creeds as well as vice, that each of you are in duty bound to peruse this work, of which this is part and specimen, it is a work which I hold in estimation, and consequently requires your attention.

I hope I shall have the pleasure of selling a few copies of this work to your Honourable Society, whether for the purpose of a prosecution or not, I am quite indifferent, as I hold Paine's opinion to be good, that under a bad government it is well to have a good work prosecuted.

I am, Gentlemen,

Your firm opponent,

R. CARLILE.

COPY OF WARRANT.

Newgate, Feb. 13th, 1819.

England, (to wit).—Whereas it appeareth unto me by the affidavit of George Prichard, and the affidavit of Thomas Fair, that an indictment was found by the Grand Jury for the city of London, against Richard Carlile, late of London, bookseller, for selling a certain blasphemous libel, intitled "Paine's Age of Reason," which indictment has been removed and filed in his Majesty's Court of King's Bench, and to which the said Richard Carlile appeared in the said Court, and gave recognizance to plead thereto within the first eight days of the

next Easter Term. And that since the said Richard Carlile, hath entered into the said recognizance, he hath sold another copy of the said libel to the said Thomas Fair, for which said last mentioned offence, the said George Prichard intends to prosecute the said Richard Carlile in the said Court of King's Bench. These are therefore to will and require, and in his Majesty's name, strictly to charge and command you, and every of you on sight hereof, to apprehend and take the body of the said Richard, and bring him before me or one other of the said Judges of his Majesty's Court of King's Bench, if taken in or near the cities of London and Middlesex, if elsewhere, before some Justice of the Peace near to the place where he shall be herewith taken. To the end that he the said Richard Carlile may become bound to the King's Majesty in the sum of £200, together with two sufficient sureties in the sum of £100 each, for the appearance of the said Richard Carlile in his Majesty's Court of King's Bench, on the first day of next Easter Term, to answer to all and singular indictments against him, for publishing the said libel, and to appear from day to day in the said Court, and not depart until discharged by the said Court. Hereof fail not at your peril. Given under my hand and seal the eleventh day of February, 1819.

(L. S.) C. ABBOTT.

To Thomas Gibbons, gentleman, my tipstaff, or any other tipstaff of his Majesty's Court of King's Bench, and to all chief and petty constables, headboroughs, tything men, and all others whom these may concern.

COPY OF COMMITTAL

The within named Richard Carlile having been brought before me this day, by virtue of the within warrant, and not having sufficient sureties to answer to the offence in the within mentioned warrant, is committed to the custody of the Keeper of his Majesty's gaol of Newgate, being the common gaol of the city of London, where the said Richard Carlile was apprehended upon the said warrant.

Receive the body of the within named Richard Carlile into your custody, and him safely keep until he the said Richard Carlile shall be discharged by due course of law.

Dated the 11th of February, 1819.

G. S. HOLROYD.

To Mr. William Robert Henry Brown, Keeper of his Majesty's gaol of Newgate.

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