

THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OF THE THREE IMPOSTORS, BY

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Dubious author: Bernard de La Monnoye

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE THREE IMPOSTORS

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THREE IMPOSTORS.

TRANSLATED

(WITH NOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS,)

FROM THE FRENCH EDITION OF THE WORK, PUBLISHED
AT AMSTERDAM, 1776.

RE PUBLISHED BY
G. VALE, "BEACON" OFFICE, 3 FRANKLIN-SQUARE,
NEW-YORK :
1846.

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NOTE BY THE AMERICAN PUBLISHER.

We publish this valuable work, for the reasons contained in the following Note, of which we approve:—

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NOTE BY THE BRITISH PUBLISHER.

The following little book I present to the reader without any remarks on the different opinions relative to its antiquity; as the subject is amply discussed in the body of the work, and constitutes one of its most interesting and attractive features. The Edition from which the present is translated was brought me from Paris by a distinguished defender of Civil and Religious Liberty: and as my friend had an anxiety from a thorough conviction of its interest and value, to see it published in the English Language, I have from like feelings brought it before the public; and I am convinced that it is an excellent antidote to Superstition and Intolerance, and eminently calculated to promote the cause of Freedom, Justice, and Morality.

J. MYLES.

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PREFACE BY THE TRANSLATOR.

The Translator of the following little treatise deems it necessary to say a few words as to the object of its publication. It is given to the world, neither with a view to advocate Scepticism, nor to spread infidelity, but simply to vindicate the right of private judgment. No human being is in a position to look into the heart, or to decide correctly as to the creed or conduct of his fellow mortals; and the attributes of the Deity are so far beyond the grasp of limited reason, that man must become a God himself before he can comprehend them. Such being the case, surely all harsh censure of each other's opinions and actions ought to be abandoned; and every one should so train himself as to be enabled to declare with the humane and manly philosopher

"Homo sum, nihil humana me alienum puto."

Dundee, September 1844.

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CONTENTS OF THE PRELIMINARY DISSERTATION.

[DISQUISITIONS](#) on the book entitled "THE THREE IMPOSTORS."

[ANSWER](#) to the dissertation of M. de la Monnoye on the work entitled "THE THREE IMPOSTORS."

[COPY](#) of Part 2d, Vol. 1., Article ix. of "Literary Memoirs," published at the Hague by Henry du Sauzet, 1716.

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DISQUISITIONS ON THE BOOK ENTITLED THE THREE IMPOSTORS.

It has long been a disputed point if there was at anytime a book printed and bearing the title of "The Three Impostors."

M. de la Monnoye, having been informed that a learned German¹ intended to publish a dissertation the object of which was to prove that this work had really been printed, wrote a letter, in refutation, to one of his friends; this letter was given by M. Bayle to M. Basnage de Bauval, who in February 1694, gave an extract from it in his "History of the works of celebrated and learned men." At a later period M. de la Monnoye entered more fully into the subject, in a letter dated at Paris 16th of June, 1712, and addressed to President Bouhier, in which letter, he says, will be found an abridged but complete account of this remarkable book.

He condemns at once the opinion of those who attribute the work to the Emperor Frederick. The false charge, he says, took its rise from a passage in the appendix to a discourse concerning Antichrist, and published by Grotius, wherein he speaks as follows²: "Far be it from me to attribute the book called 'The Three Impostors,' either to the Pope, or to the opponents of the Pope; long ago the enemies of the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa set abroad the report of such a book, as having been written by his command; but from that period nobody has seen it; for which reason I consider it apocryphal."

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Colomiez quotes this, page 28 of his "Historical Miscellanies;" but he adds that there are some blunders—that it was not Frederick I. (Barbarossa,) on whom they intended to fix the authorship, but Frederick II. his grandson. This he says, is apparent from the letters of Pierre des Vignes, the secretary and chancellor of the second Frederick, and from Matthew Paris; inasmuch as they record, that this monarch was blamed for having said that the world had been led aside by "Three Impostors;" but by no means that he had written a book having such a title. The Emperor denied in the strongest terms, that he ever made use of any expression to that effect. He detested the blasphemy with which they charged him, and declared that it was an atrocious calumny; more shame to Lipsius and other writers who have condemned him without sufficiently looking into the evidences.

Averroes, nearly a century previous, had jeered at the three religions, saying³; that "the Jewish religion was a law for children; the Christian religion a law which it was impossible to follow; and the Mahometan religion a law in favor of swine."⁴

Since then, many people have written with great freedom on this same subject.

We read in the works of Thomas de Catimpre, that M. Simon de Tournay had said that "Three Seducers"—Moses, Jesus Christ, and Mahomet, had "mystified mankind with their doctrines." This is evidently the M. Simon de Churnay, of whom Matthew Paris relates some other improprieties, and the same individual whom Polydore Virgil styles *de Turwai*, the orthography in both instances having been mismanaged.

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Amongst the manuscripts of the Abbe Colbert's library, obtained possession of by our sovereign in 1732, there is one numbered 2071, written by Alvaro Pelagius, a Spaniard of the Cordelian order, bishop of Salves and Algarve, and well known on account of his work, "The Lamentation of the Church." He states that an individual named Scotus, of the same order as himself and a Jacobin, was at that time a prisoner at Lisbon on a charge of blasphemy. Scotus, it would appear, had said that he considered Moses, Jesus Christ and Mahomet as "Three

Impostors;" for that, the first had deceived the Jews; the second the Christians; and the third the Saracens.⁵

Gabriel Barlette, in his sermon upon St. Andrew, alludes to Porphyry in this way; "and therefore the notion of Porphyry is absurd, when he says that there had existed three individuals who had turned over the world to their own opinions; the first being Moses amongst the Jewish people—the second Mahomet, and the third Christ."⁶ A strange chronologist to stamp the era of Christ and Porphyry after that of Mahomet!

The Manuscripts of the Vatican, quoted by Odomir Rainoldo in the nineteenth volume of his Ecclesiastical Annals, mention one Jeannin de Solcia, a canon at Bergame, a doctor of civil and canon law, known from a decree of Pope Pius II., as Javinus de Solcia. He was condemned on the 14th November 1459 for having maintained this impiety—that Moses, Jesus Christ, and Mahomet had ruled the world at their pleasure. "Mundum pro suarem libito voluntatum rexisse."

John Louis Vivaldo de Mondovi, who wrote in 1506, and amongst whose works there is a treatise on "The Twelve persecutions of the Church of God," says, in his chapter upon the sixth persecution, that there were people who dared to dispute, which of the three law-givers had been most followed, Jesus Christ, Moses, or Mahomet.⁷

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Herman Ristwyk, a Dutchman, burned at the Hague in 1512, sneered at the Jewish and Christian religions. He does not speak of the Mahometan creed; but a man who could regard Moses and Jesus Christ as impostors, could entertain no better opinion of Mahomet.

Now we must turn to an author, name unknown, but accused of blasphemy against Jesus Christ. The charge was founded upon some papers discovered at Geneva in 1547, amongst the documents belonging to M. Gruet. An Italian, named Fausto da Longiano, had begun a work which he entitled "The Temple of Truth," in which he undertakes no less than to overturn all religions. "I have," he says, "begun another work entitled 'The Temple of Truth.' It is probable that I may divide it into thirty books. In this work will be found the extinction of all sects—Jews, Christian, Mahometan, and other superstitions; and matters will be brought back to their first principles."

Now, amongst the letters of Aretino addressed to Fausto, there is not one to be met with which alludes in any way whatever to this work. Perhaps it had never been written, and although it had been published, it must have been a very different book from the one in question; of which, they pretend that there are some copies in the libraries in Germany, printed in folio, and written in High Dutch.

Claude Beauregard, better known under his Latin appellation Berigardus, a professor of philosophy, first at Paris, next at Pisa, and latterly at Padua, quotes or forges a passage from the work, "The Three Impostors," in which the miracles which Moses performed in Egypt are attributed to the superiority of his *demon*⁸ over that of the Magicians of Pharaoh. Giordano Bruno who was burned at Rome, 17th Feb. 1600, was accused of having advanced something much to the same effect. But although Beauregard and Bruno have indulged in such reveries, and have thought proper to assert that they quoted from the work in question, is this a certain proof that they had read the book? If so they would doubtless have stated whether it was in manuscript, or in print, and referred to the size and the place where they found it.

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Tenzelius, trusting to one of his friends, a pretended ocular witness, gives a description of the book, and specifies the number of leaves and sheets; and attempting to prove in chap. III. of his work that the ambition of legislators is the only source of all religions, he gives as examples Moses, Jesus Christ, and Mahomet. Struvius, after Tenzelius, enters into the same subject, but finding nothing but what a clever fabulist might invent, he seems much inclined to disbelieve in the existence of the book.

A journalist at Leipsic, in his "*acta eruditara*," dated Jan. 1709, pp. 36 and 37, gives the following extract from a letter addressed to him: "Having occasion to be in Saxony I saw, in the Library of M..., a book entitled "The Three Impostors." It is an 8vo volume, in Latin, without the name of the printer or the date of its publication; but to judge from the letter it appears to have been published in Germany. It was to no purpose that I tried to obtain permission to read the whole work. The proprietor of the book, a man of sensitive piety, would not consent to it. I have since learned that a celebrated professor at Stuttgart had offered a great sum of money for the volume. Shortly afterwards I went to Nuremberg, and in talking of this work to M. Andre Mylhendorf, a man respectable alike for his age, and from his learning, he assured me he had read it, and that

M. Wolfer a clergyman had lent it to him. From the manner in which he spoke, I thought it might be a copy of the one alluded to above, and I concluded that it was unquestionably the book referred to; but not that it was in octavo, nor of so old a date, nor perhaps so accurate." The writer of the foregoing was able to throw more light upon the subject and ought to have done so; for it is not enough to say that he had seen the book—he must produce evidence that he had seen it, otherwise he ought to be classed with those who promulgate opinions founded on mere report; in which category we must include all the authors to whom reference is made in this disquisition.

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The first who makes mention of the book as it existed in 1543, is William Postel, in his treatise on the agreement of the Alcoran with the doctrines of the Lutherans or the Evangelists. He calls the work "*Anevangelistes*," and attempts in it to bring the Lutheran doctrines into utter disrepute by proving that they lead straightway to Atheism. To support his argument he instances three or four productions written, as he says, by Atheists, whom he declares to have been the first disciples of this new Gospel. He adds, "my opinion can be vindicated by reference to an infamous pamphlet written by Villanovanus relative to three works respectively entitled 'The Cymbal of the World,' 'Pantagruel,' and the 'New Islands;' the authors of which works were the standard-bearers of the Atheistical party."

This Villanovanus, whom Postel asserts to be the author of the book "*The Three Impostors*," was Michel Servetus the son of a notary, born in 1509, at Villanueva in Aragon, who assumed the name of Villanovanus, in a preface to a Bible which was printed for him at Lyons, 1542, by Hugues de la Porte. In France his designation was Villeneuve, under which title he was impeached, after he had published at Vienna, in Dauphiny, 1553, (the year before his death) the work entitled "*Christianity restored*;" a book extremely rare, on account of the trouble which they took at Geneva to find out the copies of the work and get them burned. In the authentic list of the writings of Servetus, however, we do not find mention made of "*The Three Impostors*." Neither Calvin nor Beza, nor Alexander Morus, nor any other defender of the Huguenot party who wrote against Servetus, and whose interest it was to justify his punishment, and to convict him of having written this work, has laid it to his charge. Postel, an ex-Jesuit, was the first to do so, without grounds.

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Florimond de Remond, a councillor in the Senate at Bordeaux, writes decidedly that he had seen this book in print. His words are; "James Curio, in his *Chronology* 1556, asserts that the Palatinate was filled with scoffers at religion, the Lievanistes, viz. a sect who considered the Sacred Writings as fabulous, and more especially those of Moses, the great Lawgiver of God. Is there not a book, '*The Three Impostors*,' defaming the three religions which alone acknowledge the true God—the Jewish, the Christian, and the Mahometan?—a book composed in Germany, but printed elsewhere at the exact moment when these heretics are employing this individual to spread abroad their doctrines? The very title shows the character of the age which has dared to publish so impious a treatise. I would have referred to it unless Osius and Genebrard had spoken to me on the subject. I recollect that in my earlier days I saw a copy of this work at the College of Presle. It belonged to Ramus, a man distinguished for his extraordinary learning, and who was then employed in deep researches into the mysteries connected with religious belief; which subject he intended to treat in a philosophical manner. At this time they were circulating this iniquitous work amongst the learned, who were very desirous to see it." A curious inquirer into secrets!

Everybody knows Florimond de Remond as an insignificant scribbler. There are three remarkable sayings in currency against him; that "he built without money, that he was a judge without principle, and an author without knowledge."⁹ We know also that he always lent his name to P. Richeaume, a Jesuite much hated by the Protestants, who cloaked his own name by assuming that of the councillor of Bordeaux. Now, if Osius and Genebrard had spoken as decidedly as Florimond de Remond, there might have been somewhat to rest upon; but see what Genebrard says in the thirty-ninth page of his answer to Lambert Danan, printed (octavo) at Paris 1581.¹⁰ "They (his own party) have not driven Blandratus, nor Alciatus, nor Ochinus into Mahometanism; nor have they induced Valleus to profess himself an Atheist; neither have they enticed any one whatever to circulate the work called "*The Three Impostors*," wherein Christ the Lord is alluded to as the second, the other two being Moses and Mahomet."

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Is that the way to identify this impious book? and Genebrard, forsooth had seen it! And can it be, that in the present day people will attempt to get up regular proof to show that such a work exists? It is a well known fact that, in all ages, many lies have been palmed off in reference to books which could never be discovered, although individuals declare that they had seen them and even went

so far as to mention the places where they had been favoured with their perusal.

It has been said that this work was in the library of M. Salvius, the Swedish ambassador, at Munster, and that Queen Christina, unwilling to ask it of him while he lived, immediately sent M. Bourdelet, her chief physician, to entreat his widow to satisfy her curiosity, when he was informed that M. Salvius, having been seized with remorse of conscience on the night of his death, made them burn the work in his presence. A short time afterwards Christiana enquired eagerly after the "*Colloquium Heptaplomerum*" by Bodin, a manuscript, at that period extremely rare; after a long search it was found, but whatever desire the Queen had to see the work in question, and although it was sought after in all the libraries of Europe, she died without having discovered it. Ought we not therefore to conclude that it was never in existence? Without doubt the pains taken by Christina would have led to the discovery of that book which Postel declares was printed in 1543, and which Florimond de Remond says appeared in 1556. Since then different individuals have assigned to it other dates.

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In 1654, Jean Baptiste Morin, a celebrated doctor and mathematician, wrote a letter under the name of Vincent Panurge, which he addressed to himself in this way, "An epistle to that most eminent physician, John Baptist Morin, concerning the 'Three Impostors'."¹¹ The three impostors to whom he refers were Gassendi, Neure, and Bernier, whom he wished to satirize under this title. Christian Kortholt in 1680 employed the same terms in his work against Hebert, Hobbes, and Spinoza. Such has been the use which the learned have made of this work when they wrote against their opponents, and in this way have they drawn upon the credulity of comparatively ignorant people, who, caring little to examine the evidences, have been deceived at once. Is it possible, that if such a work had really existed, it would not have been refuted; just as they refuted the work concerning the Pre-Adamites,¹² written by M. de la Peyrere,—the discourses of Spinoza, and the publications of Bodin? The "*Colloquium Heptaplomerum*," although in manuscript, has been answered; would "The Three Impostors" have met with more favour? How comes it that it has not been condemned, and placed in the Index Expurgatorius, and how has it escaped cremation by the hands of the common hangman? Books against morality have been sometimes tolerated, but those which strongly attack Religion do not escape with impunity. Florimond de Remond, who says that he had seen the book, asserts that he was at that time a youth, old enough perhaps to write fairy tales; he quotes Ramus who had been dead for thirty years, and could not convict him of falsehood; he quotes Osius and Genebrard, but in vague terms, and without pointing out the passage in their works. He says that they were circulating this work—a work which if it existed, would unquestionably have been put under lock and key. Our opponents may produce a passage from Sir Thomas Browne, who, in the 19th sec. part I. of his work styled "*Religio Medici*," translated from English into Latin by a distinguished scholar, uses the following words; "this impious man, the author of this blasphemous work, 'The Three Impostors,' although a stranger to every religion, inasmuch as he was neither a Jew, a Mahometan, nor a Christian, was nevertheless evidently not an Atheist."¹³ From this they would infer that he must have seen the book, when he speaks in such terms of its author. Now, Sir Thomas only says that Bernard Ochinus, who in his opinion was the author of the work, (as he hints in a foot note,) was more of a Deist than an Atheist, and that any Deist of ordinary average intellect and information, was capable of planning and executing such a design. Molikius, in a note upon the passage, denies and justly, that this work was written by Ochinus, for they assert that it was written in Latin, and we know that Ochinus never wrote but in Italian; moreover if he had been suspected of having any connection with this work, his enemies, who made so much clamour against his dialogues concerning the Trinity and Polygamy, would not have spared him. But how can we reconcile Browne and Genebrard who consider Ochinus as a Mahometan, and at the same time declare that he was neither a disciple of Moses, nor of Jesus Christ, nor of Mahomet!

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Naude, by a strange mistake attributes the work to Villeneuve, a comparatively ignorant writer, and Ernstius declares that at Rome he had learned from Campannelle, that Muret, a polished and accomplished author, had written the work more than two centuries after Villaneuve. Ernstius is mistaken. Campannelle also refutes himself, for in the preface to his work, "*Atheism overthrown*," and still more explicitly in his discourse, "*Paganism indefensible*," he affirms that this work came from Germany, but that it was the composition of Muret; a statement entirely opposite to that of Florimond de Remond alluded to before, which holds that the work was written in Germany but published elsewhere. Muret has therefore been falsely accused, and stands in need of no apology. They have judged of his religion from his life. The Huguenot party, vexed that after embracing their doctrines he had abandoned them forever, did not spare him on this occasion, and Beza, in his "*Ecclesiastical History*," reproaches him with two crimes, the second being Atheism. Julius Scaliger, nettled by a *jeu d'esprit* of Muret's against him, has been led to do him

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injustice¹⁴. "Muret," he says maliciously, "would have been a better Christian if he had believed in God; I am aware that he tried to persuade others to do so." In this way have originated false impressions against Muret. Instead of respecting his exemplary piety, of which he gave striking evidence in the last years of his existence, they set themselves half a century after his death, to blacken his character by accusing him of crimes which were unknown to his most avowed enemies, and with which, in his life-time, we are certain that he never was charged. Some ignorant writers who possess no critical acumen, have impeached without any reason whatever the first individual who occurred to their memory. Stephen Dolet of Orleans, Frances Pucci of Florence, John Milton of London, and Merula, a renegade Mahometan, have done so; they have accused Peter Aretin, merely because he was a fearless and licentious writer, without reflecting that he was an uncultivated man, of no learning and scarcely master of his native tongue. For similar reasons they have blamed Poggio and others, and have even gone so far back as Boccaccio, most likely on account of the third tale in his Decameron, where he recounts the fable of three similar rings, of which he makes a dangerous application to the Jewish, Christian, and Mahometan religions, as if insinuating that they might be embraced indifferently, since it was impossible to decide which of them ought to have the preference. Neither have these writers forgot Machiavel; and Decker impeaches Rabelais. The Dutchman also who translates into French the "Religio Medici" of Sir Thomas Browne, in the notes to his 20th chap. accuses Erasmus as well as Machiavel.

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With more apparent reason they attack both Pompanacius and Cardan. The former, in his treatise on the immortality of the soul, where he reasons as a philosopher and speaks abstractly of the Catholic faith—in which (at the end of his work) he solemnly professes himself a believer—is bold enough to add that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul had been propounded by the originators of every religious creed in order to keep their followers in thrall, and that therefore the majority of the human race had been duped. "If the Jewish, Christian, and Mahometan religions," he continues, "are all three of them impostures, it follows that the half of mankind are mistaken." This absurd reasoning, in spite of the precautions of Pompanacius, reached Jacques Carpentier, and induced him to exclaim, "Can any thing be conceived of more truly pernicious than this scepticism, coming as it does from a Christian school of *theology*."¹⁵

Cardan goes still farther wrong in the eleventh of his discourses "On Sophistry," where, after minutely comparing Paganism, Judaism, Christianity, and Mahometanism, and setting the one to contradict the other, without expressing belief in any of them, he finishes rashly in this way; "his igitur arbitrio victoriæ relictes," that is, he leaves it to chance to decide the victory; an expression however which he himself corrected in the second edition of his work.—This retraction did not save him from being most bitterly attacked three years afterward by Joseph Scaliger, on account of the fearful import of the language he had made use of, and of the indifference it showed on the part of Cardan as to which of the four parties might gain the victory, and as to whether that victory were gained by argument or arms.

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In the last article of the work "Naudiana," which is a rhapsodical compound of blunders and falsehood, there are some confused references to "The Three Impostors." The author asserts that Ramus had attributed it to Postel; nothing whatever can be found in the writings of Ramus to establish this. Postel was a singular visionary. Henry Stephanus relates that he had been heard to say, that out of the three religions, the Jewish, the Christian, and the Mahometan, a good one might be made. However, in no part of his work does he call in question the mission of Moses, or the divinity of Christ; neither does he venture to maintain in exact terms that the devout Venetian Hospitaller, whom he calls "his mother Jeanne," would be the Redeemer of women, as Christ had been the Redeemer of men. After explaining that in men there is a masculine part, the *animus*, and a feminine part, the *anima*, he has the absurdity to add that both parts were corrupted by sin and that "his mother Jeanne" might restore the feminine as Christ had restored the masculine. The book in which he utters this absurdity was printed at Paris in 1553, and is by no means so rare but that copies may easily be found. From it we can gather that he would have published the other works also, if it had been true that he had reached this pitch of blasphemy. So far from this being the case, he writes (1543) that the book was written by Michael Servetus; and long afterwards he does not scruple to avenge himself on his Huguenot calumniators, by accusing them, in a letter addressed to Masius, (1563) of having themselves printed the work at Caen: "this infamous commentary or discourse against Moses, Christ, and Mahomet, was lately printed at Cæn, by those who profess themselves the keenest supporters of the Calvinistic doctrines."¹⁶ In the same chapter of "Naudiana," mention is made of one Barnaud, but in terms so perplexed that little can be drawn from them

except that he had seen an octavo work of 98 pages, printed in 1613, entitled "The Geneva Booby." It did not bear where it had been printed, neither was the author's name given. Perhaps it might have been written by Henri de Sponde, afterwards Bishop of Pamier; who says, that at that period there lived a physician named Barnaud an Arian, who had composed this treatise. Now this would make it of a comparatively recent date. The only sensible article in "Naudiana" is towards its conclusion, where Naude, a man of vast experience as a bibliologist, is made to declare that he had never seen the work alluded to, that he did not believe such a work had ever been printed, and that he considered every thing which had been said on this subject as mere invention and fable.

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To this list may be added that notable atheist Julius Cæsar Vanini, burned at Toulouse under the name of Lucilius Vaninus, who was accused of having circulated this vile work in France some years before he was put to death.

If there are writers so credulous and devoid of common sense as to believe in these incoherencies, asserting that the book was publicly sold in many quarters of Europe, they ought to set the matter at rest by producing a single copy; for it cannot be in the case supposed, that the work is so rarely to be met with. But no person has seen a copy, neither of the edition said to have been published by Christian Wechel at Paris, about the middle of the 16th century, nor of that which they attribute to Nachtegal, as printed at the Hague, 1614 or 1615. Father Theophylus Reynaud states that the former had sunk into extreme poverty from the visitations of heaven; and Muller relates of the latter that he was banished from the Hague with infamy. Bayle in his dictionary (article *Wechell*) clearly refutes the calumny against this printer; and in regard to Nachtegal, Spizelius informs us that he was a native of Alkmaer, and banished, not for having published this suppositious work, but for having given utterance to other blasphemies. Now, when we look over with attention and patience what Vincent Placcius says in the folio edition of his immense work concerning "Anonymous writers, and authors who write under false names," and what Christian Kertholt says in his work revised by his son Sebastian regarding "The Three Impostors," and finally what Struvius advances in his treatise (1706) on "Learned Impostors," we can find nothing at all to prove that such a work ever existed; and it is astonishing that Struvius, who in spite of the most specious evidence which Tentzelius had offered him to prove its existence, had always maintained the contrary, was at last persuaded to believe that there really was such a work; and that too, for the most frivolous reason which it is possible to conceive.

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In the preface of "Atheism Overthrown," he discovers that the author of this work, in order to vindicate himself from the crime laid to his charge, declares that "The Three Impostors" had been published thirty years before he was born. This is a strange discovery, but it appeared so satisfactory to Struvius that he ceased to doubt in the existence of such a book, because he knew the year in which Campannelle was born (1568.) and knew also that the book was printed thirty years before this, viz. in 1538. Afterwards in pushing their researches farther, they resolved to consider Boccaccio as the author of the work, from a misinterpreted passage in Chap. 2, No. 6, in the "Atheism Overthrown" where the following words occur; "Hence Boccaccio in his impious fables, contends that there is no distinction between the law of Moses, of Christ and of Mahomet, because they are as like each other as the three similar rings.¹⁷" But does Campannelle, in this passage intend to say that Boccaccio was the author of "The Three Impostors?" So far is this from being the case, that he answers elsewhere the objections of the Atheists against Boccaccio and the book in question; and Struvius himself, in the 9th paragraph of his dissertation on "Learned Impostors" quotes a passage from Ernstius, which states that Campannelle had told him that the book was written by Muret; now Muret having been born in 1526, and the book been printed in 1538, he could only have been 12 years of age; at which time of life we cannot suppose it possible that he was able to write a work of this description. It follows therefore that this book, said to have been written in Latin and printed in Germany, never existed. At no period has there been a printed work, however rarely to be met with, in reference to which very authentic and circumstantial information could not be found.

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Although the works of Michael Servetus may never be met with, it has always been well known that they were printed, and moreover where they were printed. Before the publication of the two modern editions of the "Cymbalum Mundi," composed by Bonnaventure de Perrieres, writing under the assumed name of Thomas du Clevier, who says that he had translated it from the Latin, and of which work only two ancient copies remain, the one in the King's library and the other in that of M. Bigot at Rouen;—before the publication of the the modern editions, it was an ascertained fact that the work had been printed, and the date and name of the bookseller were known. The case is exactly the same as regards "The Blessings of Christianity, or the Scourge of the Faith," the author of which,

Geoffrey Vallee a native of Orleans, was hanged and burned at Greve, on the 9th February 1573, after having adjured his errors. It is a small octavo work of thirty pages, without date, or the name of the place where it was printed; a trifle, feebly reasoned, and now become so rare that perhaps the copy belonging to Monsieur the Abbe d'Estrees is the only one to be found. But although all these works had absolutely perished, no one could doubt their previous existence, the facts on record concerning them being as true, as those concerning 'The Three Impostors' are apocryphal.

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- 1 Daniel George Morof, who died suddenly on the 30th of June 1691. ↑
 - 2 Librum de tribus impostoribus absit ut Papæ tribuam, aut Papæ oppugnatoribus; jam olim inimici Frederici Barbarossæ Imperatoris famam sparserant libri talis, quasi jussu ipsius scripti, sed ab eo tempore, nemo est qui viderit; quare fabulam esse arbitror. ↑
 - 3 Apud Nevizanum 1. Sylvae nupt. 2. n. 121. ↑
 - 4 Doubtless Averroes here alludes to that law of Mahomet which wisely prohibits the use of pork in a hot and pestilential climate.—*Translator's Note.* ↑
 - 5 Disseminavit iste impius haereticus in Hispania, [such is the language made use of by Alvaro Pelagius], quod tres deceptores fuerunt in mundo, scilicet, Moises, qui decepterat Judaeos, et Christus, qui decepterat Christianos, et Mahometus, qui deceptit Sarrazenos. ↑
 - 6 Et sic falsa est Porphirii sententia, qui dixit tres fuisse garrulatores qui totum mundum ad se converterunt; primus fuit Moises in populo Judaico, secundus Mahometus, tertius Christus. ↑
 - 7 Qui in quæstionem vertere presumunt, dicentes; quis in hec mundo majorem gentium aut populorum sequelam habuit, an Christus, an Moises, an Mahometus? ↑
 - 8 Every classical scholar must have heard of the demon of Socrates. The belief in the existence of such agencies was sufficiently prevalent in the East 2000 years ago, and the Jews were in this respect, as credulous as their neighbors. We read in [Acts, c. iv. v. 7](#), that the leaders of the Sanhedrim enquired of the Apostle Peter, "By what power or *by what name*, have ye done this;" evidently acknowledging their belief that it was possible to work miracles by the invocation of some mysterious power. The Apostle, himself a Jew, seems to understand their creed; but he answers them in a way for which they were not altogether prepared.—*Translator's Note.* ↑
 - 9 Ædeficabat sine pecunia, judicabat sine conscientia, scribebat sine scientia. ↑
 - 10 Non Blandratum, non Alciatum, non Ochinum ad Mahotnetismum impulerunt; non Valleum ad atheismi professionem induxerunt; non alium quemdam ad spargendum libellum de tribus impostoribus, quorum secundus esset Christus Dominus, duo alii Moises et Mahometes, pellexerunt. ↑
 - 11 Vincentii Panurgii epistola tribus impostoribus, ad clarissimum virum Joannem—Baptistam Morinum Medicum. ↑
 - 12 Isaac de Peyrere published his Pre-Adamite doctrine in 1655. This set of fanatics, who were persuaded by their lenders that the general race of mankind had lost nothing of their innocence by the fall of Adam, made their appearance, (both men and women) in the streets of Munster, and elsewhere, in the same robeless condition as our first parents were, when they wandered in the bowers of Paradise before the eating of that forbidden fruit, which

"Brought death into the world and all our woe."
- The magistrates of the city attempted to put them down but failed; and the military had some difficulty in extinguishing this absurdity.—*Translator's Note.* ↑
- 13 Monstrum illud hominis, diis inferis a secretis scelus, nefarii illius tractatus de tribus impostoribus author quantumvis ab omni Religione alienus, adeo ut nec Judaeus, nec Turca, nec Christianus fuerit, plane tamen athœus non erat. ↑
 - 14 Consult Bayle's Dictionary on this subject, article, "*Trabea.*" ↑
 - 15 Quid vel hac sola dubitatione in Christiana schola cogitara potest perniciosius? ↑
 - 16 Nefarium tillud rium impostorum commentum sen liber contra Christum, Moisem et Mahometan Capomi nuper ab illis qui Evangelo Calvini so adductissimos profitentur typis excussus est. ↑
 - 17 Hinc Boccaccius in fabellis probare contendit non posse discerni inter legem Christi, Moises et Mahometis, quia eadem signa habent uti tres annuli consimiles. ↑

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ANSWER
TO THE DISSERTATION OF MONSIEUR DE LA
MONNOYE ON THE WORK ENTITLED
"THE THREE IMPOSTORS."

An attempt at discussion, which you will find at the end of the new edition of "Menagiana," which has just been published in this country, affords me the opportunity of giving some information to the public on a subject which appears to call into exercise the ingenuity of almost all the learned; and at the same time of vindicating the character of many eminent men, and men of distinguished merit, who have been attacked as the authors of the work which forms the subject of a disquisition attributed to M. de la Monnoye. Without doubt this new book is already in your possession; you will perceive that I allude to "The Three Impostors." The author of the dissertation upholds the non-existence of such a book, and attempts to establish his point by bringing forward conjectures, without advancing any evidence capable in the smallest degree of influencing the opinions of those who are accustomed to examine before they decide. I will not undertake to refute *seriatim* the articles contained in a dissertation, the substance of which is to be found in a Latin discourse by M. Burkhard Gotthelf Struve, on "Learned Impostors," printed for the second time at Geneva, by Müller in 1706, and which M. de la Monnoye must have seen, because he quotes from it. He will acknowledge that I am quite prepared to overturn his arguments, when I inform him that I have read this celebrated little work, and that I have it in my library. I will give you and the public an account of the way in which I discovered it, and as it is in my possession, I will subjoin a short but faithful description of it.

Being at Frankfort on the Main in 1706, I called one day in company with a Jew, and a friend named Frecht, at that time a student in Theology, on an eminent bookseller in whose establishment almost every work was to be met with. We were examining his catalogue when there entered a German officer, who addressed himself to the proprietor in German, and asked him if he was ready to agree to his proposals, or if another merchant should be sought after. Frecht, who formerly was acquainted with the officer, saluted him and was recognised. This gave an opportunity to my friend of asking the officer, whose name was Trawsendorff, what transaction he had with the bookseller. Trawsendorff told him that he had two manuscripts and a very old book in his possession, by the sale of which he expected to raise a sum of money against the approaching campaign, and that the bookseller higgled on 50 Rix-dollars, being unwilling to advance more than 450 for the three works, which he, (the officer), valued at 500. This great sum of money demanded for two manuscripts and a little book excited the curiosity of Frecht, who asked of his friend if he might see the productions which he wished to sell at so dear a rate. Trawsendorff immediately drew from his pocket a parchment envelope, tied with a silk thread, which he opened, and from which he took the three books. We went into the parlour of the bookseller to examine them at our leisure, and the first which Frecht looked at had been printed, but had a title written in Italian instead of its real title, which had been defaced. It ran thus; "Spaccio della Bestia trionfante," and did not appear to be of an ancient date. It struck me as being the same work which Toland translated into English, and printed some years ago, and the copies of which sell very high.

The second we looked at was an old Latin manuscript written in a character very difficult to decypher, without any title; but at the top of the first page there were written these words, "Fredric the Emperor wishes health to Otho, his most illustrious and dearest friend.¹"

The work opens with a letter, the first lines of which are as follows; "I will send you as soon as possible a copy of the work on the three most celebrated deceivers of mankind, a work written at my request by a very learned man, and transcribed by my order for my library; and along with it another work written in the same pure and polished style, for, &c."² The third was also a Latin manuscript without a title, commencing with a quotation from Cicero.

Frecht having glanced over the books in a hurried way, fixed his attention upon the second, of which he had often heard, and in respect to which he had read many conflicting histories; and without looking into the other two, he took Trawsendorff aside and told him that he would easily find purchasers of the three works. He spoke little of the Italian work, and by reading a few passages he showed him that the other was a demonstration of Atheism. As the bookseller still held to his terms, and would not come up to the officer's demand, we went all three to the lodgings of Frecht, who having an object in view called for wine, and while begging Trawsendorff to inform us how he came by the works, he made him swallow so many bumpers that he soon became half intoxicated, so that Frecht had little difficulty in persuading him to leave with him the manuscript of "The Three most celebrated Deceivers of Mankind;" but he made him take a solemn oath that he would not copy it. On this condition, the work was to be left with us from Wednesday till Sunday night, when Trawsendorff was to call again and take his share of a few bottles of Frecht's wine, which seemed to be much to his taste.

As I had quite as much desire as Frecht to be acquainted with the book, we sat down immediately to read it over, determining to sleep very little until Sunday night. It was not very large—an octavo work of ten sections, exclusive of the prefatory letter, but in so small a character, and so full of contractions, besides being without points, that we had much difficulty in decyphering the first page in two hours. After this however we read it more easily, which made me suggest to my friend a plan (rather Jesuitical) whereby he might obtain a copy of this celebrated work without breaking his oath which he had taken on compulsion;—that it was likely that Trawsendorff, when he insisted that it should not be copied, only meant that he should not transcribe the words—in short that we were quite at liberty to translate it. To which Frecht consented after some scruples, and we set to work immediately. On Sunday we were in possession of the work a little before midnight. Trawsendorff afterwards got his 500 rix-dollars for the work from a bookseller who had been commissioned by a Prince of the House of Saxe to purchase it. The Prince knew that it had been stolen from the Royal Library at Munich, when the Germans obtained possession of the city after the defeat of the French and Bavarians at Hochstet, and Trawsendorff acknowledged to us that, being alone in the library of the Elector, the parchment envelope with its yellow silk thread attracted his attention, and that he could not resist the temptation to steal it: expecting that it contained some rare production, in which he was not disappointed.

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To complete the history of this treatise, I will give you the conjectures which Frecht and I made as to its origin. We agreed at once that the "*Illustrissimo Otho*" to whom it was sent, was "Otho the Illustrious," Duke of Bavaria, son of Louis I. and grandson of "Otho the Great," Count of Schiven and Witelspach, to whom the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa had given Bavaria as a reward for his fidelity, after he took it away from "Henry the Lion," as a punishment for his ingratitude. "Otho the Illustrious" succeeded his father Louis I., in 1230, under the reign of Frederick II., grandson of Frederick Barbarossa, who had at that time quarrelled with the Count of Rome on his return from Jerusalem. This led us to think that the letters F. I. S. D. which followed the "*Amico meo carissimo*," denoted Fredericus Imperator Salutem Dicit, and that the treatise was written posterior to the year 1230, by the order of this Emperor, inflamed as he was against all Religions in consequence of the bad treatment he had met with from the head of his own, viz. Pope Gregory IX. by whom he had been excommunicated before he set out, and who persecuted him even in Syria by intriguing to such an extent, that the Emperor's army refused to obey his orders. This Prince on his return besieged the Pope at Rome, after having ravaged the neighboring territory, and thereafter made a peace with him which was of no long duration, and which was followed by an animosity so bitter between him and the Holy Pontiff, that it only ceased at the death of the latter, who died heart-broken that Frederick triumphed in spite of his empty fulminations, and that he had unmasked the vices of the Papal Chair in satirical verses which he circulated in every quarter,—in Germany, Italy, and France. But we could not discover who was the "*doctissimus vir*," with whom Otho appears to have held converse on the subject in the library, and apparently in the company of the Emperor; unless indeed it were the celebrated Pierre des Vignes, the secretary, or as others maintain, the chancellor of Frederick II. His discourse "On Sovereign Power," and his "Letters," give proof of his learning, and the zeal which he had for the interests of his master, and of his own hatred of Pope Gregory IX, and the Ecclesiastics and established Churches of his day. It is true, that in one letter he attempts to exculpate his master from the charges against him as the author of this book: but this strengthens the supposition, and inclines us to think he only pleaded for Frederick, to cloak his own share in so scandalous a work. At all events we must believe that he would have confessed the truth when Frederick, on suspicion that he had conspired against his life, condemned him to lose his eyes, and handed him over to the inhabitants of Pisa, his cruel enemies; and where despair hurried on his death in an infamous dungeon where he could hold intercourse with no one.

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In this way we can repel the false charges brought against Averroes, Boccaccio, Dolet, Aretino, Servetus, Ochinus, Postel, Pompanacius, Campannelle, Poggio, Pulci, Muret, Vanini, Milton, and many others; the book having been written by a learned man in high repute at the court of this Emperor, and by his order. As to the *printing* of the book they can bring forward no *proof* whatever; and it is impossible to conceive that Frederick, surrounded as he was by enemies, would have circulated a work which gave fair opportunity of proclaiming his infidelity. It is probable therefore that there are only two copies, the original one and that sent to Otho of Bavaria.

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This will suffice as to the discovery of the book, and its date; we come now to what it contains.

It is divided into six books or chapters, every one of which contains several

paragraphs. The first Chapter has for its title "Of God," and contains six paragraphs in which the author, wishing to appear free from party or educational prejudices, shows that although mankind have a real interest in ascertaining the truth, nevertheless they found upon opinions and imaginations alone; and meeting with people whose interest it is to keep them in this state, they are made to rest, contented in it, although they could easily shake off the yoke by making the slightest use of their reason. He passes next to the ideas which men entertain of the Divinity, and prove that they are injurious, inasmuch as they have led to the creation of the most fearful and imperfect being whom it is possible to conceive of; and he then blames the ignorance of the people, or rather their foolish credulity in putting faith in the visions of Prophets and Apostles, of whom he draws a portrait suited to the ideas which he entertains of them.

The second Chapter treats of the reasons which have led men to believe in a divinity. It is divided into eleven paragraphs, where he proves that the ignorance of physical causes has given birth to a fear natural enough at the sight of a thousand terrible accidents, and has led them to believe in the existence of some invisible Power; a doubt, and a fear, of which subtle politicians have taken advantage, for their own interest, and which have given rise to a belief in this Existence, which has been confirmed by others who have found it for their own benefit to maintain it; although it is merely grounded on the folly of the common people, always admirers of the extraordinary, the sublime, and the marvellous. He next inquires into the nature of the Divinity, and overturns the vulgar belief in final causes, as contrary to sound philosophy. In fine, he makes it appear that such ideas of the Divinity are only formed after having decided what is perfect, good, evil, virtue, vice, according to imagination, and often as false as possible. In his tenth paragraph the author explains his own opinion as to the Divinity, which is conformable to the system of the Pantheists, saying that the word God represents an infinite Being, one of whose attributes is that he is of unlimited extension, and consequently that he is infinite and eternal. In the eleventh paragraph he treats with ridicule the popular opinion which is given to the Deity, a resemblance to the kings of the earth; and passing to the sacred books, he speaks of them in a very unfavourable manner. [29]

The third Chapter has for its title "The signification of the word Theology, and how, and for what purpose so many religions have been introduced into the world."—This chapter contains twenty-three paragraphs. In the ninth he examines the origin of religions; and brings forward examples and reasonings which, so far from being divine, are altogether the work of politicians. In the tenth paragraph he undertakes to expose the imposture of Moses, showing what he was, and how he managed to establish the Jewish religion. In the eleventh paragraph he inquires into the impostures of several politicians such as Numa, and Alexander the Great. In the twelfth he examines the birth of Jesus Christ; in the thirteenth and following he considers his morality, which he does not think more pure than that of a great number of ancient philosophers; in the nineteenth he inquires whether his reputation after his death is sufficient to warrant his believing in his divinity. Lastly, in the twenty-second and twenty-third paragraphs, he considers the imposture of Mahomet, of whom he does not say so much, because he has not to encounter so many advocates of his doctrine as that of the two others.

The fourth Chapter treats of truth evident and obvious to the senses, and consists only of six paragraphs, where he demonstrates what really is the divinity, and what are his attributes: he rejects the belief in a life to come, and the existence of spirits.

The fifth Chapter treats "Of the Soul." It consists of seven paragraphs in which, after having exposed the vulgar opinions, he gives those of the Philosophers of antiquity, and concludes by showing the nature of the Soul according to his own system.

In the sixth and last Chapter of seven paragraphs, he discourses on the Spirits called *Demons*, and shows the origin and falsity of the opinions as to their existence.—Such is the anatomy of this celebrated work. I might have given it in a manner more extended and more minute; but besides that this letter is already too long, I think that enough has been said to give insight into the nature of its contents. A thousand other reasons which you will well enough understand, have prevented me from entering upon it to so great a length as I could have done; "Est modus in rebus."³ [30]

Now although this book were ready to be printed with the preface in which I have given its history, and its discovery, with some conjectures as to its origin, and a few remarks which may be placed at its conclusion, yet I do not believe that it will live to see the day when men will be compelled all at once to quit

their opinions and their imaginations, as they have quited their syllogisms, their canons, and their other antiquated modes. As for me I will not expose myself to the *Theological stylus*⁴, which I fear as much as Fra-Poulo feared the Roman stylus, to afford to a few learned men the pleasure of reading this little treatise; but neither will I be so superstitious, on my death bed, as to make it be thrown into the flames, which we are informed was done by Salvius, the Swedish ambassador at the peace of Munster. Those who come after me may do what seems them good—they cannot disturb me in the tomb. Before I descend to that, I remain with much respect, your most obedient servant,

J. L. R. L.

LEYDEN, 1st January 1716.

[This letter was written by M. Pierre Frederick Arpe, of Kiel in Holstein; the author of an apology for Vanini, printed in octavo at Rotterdam, 1712]

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¹ F. I. S. D. namely, Fredericus Imperator Salutem Dicit Othoni illustrissimo amico meo carrissimo. ↑

² Quod de tribus famosissimis nationum deceptoribus in ordinem jussu meo digessit doctissimus ille vir quorum sermonem de illa re in museo meo habustiae exscribi curavi; atque Codicem illum stylo aequae vero ac puro scriptum ad te quam primum mitto; etenim, &c. ↑

³ There is a measure in every thing. ↑

⁴ This phrase is frequently employed to express ecclesiastical criticism. Its first application however had a more pungent meaning.—The individual here alluded to having boldly assailed the errors of the Church was attacked one evening by an assassin. Fortunately the blow did not prove fatal; but the weapon (a stylus, or dagger, which is also the Latin name for a pen) having been left in the wound—on his recovery he wore it in his girdle labelled, “The Theological Stylus,” or Pen of the Church. The trenchant powers of this instrument have more frequently been employed to repress truth, than to refute argument. ↑

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COPY OF THE SECOND PART, VOL. I, ARTICLE IX. OF, “LITERARY MEMOIRS.” PUBLISHED AT THE HAGUE BY HENRY DU SAUZET, 1716.

It is impossible in the present day to doubt the existence of “The Three Impostors,” since we find several manuscript copies of it. If M. de la Monnoye had observed the agreement of it with an extract published at Leyden, 1st. Jan. 1716,—the same division into six chapters—the same titles, and the same subjects of which they treat, he would have exclaimed against the forgery of this work, improperly attributed to Pierre des Vignes, the Secretary and Chancellor of Frederick II. This judicious critic long ago observed the difference between the Gothic style of Pierre des Vignes in his Epistles, and that of the letter pretended to be addressed to the Duke of Bavaria, “Otho the illustrious,” when they sent him the work. A more important point has not escaped the notice of the learned. This treatise is written and argued in the method and upon the principles of the New Philosophy, which was not introduced until about the middle of the seventeenth century, after Descartes, Gassendi, Bernier, and some others had explained its principles in a juster and clearer way than did the ancient philosophers, who wished to preserve their secrets, as they affected a mysterious obscurity in favor of the initiated. The author himself, in the fifteen chapter of his work, names Descartes, and combats the arguments of this great man on the subject of the soul. Neither Pierre des Vignes, nor any of those whom they have attempted to pass off as the author of this book, could have reasoned according to the principles of the new Philosophy, which was not introduced till after they had written. To whom then must the work be attributed? We must conclude that it cannot be of the same date as the short letter printed at Leyden, 1717. But another difficulty occurs. Tentzelius, who wrote in 1689, also gives an extract from this book upon the credit of a pretended ocular witness. But without attempting to fix the date of this book, which is said to have been composed in Latin and printed; the small French manuscript treatise, whether it had ever been written in that language or whether it is translated from the Latin, (which is difficult to believe,) cannot be of a very ancient date.

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This is not the only book composed under this title and upon the same subject. A

man whose character and profession ought to have led him to engage in matters more decorous, composed a great work (in French) under the same title. In his preface he says that it is long since he had heard of "The Three Impostors," but that he had never found any part of it, whether there had never existed such a work, or whether it be lost; therefore he attempts to restore it by writing on the same subject. His work is very long, very wearisome, and very badly written; with little principles and less argument. It is a confused jumble of all the invectives and calumnies circulated against the Three Legislators. The manuscript was in two volumes folio, thick, and legible enough, although in small characters—the book is divided into a great many chapters. Another similar manuscript was found after the death of a nobleman. This gave rise to an attempt to seize the author who having been informed of it took care that nothing should be found among his papers to convict him. Afterwards he lived in a monastery under penance. In 1733 he recovered his liberty and enjoyed a revenue of 250 livres from the Abbey of St. Liguarie, in addition to a reserved one of 350 livres from his benefice. His name was Guillaume, Cure of Fresne-sur-Berny, and the brother of a labourer in the Netherlands. He was at one time Regent of the College of Montaigu; in his youth he had been a dragoon, and then he became a Capuchin.

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A TREATISE ON THE THREE IMPOSTORS.

CHAP. I.—OF GOD.

§ 1.

Although it is important that all men should know the truth, there are nevertheless few who enjoy this advantage; some are incapable of finding it out unassisted, and others will not put themselves to the trouble. It is not to be wondered at therefore, if the world is filled with vain and absurd opinions; and nothing is more adapted to spread them than ignorance, which is the sole originator of the false ideas which prevail as to the Divinity, the Soul, the existence of Spirits, and almost all the other subjects which go to make up Theology. Custom is powerful—men rest contented in the prejudices of their birth, and leave the care of the most essential matters to interested parties, who make it a rule to uphold with bigotry the received opinions, and who dare not overturn them lest in so doing they should destroy themselves.

§ 2.

What renders the evil without remedy is this, that, after having established these false ideas of the Divinity, they neglect no plan to compel the people to believe in them, without permitting any one to examine for himself. On the contrary, they have excited a hatred against philosophers—the truly learned, lest the doctrines which they would teach should lead to the exposure of those errors in which they have plunged mankind. The advocates of these foolish notions have succeeded so well, that it is dangerous to combat them. It is too much the interest of those impostors that the people be ignorant, to permit them to become enlightened. Thus the truth must either be kept in abeyance, or its promoters be prepared to be sacrificed at the shrine of a false philosophy, and to suffer from the rage of grovelling and interested minds.

§ 3.

If the people could understand into what an abyss they are sunk by ignorance, they would speedily shake off the yoke of their unworthy leaders, for it is impossible not to discover the truth when reason is left to its unrestrained exercise.

These deceivers are so well aware of this, that to prevent the good effects which Truth would infallibly produce, they have painted it as a monster incapable of giving rise to any virtuous sentiment; although, in general terms, they condemn *unreasonable* people, they would nevertheless be much disconcerted if the truth were heard. Thus these sworn enemies to common sense are perpetually falling into contradictions, and it is difficult to discover at what they are aiming. If it be true that reason is the only light which men ought to follow, and if the people are not so incapable of judging as they wish us to believe, it ought to be the object of those who instruct them to endeavour to rectify the false reasonings, and to uproot their prejudices; then their eyes would be gradually opened and their minds convinced that the Deity is by no means what is generally supposed.

§ 4.

To attain this, there is no need for lofty speculations, nor for penetrating far into the mysteries of nature. It requires only a little common sense to perceive that the Deity is neither choleric nor jealous; that justice and mercy are alike falsely considered as his attributes; and that, all that the Prophets and Apostles have said give us no information either as to his nature, or to his essence.

In short to speak plainly and to put the matter on its proper footing, it will be allowed that these teachers were neither more able nor better instructed than the rest of mankind; so far from that being the case, what they advance regarding the Deity is so gross that the people must be altogether ignorant to credit it. Although this is apparent enough we will attempt to explain it more at length, by inquiring, if there is any evidence that the Prophets and Apostles were differently constituted from other men.

§ 5.

It is agreed, that as far as descent, and the common duties of life are implicated, they possessed no quality to mark them out from the rest of mankind. They were begotten by men, they were born of women, and they sustained themselves as we do in the present day. In reference to their minds, people would have us believe that God dealt with these prophets in a way differing from that wherein he deals with ordinary mortals, and that he disclosed himself to them in a manner quite exclusive. Many persons consider this matter as a proved and ascertained fact, without reflecting that every man may meet his counterpart, and that we have one common origin; endeavouring at the same time to persuade us that these men were cast in no common mould and that they were selected by the Deity to proclaim his oracles. Now, apart from the consideration that these inspired people were gifted with only an average intellect, and with an understanding not much above the common, what do we find in their writings to justify us in forming so exalted an opinion of them? The matter of which they treat is for the most part so obscure that no one can comprehend it, and thrown together with so little order that it is easy to perceive they did not understand it themselves; the whole showing that they were both knaves and fools. Their impudence in boasting that whatever they announced to the people came immediately from God, gave rise to the respect which was paid to them. This assertion on their part was equally absurd and ridiculous, seeing that according to their own declaration God only spoke to them in dreams. There is nothing more natural than that a man should dream; but a man must be very impudent, very vain, and very stupid, to say that God speaks to him in this manner, and a poor and credulous fool must he be who should yield credence to such an assertion, and receive the dreams of such visionaries for heavenly oracles. Suppose for a moment that the Deity were to hold intercourse with a man by dreams, or visions, or in any other way we can think of; nobody is obliged to believe this on the mere assertion of a fellow-creature equally subject to error with himself, and moreover, fallible in the way of lying and imposture. Accordingly we find that under the ancient law, the prophets were held in far less repute than they are at the present day. When people got wearied of their babble, which often only tended to spread revolt and to turn aside subjects from obedience to their sovereigns, they silenced them by punishment. Jesus Christ himself did not escape chastisement, for he had not, like Moses¹, an army at his back to defend his opinions. Add to this, that the prophets were so much accustomed to contradict each other, that out of four hundred of them not one true or truth-speaking man could be found.² Moreover it is certain that the drift of their prophesies, like that of the laws promulgated by the most celebrated legislators, was to immortalize their memory by persuading people that they had conferences with the Divinity. The most subtle politicians have invariably played the same game, although this *ruse* has not succeeded with every one as it did with Moses.

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§ 6.

This being settled, let us examine for a little the idea which the Prophets have formed of the Deity. According to their account, God is a being purely corporeal. Michael saw him seated; Daniel beheld him clothed in white, and under the form of an Old Man; Ezekiel perceived him as a Fire: so much for the Old Testament. With respect to the New, the disciples of Jesus Christ imagined that they saw him in the form of a Dove; the Apostles, like Tongues of Fire; and finally, St. Paul beheld him as a LIGHT, which dazzled and blinded him. Then as to their contradictory statements; in the Book of Genesis³ we are informed that man is the master of his own actions, and that it only depends upon himself to do what is right. St. Paul on the other hand asserts that man has no control over his evil propensities without the particular grace of God. Samuel⁴ declares that the Deity repented of the *evil* which he had brought on men: and Jeremiah⁵ affirms that he repented, or on certain conditions that he would repent, of the *good* which he had done them. Such are the false and contradictory ideas which those pretenders to inspiration give us of the divinity; and which they wish us to adopt without reflecting that they represent the Deity as a sensitive Being, material, and subject to like passions with ourselves. Next they inform us that God has nothing in common with matter, and that his nature is altogether incomprehensible by us. It would be important to learn how these manifest and irrational contradictions can be reconciled; and whether we ought to put much faith in the evidence of a people who, in spite of the sermons of Moses, were stupid enough to believe that a calf was their God! Without dwelling on the reveries of a people cradled in bondage and brought up in absurdity, it is sufficient to remark, that ignorance has produced a belief in all the impostures and errors which prevail amongst us at the present day.

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¹ Moses put to death in one day 24,000 men, because they resisted his laws. †

² We read in the [Book of Kings, chap. xxii, v. 6](#), that Ahab, the King of Israel consulted 400 prophets who were all false, as the result of their vaticinations showed. ↑

³ [Genesis, chap. iv, v. 7](#). ↑

⁴ [I. Samuel chap. xv, v. 11](#). ↑

⁵ [Jeremiah, chap. xviii, v. 10](#). ↑

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CHAP. II.

ON THE REASONS WHICH HAVE LED MANKIND TO BELIEVE IN A DIVINITY.

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§ 1.

Those who are ignorant of physical causes have a natural fear¹, proceeding from a restlessness in their minds, as to whether there exists a Being or an Agency invisible to them, who has the power to injure them or to do them good. Hence the tendency which they have to feign unseen causes, which are only the phantoms of their imagination—whom they deprecate in adversity and thank in prosperity. They make Gods of them for this purpose; and this chimerical fear of invisible Powers is the source of those Religions which every one forms after his own fashion. Those whose interest it is that the people should rest contentedly fettered by such reveries, have fostered their spread—have founded laws upon them—and finally reduced the people by the terrors of futurity to a blind obedience.

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§ 2.

The origin of the Gods being discovered, men next imagined that they resembled themselves, and that they invariably acted with a certain end in view. Thus they unanimously said and believed, that God only works for man's behoof; and reciprocally, that man is only created for God. This prejudice is general even in the present day, and when we reflect on the influence which it must necessarily have on the manners and opinions of men we may clearly perceive that from it have arisen those false ideas which men have formed to themselves, of good and evil, of merit and demerit, of praise and blame, of order and confusion, of beauty and deformity, and a thousand other similar matters.

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§ 3.

It must be agreed that all men are in a state of profound ignorance at their birth, and that their only natural wish is to seek that which is pleasant and profitable to them.—Hence it follows, 1st, That they believe it sufficient for them that they are free, and that they feel within themselves the power of volition and desire, without troubling themselves as to the causes which effect this volition and this desire; because they know them not. 2dly, As men only aim at one object when they prefer it to all others, they sought to ascertain the final causes of their actions, imagining that after these were discovered there would be little room for doubt; and as they found within themselves and without themselves abundant means of arriving at the end proposed—the eye constructed for vision, the ear for hearing; a sun above them to give them light and heat; they concluded that there was nothing in nature which was not made for them and which they could not enjoy and dispose of; but as they well knew that *they* were not the creators of these things, they thought that they were justified in imagining a Supreme Being, the author of all; in one word they conceived that everything in existence was the work of one, or of more Divinities. On the other hand, the nature of the Gods whom men acknowledged being unknown to them, they believed that they were susceptible of like passions with themselves; and as the natural dispositions of men are different, every one rendered to his Divinity a worship according to his fancy, with the view of drawing down his blessings, and making universal nature subservient to his own desires.

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§ 4.

In this manner prejudice was changed into superstition. It was rooted in such a way that the most ignorant people believed themselves capable of explaining the doctrine of *final causes*, as if they had an entire knowledge of them.—Thus, instead of proving that Nature did nothing in vain, they imagined that God and Nature thought after the manner of men. Experience taught them that an infinite number of calamities disturbed the pleasures of life—storms, earthquakes, plagues, hunger, thirst, &c. They attributed all these evils to divine wrath, and believed that the Deity was irritated against mankind for their offences; nor could the daily occurring examples which prove that good and evil happen alike to the just and unjust, disabuse them of their prejudices. This error prevailed, because they found it easier to remain in their natural ignorance, than to divest themselves of notions established for so many ages; and to adopt something in their stead, having at least the appearance of truth.

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§ 5.

This prejudice conducted them straightway to another, which was, that all the judgments of God were incomprehensible; and that consequently they were beyond the cognizance of truth, and above the strength of human reason; a mistake which would have existed at the present day, if mathematical knowledge, natural philosophy, and other sciences had not extinguished it.

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§ 6.

There is no necessity for a long dissertation to prove that nature never aims at any definite end, and that all these *final causes* are only human fictions. It is sufficient to show that this doctrine deprives the Deity of all the perfections which have been attributed to him; and this we will endeavor to do.

If God acts for an end, either for himself or for any other being, he desires that which he does not possess; and it must be granted from these premises that, as there was a time when God had no object for which to act, he wished to have one; that is to say, *that he stood in need of something*. But not to overlook anything which may strengthen the arguments of those who maintain the opposite opinion, suppose, for a moment, that a stone detached from a battlement fell upon an individual and killed him; it proves, say our opponents, that this stone fell for the purpose of killing this person, because it could not so have happened unless God had wished it. If we reply that it was the wind which caused its fall at the time when the unfortunate individual was passing, they demand at once, how it happened that he was passing exactly at the time when the wind brought down the stone. We answer, that he was on his way to dine with a friend who had invited him; they wish to know why his friend had invited him on that day rather than on any other. They put in this manner an infinitude of absurd questions to force you to confess that the will of God alone (which is the refuge of the ignorant) was the real cause of the fall of this stone. When they examine the structure of the human body, they fall into ecstasies; but because they are ignorant of the causes of those effects which appear to them so marvellous, they conclude that it must be a supernatural effect, when the causes which are known to us account for it. This is the reason why the man who wishes deeply to examine the works of creation, and like a true philosopher to penetrate into their natural causes, irrespective of those prejudices which ignorance has created, is branded as an infidel, or speedily clamoured down by the malice of those whom the vulgar acknowledge as the interpreters of Nature and of the Gods. These mercenary spirits are well aware that the ignorance which holds the people in wonderment, is that which gives them bread, and upholds their credit.

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§ 7.

Men being thus imbued with the ridiculous opinion that every thing which they behold is created for themselves, have made it a point of religion to engross every thing, and to judge of its value by the profit which it brings. Accordingly they have invented notions which do them service in explaining the nature of things, and enable them to judge of good and evil, order and disorder, heat and cold, beauty and ugliness, &c. which are by no means what they imagine. Because they are able to frame their ideas in this way, they think that they are in

a position to judge of praise and blame; of good and evil. They call that *good* which respects their divine worship, and turns to their own profit; and that which does neither the one nor the other they denominate *evil*; and because the ignorant are incapable of judging, and have no conception of any thing save through the medium of their imagination, which they mistake for judgment, they tell us that nothing can be learned from nature, and forthwith invent a particular arrangement of the world. In short they think that matters are ill or well constituted according to the facility or the difficulty which they have in conceiving of them when presented to them through the medium of their senses. People are best pleased with what gives least fatigue to the brain. These individuals have wisely resolved to prefer order to confusion, as if order were any thing else than a pure fiction of the imagination. Thus to say that the Deity has made every thing with order, is to pretend that it is in favour of the human imagination that he has created the world in a manner the most easy for it to form a conception of;—or, which is the same thing, that they know with certainty all the relations and all the designs of whatever exists; an assertion too absurd to merit any serious refutation.

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§ 8.

With respect to their other opinions, they are purely the result of this same imagination, having no basis in reality, and being only different modifications of which that faculty is susceptible. Thus, when the impressions made upon the nervous system through the medium of the eyes are agreeable, they pronounce that the objects viewed are beautiful. *Smells* are good or bad; *tastes* are sweet or bitter, things *touched* are hard or soft, according as the sensation produced is unpleasant or otherwise—as scents, and tastes, and contact, and sounds affect the system. Following up these ideas, men have believed that the Deity is pleased with melody, while others have believed that all the movements of the celestial bodies were one harmonious concert; a proof, that these men are persuaded that things are really such as they conceive them to be, or that the world is entirely ideal.—It is not to be wondered at therefore, if we scarcely ever meet with two individuals of the same opinion: indeed some make it their boast to doubt of every thing; for, although all men have a similar bodily conformation, and resemble each other in many respects, there are still as many respects in which they differ. Accordingly it must follow, that what pleases this party displeases that; and what appears good to one man appears evil to another.—We must conclude therefore, that their various opinions must be attributed to their different organizations and the diversity of their co-existences—that reason has little connection with them; and in short, that their conceptions of the material world are the decided results of imagination.

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§ 9.

It is therefore evident, that all the reasonings which the generality of mankind are accustomed to employ when they set themselves to explain what nature is, are only their own modes of imagining that which is most uncalculated to make good their own position. They give names to their ideas, as if they existed in any other quarter than in their own prejudiced brain; but instead of calling them mere chimeras, they designate them Beings. There is extremely little difficulty in refuting the arguments grounded on such opinions.

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If it is true, as they advance, that the universe is nothing more than an emanation from, or simply a necessary consequence to, the Divine nature, whence spring those imperfections and defaults which we perceive in it? This objection is easily answered. It is impossible for men to judge of the perfection or imperfection of any Being, without a thorough knowledge of his nature and essence², and it is a strange abuse of terms to assert that any thing is more or less perfect according as it pleases or displeases, or as it is useful or noxious to human nature. To terminate the argument with those who demand why God has not created all men good and happy, it is sufficient to state that every thing is necessarily what it is; and that, in nature there is no imperfection, since all flows from the necessity of things.

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§ 10.

This being established, if it is asked, “What then is God?” I answer that the word imports that universal Being “in whom,” as St. Paul says, “we live, and move,

and have our being.³ This opinion conveys no unworthy notions of the Divinity, for if all things are in God, all things must necessarily flow from his essence, and consequently be of such essence as he himself; for it is impossible to conceive that beings entirely material should be maintained and comprehended in a Being who is not so. This opinion is not new. Tertullian, one of the most learned of the Christian fathers, maintained in his discourse against Appelles, that whatever is not corporeal is nothing; and in that against Praxeas that every Existence is a body. He adds, “who will deny that God is a body, although God is a Spirit⁴?” It is of importance to observe that this doctrine was not condemned in any of the four first Œcumenical or General Councils of the Christian Church.⁵

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§ 11.

These ideas are clear and simple, and the only ones which an unbiased mind can form of God. However, there are few contented with this simplicity. A gross people accustomed to the gratification of their senses, have conceived that God resembles the kings of the earth. That pomp and splendor which surround the latter have dazzled them so much, that to uproot the idea that God has no resemblance whatever to earthly sovereigns, would be to deprive them of the hope of meeting celestial courtiers, and of enjoying in their company, the same pleasures which they had tasted at regal courts; it would take from them the only consolation which keeps them from despair amidst the miseries of this life. They assert that God must be a just and avenging Being who punishes and recompenses—they represent him as susceptible of every human passion—they depict him with feet, with hands, with eyes and with ears, and yet maintain that he is an immaterial Being. They quote Scripture to prove that man is chief of God’s works below, and formed in his own image; and deny that the copy has the slightest resemblance to the original. In short, the God of the people in the present day, as represented by themselves, is subject to more transformations than the Pagan Jupiter. What is still more strange is this, that the more these opinions contradict each other and outrage common sense, the more are they revered by the vulgar, who uphold with bigotry whatever their prophets have enounced, although these visionaries only held the same place among the Hebrews, as did the augurs and soothsayers amongst the pagans. They consult the Bible as if God and Nature had explained it to them exclusively, although it is only a tissue of fragments gathered together at various periods, and by different persons, and published under the censorship of the Rabbis.⁶ These, at their pleasure, decided as to what ought to be approved of, and what, rejected; according as they found it agreeable or opposed to the law of Moses.

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Such is the malice and the folly of mankind. They spend their lives in quibbles, and persist in reverencing a book which has scarcely more arrangement than the Alcoran of Mahomet—a book which from its obscurity nobody understands, and which has only served to foment divisions. The Jew and Christians love far better to consult this legerdemain book, than to listen to that which God, that is to say Nature (inasmuch as it is the origin of all things) has written on their hearts. All other laws are merely human figments—palpable illusions set abroad, not by demons or evil spirits, which are the creations of the fancy, but by the policy of princes, and the craft of priests. The former have striven in this way to add weight to their authority; and the latter have been contented to enrich themselves by the sale of an infinitude of chimerical notions, which they vend at a dear rate to their ignorant followers.

No other code of laws which has followed that of Moses, except the Christian, has been based upon that Bible the original of which could never be discovered, which relates to things supernatural and impossible, and which speaks of rewards and punishments for actions good or bad, but wisely postpones them till an after life, lest the imposture should be detected; for no one has ever returned from the grave. Thus the people, kept always fluctuating between hope and fear, are held in bondage by the belief that God has created mankind for no other purpose than that of rendering them eternally happy or everlastingly miserable. This is the origin of the vast number of religions which prevail in the world.

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Cætera, quæ fieri in terris, Cœloque tuentur
Mortales pavidis cum pendent mentibus sæpe
Efficiunt animos humiles formidine Divum,
Depressosque premunt ad terram, propterea quod
Ignorantia causarum conferre Deorum
Cogit ad imperium res, et concedere regnum: et
Quorum operum causas nulla ratione videre
Possunt hæc fieri Divino numine rentur.

- 2 “What appears to our limited conceptions to be evil or apparently unjust, is entirely owing to our having no commensurate ideas either of the goodness or the justice of the Deity.”—
Bolingbroke’s Works, Vol. iv, p. 117.—*Translator’s Note.* ↑
- 3 [Acts, chap. xvii, v. 28.](#) ↗ ↑
- 4 “[Qui autem negabit Deum esse corpus, etsi Deus Spiritus?](#)” Tertul adv. Prax. cap. vii. ↑
- 5 These four Councils were, First, that of Nice, (325) under Constantine and Pope Sylvester: Second, that of Constantinople, 381, under Gratian, Valentinian, Theodosius, and Pope Damasus: Third, that of Ephesus, 431, under Theodosius II, Valentinian, and Pope Celestin: and Fourth, that of Chalcedon, 451, under Valentinian, Marcianus, and Pope Leo I. ↑
- 6 The Talmud informs us that the Rabbis deliberated whether they ought not to strike from the list of Canonical writings the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and that they only spared them because they made favourable mention of Moses and his law. The prophecies of Ezekiel (which the Jews were not permitted to read until they were thirty years of age) would to a certainty have been expunged from the sacred Catalogue, if a learned Rabbi had not undertaken to reconcile them with the same Law. ↑

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CHAP. III.

ON THE MEANING OF THE WORD RELIGION; HOW, AND FOR WHAT PURPOSE, SO MANY RELIGIONS HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED INTO THE WORLD.

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§ 1.

Before the term *Religion* was introduced into the world, mankind followed the law of Nature, that is, they lived conformably to Reason. Instinct was the only bond by which men were united; and this bond, simple as it is, was so strong that divisions were rare. But after terror led them to suspect that there were Gods and invisible Powers, they built altars to the imaginary beings, and shaking off the yoke of reason and of Nature, they bended themselves by foolish ceremonies, and by a superstitious worship of the idle phantoms which themselves had imagined.

Such was the origin of the word *Religion*, which has made so much noise in the world. After having admitted the existence of these invisible Agencies, men worshipped them to depreciate their anger, and moreover they believed that nature was under the control of these Powers. Afterwards they came to regard themselves as inert matter, or as slaves who could only act under the commands of these imaginary beings. This false idea having obtained possession of their minds, they began to exhibit more contempt for nature, and more respect for those whom they called their Gods. Hence sprung that ignorance in which so many nations were immersed—an ignorance from which, however profound, the true philosophers might have freed them, if they had not been always thwarted by those who led the blind, and throve by their own impostures.

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Now, although there were little appearance of success in our undertaking, we must not forsake the cause of truth. A generous mind will speak of things as they really are, out of regard to those who exhibit symptoms of this malady. The truth, whatever its nature may be, can never be injurious; whereas error, although at the time apparently innocent and even useful, must finally terminate in the most disastrous results.

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§ 2.

Terror having thus created the Gods, men wished to ascertain their nature, and conceiving that they must be of the same substance as the Soul, which they thought was like the appearances in a mirror, or the phantoms of sleep, they believed that their Gods were real substances, but so thin and subtle that to distinguish them from *Bodies* they named them *Spirits*; although *Bodies* and *Spirits* are in truth one and the same thing, for it is impossible to imagine an *incorporeal Spirit*. Every spirit has its proper shape, which is inclosed in some

body; that is, it has its limits, and consequently it is a body, however subtle its nature.¹

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§ 3.

The ignorant, that is the majority of mankind, having thus determined the nature and substance of their Gods, endeavoured next to discover the means by which these invisible agents acted; and unable to arrive at this because of their ignorance, they had recourse to their own conjectures, judging blindly of the future from the past. How is it possible to draw rational conclusions from any thing which has formerly happened in a certain way, as to what will happen hereafter, seeing that all the circumstances and all the causes which necessarily influence events and human actions, are so exceedingly different. They persisted however in contemplating the past, and they augured well or ill as to the future, according as any former similar undertaking had been successful or otherwise. On this principle, because Phormis had defeated the Lacedemonians at the battle of Naupactus, the Athenians, after his death appointed another commander of the same name. Hannibal having been conquered by Scipio Africanus, the Romans, on account of his success, sent to the same province, Scipio Cæsar, who was unsuccessful both against the Greeks² and the native forces. Thus have many nations, after two or three experiments, only attributed their bad or good fortune to places, to objects, and to names. Others employed certain words which they denominated *spells*, which they considered efficacious enough to make trees speak, to create a man or a God from a morsel of bread, and in short to metamorphose whatever appeared before their eyes.³

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§ 4.

The empire of these invisible powers being now established, men at first did homage to them as their sovereigns, by marks of submission and respect; by gifts, prayers, &c. I say, *at first*, for nature does not enjoin bloody sacrifices for this purpose; these were only instituted for the subsistence of priests, and others set apart for the services of these imaginary Gods.

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§ 5.

These originators of Religion, viz. Hope and Fear, aided by the different opinions and passions of men, have given rise to a vast number of phantastical creeds, which have been the cause of so much mischief and of so many revolutions among the nations.

The honor and the revenues attached to the priesthood, or to the ministers of the Gods, have encouraged the ambition and avarice of cunning men who knew how to profit by the stupidity of the vulgar, whom they have got so much entangled in their snares that they have led them insensibly into the habit of loving a lie and hating the truth.

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§ 6.

A system of falsehood being established, ambitious men, intoxicated with the pleasure of being elevated above their fellow mortals, attempted to add to their reputation by feigning that they were the friends of those invisible Beings whom the common people so much feared. The better to succeed in this every one represented them after his fashion, and they all took the liberty of multiplying them to an extent almost incredible.

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§ 7.

The rude unformed matter of the world was called the God Chaos. In the same way they deified the Heavens, the Earth, the Sea, Fire, the Winds and Planets. The same honor was conferred on men and women; birds, reptiles, the crocodile, the calf, the dog, the lamb, the serpent and the swine, in fact, all sorts of plants and animals were worshipped. Every river, every fountain, bore the name of some deity; every house had its *lares* and *penates*, and every man his genius—all

was filled above and below the earth with Gods, Spirits, Shadows, and Demons. Neither was it enough to feign divinities in every imaginable place. They outrage in the same way, Time, the Day, the Night, Victory, Strife, Honor, Virtue, Health, and Sickness. They invented these Divinities that they might represent them as ready to take vengeance on those who would not be brought up in temples and at altars. Lastly, they took to worshipping their own Genii; some invoked theirs under the name of the Muses, while others, under that of Fortune, worshipped their own ignorance. Some sanctioned their licentiousness under the name of Cupid, their wrath under that of the Furies, their natural parts under the name of Priapus; in one word there was nothing to which they did not give the name of a God or a Demon.

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§ 8.

The founders of these Religions, knowing well that their impostures were based upon the ignorance of the people, took care to keep them in it by the adoration of images in which they feigned that the Divinities resided. This rained gold into the coffers of the priesthood, and their benefices were considered as sacred things because they belonged to holy ministers; no one having the rashness or audacity to aspire to them. The better to deceive mankind, the priests pretended to be divinely inspired Prophets, capable of penetrating the mysteries of futurity, boasting that they had intercourse with the Gods; and, as the desire is natural to learn one's destiny, they by no means failed to take advantage of it. Some were established at Delos, others at Delphi, and in various places, where in ambiguous language they answered the questions put to them. Even women took a part in these impostures, and the Romans in their greatest difficulties consulted the Sybilline books. These knaves were really considered inspired. Those who feigned that they had familiar commerce with the dead were called Necromancers; others pretended to ascertain the future from the flight of birds or the entrails of beasts; in short they could draw a good or bad augury from almost every thing, the eyes, the hands, the countenance, or any extraordinary object. So true it is that ignorance will receive any impression, when men know how to take advantage of it.⁴

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§ 9.

The ambitious, who have always been great masters in the art of deceiving, have followed this method in promulgating their laws; and to induce mankind to give a voluntary submission to them, they have persuaded them that they received them from some God or Goddess.

However great the multitude of Divinities, amongst those who worshipped them, and who were denominated *Pagans*, there was never any generally established system of religion. Every republic, every kingdom, every city, and every individual had their own proper rites, and conceived of the Divinity after their own phantasy. But afterwards there arose legislatures more subtle than the former, and who employed more skilful and sure plans in giving forth the laws, the worship, and the ceremonies calculated to nourish that fanaticism which it was their object to establish.

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Amongst a great number, Asia has produced THREE, distinguished as much by their laws and the worship which they established, as by the ideas which they have given of the Divinity, and the methods which they employed to confirm these ideas, and to render their laws sacred.—Moses was the most ancient. After him Jesus Christ appeared, who wrought upon his plan and kept the fundamental portion of his laws, but abolished the remainder. Mahomet, who appeared the last upon the scene, borrowed from each of the Religions in order to compose his own, and thereafter declared himself the sworn enemy of both.—We shall consider the character of the three legislators, and examine their conduct, that afterwards we may be enabled to decide whose opinions are best grounded—those who reverence them as inspired men, or those who regard them as impostors.

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§ 10.

MOSES.

The celebrated Moses, a grandson of a distinguished Magician,⁵ (according to Justin Martyr) possessed every advantage calculated to render him that which

he finally became. It is well known that the Hebrews, of whom he became the chief, were a nation of shepherds whom Pharaoh Osiris I. admitted into his kingdom in gratitude for the services which one of them had rendered during a period of severe famine. He assigned them a territory in the East of Egypt, rich in pasturage, and admirably adapted for the rearing of cattle; where, during two centuries, they very much increased in numbers, either, that being regarded as strangers they were not liable to military service, or on account of the other privileges which Osiris had conferred upon them. Many natives of the country joined themselves to them, among others, bands of Arabs who regarded them as brethren and of the same origin. However this may be, they multiplied so exceedingly, that the land of Goshen being unable to contain them, they spread over all the land of Egypt; giving just occasion to Pharaoh to dread that they would undertake some dangerous enterprise if his kingdom were attacked by the Ethiopians, his inveterate enemies, as had frequently happened. Reasons of state, therefore, compelled this monarch to take away their privileges, and to devise some means of weakening them and keeping them in subjection.

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Pharaoh Orus, surnamed Busirus on account of his cruelty, succeeded Memnon, and followed up his plans with respect to the Hebrews; and wishing to eternalize his memory by building the Pyramids, and fortifying the walls of Thebes, condemned the Hebrews to the task of making bricks, for which purpose the earth of that country was well adapted. During their bondage the celebrated Moses was born, the same year in which the king commanded that all the male Hebrew children should be thrown into the Nile, as the surest method of ridding his country from this host of strangers. Moses was in this way exposed to perish in the waters, his mother having placed him in a wicker basket among the willows on the banks of the stream. It happened that Thesmutis, the daughter of the king, was walking by the river, when, hearing the cries of the infant, that compassion so natural to her sex, inspired her with a wish to save it. Orus being dead she succeeded him, and Moses having been presented to her she commanded that he should receive the highest instruction which could be procured, as a son of the Queen of a people at that time the most learned and civilized in the world. "He was learned in all the learning of the Egyptians." This implies that he was the ablest Politician, the greatest philosopher, and the most distinguished Magician of his time; and besides, it is very evident that he had been initiated into the Egyptian Priesthood, which resembled those of the Druids among the Gauls. Those who are ignorant of the nature of the Egyptian government, must learn that the whole territory was subject to one sole sovereign, but that it was divided into many provinces of but limited extent. The governors of these provinces were designated Monarchs, and were generally of the powerful order of the Priesthood, which in fact possessed almost the third part of Egypt. The king nominated these Monarchs; and if we compare what others have written concerning Moses, and what he has written himself, we must conclude that he was Monarch of the Province of Goshen, and that he owed his appointment to Thesmutis, to whom also he owed his life. Such was the *status* of Moses amongst the Egyptians, where he had full time and every opportunity of studying their manners and those of his own nation, and of obtaining a knowledge of their dominant inclinations and passions; a knowledge, of which he failed not to avail himself in that revolution of which he was the originator.

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After the death of Thesmutis, her successor renewed the persecution against the Hebrews, and Moses having fallen from the honor in which he had been formerly held, was afraid that he would find it difficult to justify a homicide of which he had been guilty. He accordingly resolved on flight, and retired into Arabia Petrea. Chance led him to the house of the chief of some native tribe, to whom he rendered so many services, and by whom his talents were so highly appreciated that he gave him one of his daughters in marriage. It must here be remarked that Moses was so little of a Jew, and had so limited a conception of the Deity whom he afterwards imagined, that he married an idolatress, and did not even think of circumcising his children.

It was in the Arabian deserts, when watching the flocks of his father-in-law, that he formed the design of taking vengeance upon the King of Egypt for the injuries he had met with. He flattered himself that he would easily succeed in this, as well on account of his own talents, as from the feeling which he knew was general amongst those of his own nation, irritated against the government on account of the cruel treatment which they had experienced.

It appears from the history which he has left us of this revolution, or at all events, from the history which the author of the books attributed to Moses, has left us, that Jethro, his father-in-law, was in the plot, as were Aaron his brother, and sister Marion, who remained in Egypt, and with whom, no doubt, he maintained a correspondence.

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However that may be, we perceive from the result, that he had with the utmost policy schemed out a great design; and that he knew how to bring to bear against the Egyptians that learning which he had acquired amongst them. I allude to magic, in the exhibition of which he showed himself more subtle and expert than all those who attempted the same tricks at the court of Pharaoh.

It was by these pretended prodigies that he gained over those of his nation whom he wished to carry off, and to whom disaffected and revolutionary Egyptians, Ethiopians and Arabs joined themselves. By boasting the power of his Divinity, and the frequent communions which he had with him; and by declaring that he had his sanction for all the steps which he took with the leaders of the revolution, he succeeded so well that there followed him 600,000 fighting men, besides women and children, across the Arabian deserts, of which he well knew the localities. After six days painful flight, he ordained to his followers that they should consecrate the seventh day to his God by a general and public rest, for the purpose of persuading them that the Deity favored him and approved of his authority; and to deter any one from having the audacity to dispute his statements.

There never existed a more ignorant people than the Hebrews, nor consequently more credulous. To be assured of this we have only to look to their condition in Egypt when Moses caused them to revolt. They were detested by the Egyptians on account of their profession as shepherds, they were persecuted by the sovereign, and employed in the most degrading toil. Amongst a people thus situated it could not be very difficult for a man with the abilities of Moses to exercise a vast influence. He persuaded them that his God, (whom he sometimes merely styles an angel), the God of their fathers, had appeared to him—that it was at his command that he had taken them under his guidance—and that they would be a people highly favored of the Deity, provided they believed in him. The expert employment of deceit, and his knowledge of science, and of human nature, fortified his injunctions; and he strengthened his position by *prodigies*, which are always sure to make a deep impression on the minds of an imbecile populace.

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It must here be attended to with especial care, that he thought he had discovered a sure method of keeping the Hebrews in subjection to himself, by persuading them that God himself was their conductor—that he preceded them by night as a pillar of fire, and by day as a cloud. It can be proved that this is perhaps a more gross deceit on the part of this leader than any he had ever practised. During his sojourn in Arabia, he had learned that, as the country was of vast extent and uninhabited, it was the custom of those who travelled in caravans to take guides, who conducted them under night by means of a brasier filled with burning wood, the flame of which they followed; and the smoke of which by day equally prevented the parties of the caravan from straggling. Moses took advantage of this and proclaimed it miraculous, adducing it as an evidence of divine protection. No person is called upon to regard this as cheat, on my authority; let them believe Moses himself, who in the book of Numbers, chap. x, v. 31, is represented as beseeching his brother-in-law Habab to journey with the Israelites and show them the way, because he knew the *country*.⁶ This is proof positive. If it were really God who went before the people of Israel by night and by day, as a pillar of cloud and of fire, could they have desired a better guide? Notwithstanding here is this leader entreating his brother-in-law in the most urgent manner to act as his guide; the pillar of cloud and fire, it would seem, being only a God for the people and not for Moses.

The unfortunate dupes being delighted to find themselves adopted by the chief of the Gods on their escape from a cruel bondage, cheerfully put faith in Moses, and swore to obey him blindly. His authority being confirmed, he wished to render it perpetual; and under the specious pretext of establishing the worship of that God whose Viceregent he said he was, he appointed at once his brother and his sons to high authority in the Royal Palace, that is the place whence he thought proper to give forth his oracles; this place being altogether out of the view of the people. Lastly he practised that which is always done at the formation of new institutions; that is, he exhibited prodigies, miracles, whereby some were dazzled, and others confounded, but which only excited pity in those who could see through his impostures.

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However crafty Moses might have been, he would have had considerable difficulty in securing obedience, without the aid of his armed followers. An impostor without physical force rarely succeeds.

But in spite of the great number of dupes who submitted themselves blindly to the will of this clever legislator, there were found people bold enough to reproach him for bad faith; declaring that, under false appearances of justice and equality, he had engrossed the whole—that the sovereign authority was

confined to his own family, who had no more right to it than any other individuals—and that he was less the father than the tyrant of his people. But on these occasions Moses, with profound policy, put to death those daring spirits and spared no one who disputed his authority.

It was by similar precautions, and by always declaring that his punishments were instances of divine vengeance, that he reigned an absolute despot; and to end as he had begun—that is to say, as a knave and an impostor—he was in the habit of retiring to a cave, which he had caused to be dug in the centre of a waste, under the pretext of having conferences with the Divinity, that he might secure in this way the respect and submission of his followers. His end was like that of other similar impostors. He cast himself from a precipice which he knew of in the remote wilderness, to the end that his body might not be discovered, and that it might be thought the Deity had carried him off. He was not ignorant that the memory of the patriarchs which had preceded him was held in great veneration, although they knew their sepulchres; but this was not enough for an ambition like his—it was necessary that he should be revered as a god, over whom death had no control. This is the explanation of what he said at the commencement of his reign, when he said that God had declared that he was to be a God unto his brother.⁷ Elijah in like manner, and Romulus,⁸ and Zamolxis, and all those who have had the foolish vanity to wish to eternalize their names, have concealed the time and manner of their death, in order that they might be thought immortal.

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§ 11.

But to return to the legislators. There have never been any who did not assert that their laws did not emanate from some divinities⁹, and who have not attempted to persuade their followers that they themselves were more than mortal. Numa Pompilius, after having tasted the sweets of retirement, was with difficulty persuaded to leave them, although it was to fill the throne of Romulus; but compelled by the acclamations of the people, he profited by the devotedness of the Romans, and insinuated to them that if they really wished him to be their king, they must be prepared to obey him without enquiry, and to observe religiously the laws and divine institutions which had been communicated to him by the goddess Egeria.¹⁰

Alexander the Great had? no less vanity. Not content with seeing himself master of the world, he wished to persuade mankind that he was the son of Jupiter. Perseus pretended also to have derived his origin from the same god and the virgin Danae. Plato also insisted on a virgin nativity, regarding Apollo as his father. There have been many other personages who have been guilty of the same absurdity. No doubt all these great men believed in the opinion of the Egyptians, who maintained that the Spirit of God was capable of having intercourse with the female sex, and rendering them pregnant.

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§ 12.

JESUS CHRIST.

Jesus Christ, who was acquainted with the maxims and the science of the Egyptians, gave currency to the belief alluded to above, because he thought it suitable to his purposes. Reflecting how Moses had become renowned by his command of an ignorant people, he undertook to build on this foundation, and got some few imbecile people to follow him, whom he persuaded that the Holy Ghost was his father, and that his mother was a virgin. These simple folks, accustomed to give themselves over to dreams and reveries, adopted his opinions, and believed whatever he wished: indeed, something considerably beyond this miraculous birth would by no means have been too miraculous for them. A beautiful dove overshadowed a virgin: there is nothing surprising in that. It happened frequently in Lydia; and the swan of Leda is the counterpart of the dove of Mary.¹¹ That a man should be born of a virgin, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, is neither more extraordinary nor more miraculous than that Genghis Khan should be born of a virgin, as the Tartars assert; or that Foh, according to the Chinese belief, derived his origin from a virgin rendered pregnant by the rays of the sun.

This prodigy appeared at a time when the Jews, wearied with their God as they had formerly been with their Judges,¹² were desirous to have some visible ruler among them, as was the case with other nations. As the number of fools is

infinite, Jesus Christ in a short time had many followers; but as his extreme poverty was an invincible obstacle to his elevation, the Pharisees—at one time his admirers, and at another time startled at his boldness—forwarded or thwarted his interests, according to the inconstant humour of the populace. The report of his divine origin was spread about; but without forces, as he was, it was impossible that he could succeed, although some cures which he performed, and some resurrections from the dead to which he pretended, brought him somewhat into repute. Without money or arms he could not fail to perish: if he had been in possession of these, he would have been no less successful than Moses or Mahomet, and all those who, with like advantages, have elevated themselves above their fellow-men. If he had been more unfortunate, he would not have been less adroit; and several traits in his history prove that the principal defect in his policy was his carelessness in not sufficiently providing for his own security. Otherwise, I do not find that his plans were less skilfully devised than those of the other two: at all events his law has become the rule of faith to people who flatter themselves that they are the wisest in the world.

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§ 13.

ON THE POLITICS OF JESUS CHRIST.

Can anything be more subtle than the answer of Jesus concerning the woman taken in adultery? The Jews having demanded of him if they should stone her, instead of answering the question directly—a negative answer being directly contrary to the law, and an affirmative convicting him of severity and cruelty, which would have alienated their minds from him—instead, therefore, of replying as an ordinary individual would have done on the occasion—“Let him,” said he, “who is without sin amongst you cast the first stone at her.”¹³ A shrewd reply, and one evincing great presence of mind. On another occasion, being shown a piece of money with the emperor’s image and superscription upon it, and asked if it were lawful to pay tribute money unto Cæsar, he eluded the difficulty of answering: “Render unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar’s.”¹⁴ The false position in which they wished to place him was this: that if he denied that it was lawful, he was guilty of high treason; and if he said that it was, he went directly against the law of Moses, which he always protested that he never intended to do—knowing no doubt that he was too helpless to do so with impunity at that time. Afterwards, when he became more celebrated, he endeavoured to abrogate it almost totally: acting in this way not unlike those princes, who, until their power is thoroughly established, always promise to confirm the privileges of their subjects, but who, after that has been secured, care little for their promises.

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When the Pharisees asked him by what authority he taught the people and preached to them, he penetrated their intention—which was to convict him of falsehood; whether he answered that it was by human authority—he not being of the order of the priesthood, who alone were charged with the instruction of the people; or whether he preached by the express orders of God—his own doctrine being opposed to the law of Moses; he avoided their snare, and embarrassed themselves, by asking them in what name John baptised.¹⁵

The Pharisees, who from political motives, rejected the baptism of John, would have condemned themselves if they had said that it was in the name of God; and if they had *not* said so, they would have exposed themselves to the rage of the populace, who maintained the opposite opinion. To get out of this dilemma, they answered that they could not tell: on which Jesus Christ replied, that neither was he obliged to tell them by what name or authority he taught the people.

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§ 14.

Such was the character of the destroyer of the ancient law, and the founder of the new religion that was built upon its ruins; in which religion a disinterested mind can perceive nothing more divine than in any of those which preceded it. Its founder, who was not altogether ignorant, having witnessed extreme corruption in the Jewish republic, judged that its end was near, and thought it a favorable opportunity for forwarding his own designs.

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The fear of being anticipated by men more able than himself, made him hasten to secure his ground by means entirely opposite to those adopted by Moses. The former began by rendering himself terrible to other nations. Jesus Christ, on the contrary, attracted mankind to himself by the hope of blessings in a life beyond

the grave, which he said they would obtain by believing in him. Whilst Moses only promised temporal benefits to the observers of his law, Jesus Christ led his followers to hope for those which would never end. The laws of the one only regarded exterior observances; those of the other looked into the heart, influenced the thoughts, and stood on opposite grounds to the law of Moses. Whence it follows, that Jesus Christ believed with Aristotle, that it is the same with religion and nations as with individuals who are born and who die; and as there is nothing which is not subject to dissolution, there is no law which must not in turn give place to another.¹⁶ But as there is difficulty in passing from one law to another, and as the greater part of men are stubborn in religious matters, Jesus Christ, in imitation of other innovators, had recourse to miracles, which have at all times confounded the ignorant, and advanced the projects of ambitious and designing men.

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§ 15.

Christianity having been founded in this way, Jesus Christ wisely imagined that he could profit by the errors in the politics of Moses, and render his new law eternal—an undertaking in which he finally succeeded a little perhaps beyond his expectation. The Hebrew prophets intended to do honour to Moses, by predicting a successor who should resemble him—a Messiah great in virtues, powerful in wealth, and terrible to his enemies. These prophecies, however, produced altogether a different effect from what they expected; a number of ambitious demagogues having embraced the opportunity of palming themselves off for the coming Messiah, which led to those insurrections and civil convulsions which lasted until the entire destruction of the ancient republic of the Hebrews. Jesus Christ, more subtle than the prophets who succeeded Moses, predicted that a man of this description would appear—the great enemy of God—the favorite of the demons—the aggregation of all the vices and the cause of all the desolation in the world. After such a splendid eulogy, one would think that nobody could resist the temptation of calling himself *Antichrist*; and I do not believe that it is possible to discover a secret equal to it for eternalizing a law, although there can be nothing more fabulous than what we read of concerning this pretended Antichrist. St. Paul says that he was a ready born; whence it follows that he must have been on the watch for the coming of Jesus Christ: nevertheless, more than sixteen years rolled on after the prediction of the nativity of this formidable personage, without any one having heard of his appearance. I acknowledge that some have applied the terms to Ebion and Cerinthus, two great adversaries of Jesus Christ, whose pretended divinity they disputed. But if this interpretation be the meaning of the Apostle, which is far from being credible, the words referred to must point out a host of Antichrists in all ages—it being impossible that truly learned men should think of injuring the cause of truth, by declaring that the history of Jesus Christ was a contemptible fable,¹⁷ and that his law was nothing but a series of dreams and reveries, which ignorance had brought in repute, which self-interest had encouraged, and which tyranny had taken under its especial protection.

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§ 16.

They pretend, nevertheless, that a religion built upon so weak foundations is divine and supernatural, as if it were not an ascertained fact that there is no class of people more fitted to give currency to the most absurd opinions than women and lunatics. It is not to be wondered at that Jesus Christ reckoned none of the learned amongst his followers. He well knew that his law was inconsistent with common sense; and therefore he always declaimed against the sages, excluding them from that kingdom into which he admitted the poor in spirit, the simple and the imbecile. Rational minds ought to be thankful that they have nothing to do with such insanities.

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§ 17.

ON THE MORALITY OF JESUS CHRIST.

We find nothing more divine in the morality of Jesus Christ than what can be drawn from the works of ancient authors; for this reason, perhaps every text in his code of morals is either borrowed from their's or is an imitation of it. St. Augustine¹⁸ acknowledges that in one of the so-called heathen writers, he discovered the whole of the commencement of the gospel according to St. John.

We must remark also, that this apostle was so much accustomed to plunder others, that he has not scrupled to pillage from the prophets their enigmas and visions, for the purpose of composing his Apocalypse. Again, whence arises that agreement between the doctrines of the Old and New Testament and those of Plato, unless the Rabbis and others who composed the Jewish Scriptures had stolen from that distinguished man. The account of the creation of the world given in his *Timaeus*, is much more satisfactory than that recorded in the book of Genesis; and it will not do to say that Plato, in his tour through Egypt, had read the books of the Jews, since, by the confession of St. Augustine, king Ptolemy had not ordered them to be translated till long after the philosopher had left the country.

The landscape which Socrates describes to Simias (Phæton,) possesses infinitely more beauty than the Paradise of Eden: and the fable of the Hermaphrodites¹⁹ is beyond comparison a better invention than that which we read of in Genesis, where we are told that one of Adam's ribs was taken from him for the purpose of creating a female out of it.

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Can any more plausible account of the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah be given, than that it was caused by Phaeton? Is there no resemblance between the fall of Lucifer and that of Vulcan, or of the giants struck down by the thunderbolts of Jove. How close the resemblance between Sampson and Hercules; Elijah and Phaeton; Joseph and Hypolitus; Nebuchadnezzar and Lycaon; Tantalus and the rich man in torment;²⁰ the manna in the wilderness and the ambrosia of the gods! St. Augustine,²¹ St. Cyril, and Theophilactus, compare Jonah with Hercules, called *Trinoctius*, because he had been three days and three nights in the belly of a whale.

The river which Daniel speaks of in [chap. vii, v. 10](#), of his Prophecies, is palpably drawn from that Pyriphlegethon to which Plato alludes in his dialogue on the immortality of the soul. The idea of "Original Sin" is taken from the account of Pandora's box; and the interrupted sacrifices of Isaac and of Jephtha's daughter are borrowed from that Iphigenia, in whose room a hind was offered up. What we read of concerning Lot and his wife, is nearly the same as that which fabulous history informs us occurred to Bancis and Philemon. The histories of Perseus and of Bellerophon are the foundation of Michael and the demon whom he vanquished. In short, it is abundantly manifest that the authors of the Scriptures have copied the works of Hesiod, Homer, and some other ancient writers, almost word for word.

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§ 18.

With respect to Jesus Christ himself, Celsus, by appealing to his opponent Origen, shows that he had taken some of his most approved apothegms from Plato—Such as this: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."²² It was owing to the sect of the Pharisees, to which he belonged, that his followers believed in the immortality of the soul, the resurrection, and the torments of hell; and also in the greater part of his morality,²³ the whole of which I find in Epictetus, Epicures, and a few others. This last mentioned philosopher was referred to by St. Jerome, as a man whose virtues ought to put the best Christians to the blush; and whose mode of life was so temperate that a morsel of cheese, with bread and water constituted his highest repast. Leading a life so frugal, this philosopher, heathen as he was, declared that it was far better to be unfortunate and gifted with reason, than to be rich and opulent without it; adding, that wealth and wisdom were rarely found united in the same individual, and that it was impossible to enjoy happiness or contentment unless our conduct were guided by prudence, justice and honesty, which are the qualities whence flow all true and lasting enjoyments.

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As to Epictetus, I do not believe that there ever existed a man, not even excepting Jesus Christ, more firm, more self-denying, more equable, or who at any time gave forth to the world a more sublime system of morality. Were it not that I should exceed the limits which I have prescribed to myself in this treatise, I could recount many beautiful traits in his character; but the reader must be contented with one example. When a slave to Epaphroditus, a captain of Nero's guards, his master took the brutal fancy to writhe his limbs, Epictetus, perceiving that it gave the monster satisfaction, said with a smile, that he saw clearly that the joke would not end until he had broken one of them, which happened accordingly. The philosopher with the same equanimity and the same smile, merely said, "Did I not tell you that you would certainly break the limb?" Where is there on record another instance of like firmness? How would Jesus Christ have acted in the circumstances?—he who wept and trembled at the least

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alarm, and who in his last moments exhibited a pusillanimity altogether contemptible, and which was never shown by the martyrs for his faith.

If the work which Arian wrote concerning the life and death of our philosopher had been preserved, I have no doubt that we would have been in possession of many more examples of his equanimity than we have at present. I know that the priests will speak of the example which I have instanced, as they speak of the virtues of philosophic minds in general, and assert that it is based on vanity, and that it is by no means what it appears to be; but I know also, that those people are accustomed to speak *ex cathedra* whatever suits their purpose and to think they sufficiently earn the money which is given them for instructing the people, by declaiming against every man who knows what sober reason and real virtue are. Nothing in the world can be less in congruity with the actions of these superstitious men who decry them, than the manner of the truly learned. The former, having studied for no other end than to obtain a place to give them bread, become vain, and congratulate themselves when they have obtained it, as if they had arrived at the state of perfection; whereas it is nothing else to them than a state of idleness, pride, voluptuousness, and licentiousness,—a condition in which the great majority of them hold in no respect whatever the maxims of that religion which they profess. But we will leave these men, who have not the remotest conception of real virtue, and examine the evidences for the divinity of their master.

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§ 19.

Having considered the politics and the morality of Jesus Christ, wherein we find nothing so useful or so sublime as we find in the writings of the ancients, let us now consider if the reputation which he acquired after his death be a proof of his divinity.

The generality of mankind are so much accustomed to what is irrational, that it is astonishing to find people endeavouring to draw a rational inference from their conduct. Experience teaches us that they are always running after shadows, and that they neither do nor say anything betokening common sense. These fanatical notions on which they found their belief will always be in vogue, in spite of the efforts of the learned who have invariably set themselves against them. So rooted are their follies that they had rather be crammed with them to repletion than make any effort to be rid of them.

It was to no purpose that Moses boasted that he was the interpreter of God, and attempted to prove his mission and his authority by extraordinary signs. If he absented himself for a short time (as he did occasionally, to hold conference with the Divinity, by his account, and as in like manner did Numa Pompilius and many other legislators), it was only to find on his return strong traces of the worship of the gods whom the Hebrew people had seen in Egypt. It was in vain that he had led them for forty years through the desert, that they might lose recollection of the divinities which they had left behind. They had not forgot them, and they always wished for some visible symbol to precede them, which, if they had got, they would have worshipped obstinately, at the risk of being exposed to extreme cruelty.

The pride-inspired contempt alone which led them to the hatred of other nations, made them insensibly forget the gods of Egypt, and attach themselves to that of Moses. They worshipped him for some time with all the outward observance of the law; but with that inconstancy which leads the vulgar to run after novelty, they deserted him at last to follow the God of Jesus Christ.

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§ 20.

The most ignorant alone of the Hebrews followed Moses—such also were they who ran after Jesus Christ; and their name being legion, and as they mutually supported each other, it is not to be wondered at if this new system of error was widely circulated. The teaching of these novelties was not without danger to those who undertook the task, but the enthusiasm which they excited extinguished every fear. Thus, the disciples of Christ, miserable as they were in his train, and even dying of hunger—(as we learn from the necessity under which they were, together with their leader, of plucking the ears of corn in the fields to sustain their lives)—these disciples never despaired till they saw their master in the hands of his executioners, and totally incapable of gifting them with that wealth, and power, and grandeur, which he had led them to expect.

After his death, his disciples being frustrated in their fondest hopes, made a virtue of necessity. Banished as they were from every place, and persecuted by the Jews, who were eager to treat them as they had treated their master, they wandered into the neighboring countries; in which, on the evidence of some women, they set forth the resurrection of Christ, his divinity, and the other fables wherewith the gospels are filled.

It was their want of success among the Jewish people which led to the resolution of seeking their fortune among the Gentiles; but as a little more knowledge than they possessed was necessary for the accomplishment of their design—the Gentiles being philosophically trained, and consequently too much the friends of truth and reason to be duped by trifles—the sectaries of Jesus gained over to their cause a young man²⁴ of ardent temperament and active habits, somewhat better instructed than the illiterate fishermen of Galilee, and more capable of drawing audiences to listen to his talk. He being warned from heaven (miraculously of course), leagued himself with them, and drew over some partizans by the threat of “fabled hell,” (a plagiarism from the ancient poets), and by the hope of the joys of paradise, into which blessed abode he was impudent enough to assert that he had at one time been introduced.

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These disciples then, by strength of delusion and lying, procured for their master the honor of passing for a god—an honor at which, in his life-time, Jesus could never have arrived. His destiny was no better than that of Homer, nor even so good; inasmuch as seven cities which had despised and starved the latter in his lifetime, struggled and fought with each other, in order to ascertain to which was due the merit of having given him birth.

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§ 21.

It may be judged now, from what has been advanced, that Christianity, like every other religion, is only a complicated imposture—the success and progress of which would astonish the inventors themselves, could they revisit this world. Without bewildering ourselves, however, in a labyrinth of error and contradiction, such as we have alluded to, we go to Mahomet, who founded his law on maxims entirely opposite to those of Jesus Christ.

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§ 22.

MAHOMET.

Scarcely had the disciples of Jesus Christ torn down the Mosaic fabric for the purpose of establishing Christianity, when men, led by force of circumstances, and influenced by their usual inconstancy, followed the new legislator, who had elevated himself by means similar, as far as possible, to those which Moses employed. Like the Jewish lawgiver, Christ usurped the title of prophet, and ambassador of God; like him he pretended to perform miracles, and took advantage of the passions of the multitude. He soon found himself escorted by an ignorant populace, to whom he explained the new oracles of heaven. These miserably misled people, from the promises and fables of this new impostor, spread his renown far and wide, as having eclipsed all his predecessors.

Mahomet, on the contrary, was a man who did not appear at all competent to lay the foundation of an empire. He was distinguished neither as a politician nor a philosopher: he could neither read nor write.²⁵ At first he exhibited so little firmness, that he was frequently upon the point of abandoning his enterprise; and he would have done so, had it not been for the address of one his followers. When he was rising into celebrity, Corais, a powerful Arab chief, being irritated that a man of yesterday should have the boldness to mislead the people, declared himself his enemy, and attempted to thwart his designs; but the people, believing that Mahomet had continued intercourse with God and his angels, supported him till he had an opportunity of being avenged upon his adversary. The tribe of Corais was worsted; and Mahomet seeing himself surrounded by a host of fanatics, thought that he stood in no need of a coadjutor. However, lest Corais should expose his impostures, he took the initiative; and to make sure, he loaded him with promises, and swore that he only wished to become great in order to share with him that power, to the establishment of which he might so much contribute. “We can agree,” said he, “when we reach our proper elevation; we can depend, in the meantime, on that great multitude whom we have gained over, and it only remains that we make sure of them by the employment of that artifice which you have so happily invented.” At the same time he persuaded him to descend into the Cave of Oracles.

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This was a dried-up sunk well, from the bottom of which Corais spoke, in order that the people might believe that it was the voice of God declaring himself in favour of Mahomet who was in the midst of his proselytes. Deceived by the blandishments of the leader, his associate regularly descended into the well, to counterfeit the oracle. Whilst Mahomet was passing one day at the head of an unfatuated multitude, they heard a voice, which said—"I am your God, and I declare that Mahomet is the prophet whom I have appointed for all nations; he will instruct you in my law of truth, which the Jews and Christians have altered." For a long time the accomplice played this game; but at last he met with the blackest ingratitude. The voice being heard, as usual, proclaiming him an inspired personage, Mahomet turned to the people, and commanded them, in the name of that God who had recognised him as his prophet, to fill up the well with stones, that it might be an enduring witness in his favour, like that pillar which Jacob set up to mark the place where God had appeared to him.²⁶ Thus perished, miserably, the chief who had most contributed to the elevation of Mahomet. It was upon this heap of stones that the last of the three most celebrated impostors established his religion, and so solid and stable is its foundation, that after the lapse of twelve hundred years there is little appearance at present of its being overthrown.

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§ 23.

In this way was the power of Mahomet established; and he was more fortunate than Jesus, inasmuch as he lived to see the wide diffusion of his doctrines, which Christ on account of his want of resources, was unable to do. He was even more fortunate in this respect than Moses, who from excess of ambition brought himself to a premature end.—Mahomet died in peace, and loaded with blessings. He had, moreover, a well-grounded hope that his religion would last, because it was accommodated to the nature of a people born and brought up in ignorance; an adaptation in which men more learned than himself, but less accustomed to associate with the lower orders, might have entirely failed.

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The reader is now in possession of the most remarkable facts concerning the three most celebrated legislators, whose religions have brought into subjection a great part of the human race. They were such as we have represented them; and it is for you to consider if they are worthy of your respect, and if you are justified in allowing yourselves to be led by those whom ambition alone conducted to power, and whose dreams have been perpetuated by ignorance. The following observations, if read with a free and unprejudiced mind, may lead to the discovery of truth, by clearing away those mists wherewith you have been blinded and beguiled.

¹ Consult Hobbes' *Leviathan* "De Homine," chap. xli, pages 56, 57 and 58. ↑

² Philip of Macedon had sent auxiliaries and money to Hannibal in Africa. "Infensos Philippo, ob auxilia cum pecunia nuper in Africam missu Annibale." Levy, Book xxxi. chap. 1.—*Translator's Note*. ↑

³ Hobbes' *Leviathan*, "De Homine," chap. xii, pp. 56 and 57. ↑

⁴ Hobbes, *ubi supra* "De Homine," chap. xii. pages 58 and 59. ↑

⁵ This word must not be taken in its usual acceptation. What rational men understand by the term is a dexterous man, an able cheat, and a master of jugglery, which requires great readiness and address; and not by any means a person in compact with the Devil as the vulgar suppose. ↑

⁶ "And he said, Leave us not, I pray thee; for as much as thou *knowest* how we are to encamp in the wilderness, and thou *mayest* be to us *instead of eyes*."—[Num. chap. x, v. 31](#). ↑

⁷ [Exodus iv. 16](#). ↑

⁸ When Romulus was reviewing his forces in the plain of Caprae, here suddenly arose a thunder-storm, during which he was enveloped in so thick a cloud that he was lost to the view of his army; nor thereafter on this earth was Romulus seen.—*Liv.* 1. I. c. 16.—*Translator's note*. ↑

⁹ Hobbes' *Leviathan*; de homine, chap. xii. pp. 59 and 60. ↑

¹⁰ It is recorded by Livy, that "there is a grove, through which flowed a perennial stream, taking its origin in a dark cave, in which Numa was accustomed to meet the goddess, and receive instructions as to his political and religions institutions."—*Liv.* 1. I. c. 21. ↑

¹¹ Qu'un beau Pigeon a tire d'aile
Vienne obom brer une Purcelle,
Rien n'est sur prenant en cela;
L'on en vit autant en Lydie.
Et le beau Cygne de Leda
Vaut bien le Pigeon de Marie.

- 12 [I. Samuel, chap. viii. vs. 5 and 6](#). ↑
- 13 The Gospel according to [John, chap. viii. v. 7](#). ↑
- 14 [Matthew's Gospel, chap. xxii. v. 21](#). ↑
- 15 [Matthew's Gospel, chap. xxi. v. 27](#). ↑
- 16 Saint Paul, [Hebrews, chap. viii. v. 13](#) speaks in these terms: "In that he saith a *new* covenant, he hath made the *first* old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away."—*Translator's note.* ↑
- 17 This was the opinion of Pope Leo X. as appears from an expression of his, which, considering that it was made use of at a time when the philosophical spirit of inquiry had made little progress, was remarkably bold. "It has been well known in all ages," he observed to Cardinal Beinbo, "how much this fable of Jesus Christ has been profitable to us and ours." *Quantum nobis nostrisque sa de Christo fabula profuerit, satis est omnibus saeculis notum.* ↑
- 18 Confessions, 1. VII. c. ix. v. 28. ↑
- 19 See the discourse of Aristophanes, in the "Banquet of Plato." ↑
- 20 [Luke's Gospel, chap. xvi. v. 24](#). ↑
- 21 "The City of God," book I. chap. xiv. ↑
- 22 Orig. adv. Cels. 1. VIII. chap. iv. Compare with, [Matthew, chap. xix. v. 24](#). ↑
- 23 Op. adv. Jorin. 1. II. chap. viii.—"In indication of their refusal to take an oath, the Society of Friends quote the words of Christ, "Swear not at all;" unaware, or overlooking, that this expression is descriptive of a state of social perfection, when the word of a man will be as good as his oath. Many others of Christ's precepts besides this are unobserved by Christians, such as 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth,' 'Give to every one that asketh, and from him that would borrow of you turn not thou away.' *The morality of Christ is a beau ideal so far from being realized, that there is not even a similitude of it in the Christian world.* The Quakers who vauntingly obey this precept regarding oaths, has no hesitation in breaking the other precepts respecting the hoarding of money, and refusing to give it away."—*Translator's Note.* ↑
- 24 St. Paul. ↑
- 25 "I can believe," observes the Count de Boulainvilliers, "that Mahomet was ignorant of the common elements of education. But assuredly he was *not* ignorant in respect to that vast knowledge which a far travelled man of great natural powers may acquire. He was *not* ignorant of his native tongue, although he could not read it, being master of all its subtleness and all its beauties. He was thoroughly qualified to render hateful whatever was truly blameworthy, and to paint truth in colours so simple and vivid, that it was impossible to misunderstand it. *All that he has said is true*, as regards the essential dogmas of Religion; but *he has not said all that is true*, and in this respect alone does our religion differ from his." Farther on he adds, that "Mahomet was neither ignorant nor a barbarian; he conducted his enterprise with all the skill, delicacy, perseverance, and intrepidity, which was necessary to ensure its success. His views were as lofty as any which Alexander the Great, or Julius Cæsar, were capable of entertaining, had they been in his position."—*Life of Mahomet by Count de Boulainvilliers*, book II. pp. 266-8. Amsterdam edit. 1731. ↑
- 26 [Genesis chap. xxviii. v. 18](#). ↑

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CHAPTER IV.

TRUTHS EVIDENT AND OBVIOUS TO THE SENSES.

[Contents]

§ 1.

Moses, Jesus Christ, and Mahomet, being such as we have represented them, it is evident that it would be useless to search in their writings for a new idea of the Divinity. The conferences of Moses and Mahomet with the Deity, and the miraculous conception of Jesus Christ, are the greatest impostures that have ever met the face of day, and you must shun their contemplation as you love the truth.

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§ 2.

God, as we have seen, being only Nature, or in other words the combination of all beings, all properties, and all energies, is necessarily the cause from which emanates every thing, and of course not distinct or different from its effects. He

cannot be termed good, nor evil, nor just, nor merciful nor jealous: these attributes belong only to mankind. The Deity therefore can neither punish nor reward. The opposite idea may lead aside the ignorant, who, conceiving the Divinity to be an uncompounded essence, represent him to themselves under images altogether unsuited to his nature. Those alone who exercise their judgment without confounding its operations with those of their imaginative faculty, and who have sufficient strength of mind to cast away the prejudices of infancy, can form a clear and distinct conception of the subject. They regard him as the author of every being, producing them without distinction, and giving no preference to one over another, and whose power is such that he created man with as much ease as he did the meanest worm, or the humblest plant.

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§ 3.

We must therefore believe that this universal Being whom we generally name God, takes no greater care of a man than of an ant, nor pays more attention to a lion than to a stone; neither regards the beauty or deformity, good or evil, perfection or imperfection. He cares not to be praised, beseeched, sought after, or flattered; he is not affected by what men say or do; he is not susceptible of love or hatred:¹ in one word he is not more occupied with man than he is with the rest of the other creatures, whatever may be their nature. All these distinctions are merely the inventions of a limited understanding: they originate in ignorance, and self-interest keeps them up.

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§ 4.

Thus, therefore, no rational man can believe in God, nor in hell, nor in spirits, nor in devils, in the sense in which the terms are generally understood. These big words have only been coined to intimidate and blind the vulgar. Those who wish to convince themselves of this truth would do well to devote particular attention to what follows, and accustom themselves to suspend their judgment until after mature reflection.

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§ 5.

The infinity of stars which we see above us has not escaped the fictions of presumptive credulity. Amongst the glittering hosts, there is one said to have been set apart for the celestial court, where God holds regal state in the midst of his courtiers. This place is the residence of the blessed, wither the souls of the virtuous are conveyed after leaving the body. We need not dwell upon an opinion so frivolous and so contradictory to common sense. It is well enough ascertained that what we denominate the *heavens* is merely a continuation of the air which surrounds us—a fluid through which the other planets move, like the earth which we inhabit, unsustained and unconnected with any solid mass whatever.

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§ 6.

The priests having, like the pagans with their Gods and goddesses, invented a *heaven*, where God and the blessed might dwell; after the same example next they contrived a *hell*, or subterranean place, to which, they assure us, the spirits of wicked men go down for the purpose of being everlastingly tormented. Now, the word *hell*, in its original sense, imports no more than a place dark and deep; and the poets invented it as the opposite to the residence of the blessed, which they represented as high and bright. This is the exact signification of the Latin terms *inferus* and *inferi*, and the Greek *hades*; any dark place such as a sepulchre, or whatever was fearful from its depth and obscurity. The whole sprung from the imagination of the poet and the knavery of the priests—the former knowing how to make an impression in this way, on weak, timid, and melancholy minds; and the latter having rather more substantial reasons for continuing the delusion.

¹ Omnis enim per se divum natura necesse est
Immortali aevo summa cum pace fruatur,
Semota ab nostris rebus, sejunctaque longe;
Nam privata dolore omni, privata periclis
Ipsa suis pollens opibus: nihil indiga nostri,

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CHAP. V.—ON THE SOUL.

[Contents]

§ 1.

This is rather a more delicate subject to handle than the last which we had occasion to treat of, viz: Heaven and Hell. For the reader's sake, therefore, it must be treated at greater length; but before defining it, an exposition of the opinions of the most celebrated philosophers is necessary, which will be given in a few words, in order that the reader may be the better enabled to carry it along with him.

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§ 2.

Their opinions are exceedingly varied. Some have pretended that the soul is a spirit or immaterial essence; others have maintained that it is a part of the Divinity; others assert that it is the concord of all parts of the body; and some uphold that it is the most subtle part of the blood, separated into the brain, and thence distributed through the nervous system. If this is established, the soul must take its origin from the heart which creates it; and the place where it exercises its noblest functions must be the brain, as that organ is the most purified from the grosser parts of the blood.

Such are a few of the different opinions which have been given to the world in regard to the soul. The better to develop them, we shall divide them into two classes. In the one will be found the statements of those philosophers who considered the soul as *material*; and in the other those of the opposite party, who maintained the doctrine of its immateriality.

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§ 3.

Pythagoras and Plato have both maintained the doctrine that the soul was immaterial in its nature; that is, a being existing without aid from the body, and capable of action uncontrolled by any thing corporeal. They hold that all the individual spirits of animals were emanations from the universal Soul of the World, and that these off-givings were incorporeal, immortal, and of the same nature as the pervading Essence itself. They illustrated their doctrine well, by the analogy of a thousand little lights which are all of the same nature as the great flame at which they were kindled.

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§ 4.

These philosophers believed that the universe was animated by an immaterial Essence, immortal and invisible, knowing everything, and acting always; and which is the cause of every movement, and the origin of all spirits, these being merely emanations from it. Then, as spirits are very subtle, they cannot unite (they observe) unless they can find a body subtle as the light, or as that expanded air which the vulgar take for heaven. They therefore assume a body less subtle, then another somewhat gross; and thus by degrees they come to be enabled to unite themselves to the bodies of animals, into which they descend as into dungeons or sepulchres. The death of the body, according to them, is the life of the soul, which was in a manner buried, and could only in a feeble way exercise its noblest functions. At the death of the body, the soul shakes off materiality, comes forth of its prison-house, and unites itself to the Soul of the World from which it emanated.

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According to this opinion then, all the spirits of animals are of the same nature; and the diversity of their functions and faculties arises solely from the difference of the bodies into which they descend.

Aristotle supposes an universal intelligence, acting on particular intelligences, as light acts upon the eye; and that as light renders objects visible, so does this universal intelligence render the others intelligent.

This philosopher defines the soul as that whereby we live, feel, think, and move; but he is unsatisfactory as to the nature of that Being which is the source of its noblest functions. It is needless, therefore, to search in his writings for a solution of the difficulties which exist upon this subject.

Dicearchus, Asclepiades, and Galienus, have also, to a certain extent, believed that the soul was immaterial, but in a different way from that already alluded to. They suppose that the soul is nothing else than the harmony of all the parts of the body: that is, the result of an exact blending of its elements and disposition of its parts, its humours, and its essences. Thus, they say, as health is not a part of that which is healthy, although it is connected with it, so neither is the soul a part of the animal, although it be within it, but simply the harmony of all those parts which go to form the containing body.

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On these opinions we must, remark, that their defenders believe in the immateriality of the soul on self-contradictory principles; for to maintain that, the soul is not a body, but merely something inseparably attached to a body, is to say that it is corporeal. We not only term that corporeal which *is* a body, but everything which has form and accident, and which cannot be separated from matter.

Such are the opinions of those philosophers who maintain that the soul is incorporeal or immaterial. We see that they are discordant and contradictory to each other, and consequently little to be heeded as points of faith. We now come to the opposite party, who have upheld the doctrine of its materiality.

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§ 5.

Diogenes believed that the soul was composed of air, whence he deduces the necessity of respiration. He defines it as an air which passes through the mouth into the pulmonary vessels, whence it becomes warm, and whence it is distributed to every part of the system.

Leucippus and Democritus assert that it is fire, and that, like fire, it is composed of atoms which readily penetrate all parts of the body, and communicate motion to it.

Hippocrates said that it was composed of water and of fire. Empedocles thought that it was compounded of the four elements. Epicurus believed with Democritus that the soul is composed of fire, but he adds that there enter into its composition, air, a vapour, and an indescribable substance, which is the principle of thought. Out of these four different substances he makes to himself a very subtle spirit, pervading all the body, and which, he says, we ought to term the soul.

Descartes reasons also, but in a very wretched manner, that the soul is not material. I say in a very wretched manner, for never did philosopher reason so badly on this subject as did this great man. Here is his argument. He sets out by saying that he must doubt in the existence of his own body, believing that there exists no such thing as a body at all, and then he reasons in this fashion: "There exists no body; I exist nevertheless: I am therefore not a body, and consequently I can only be a substance which thinks." Although this fine reasoning destroys itself sufficiently, I will yet take the liberty of giving my opinion of it in two words.

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1. The doubt which M. Descartes assumes is indefensible; for although one may sometimes *think* that he does not *think* that he has a body, it is true nevertheless that he *has* a body, since he *thinks* of it.

2. Whoever believes that there exists no body, ought to be well assured that he is not one himself; for no one can doubt in his own existence. If he is assured in this matter, his doubt is useless.

3. When he says that the soul is a substance which thinks, he tells us nothing new. Every person agrees in this; but the difficulty is to *ascertain the nature* of that substance which thinks, and in this respect M. Descartes is no wiser than his predecessors.

§ 6.

That we may not go crooked as he has done, and that we may form the soundest conception possible of the soul of all animals, without excepting man, who is of the same nature, and who only exercises different functions from the difference in his organization, it is important to attend to the following remarks.

It is certain that there exists in the universe a very subtle fluid, a substance extremely attenuated, whose source is the sun, and which pervades all other bodies, less or more, according to their nature and their consistence. Such is the soul of the world, which governs and vivifies it, and of which some portion is distributed to all the creatures in the universe.¹

This soul is the purest fire. It burns not of itself, but by different movements, which it communicates to the particles of other bodies into which it enters, it burns and makest its warmth be felt. Our visible fire contains more of this matter than air; air, more than water; and earth, considerably less than any of them. Plants have more of it than minerals, and animals more than either. In fine, this fire pervading the body renders it capable of thought, and is that properly termed the soul, although it sometimes receives the appellation of *animal spirits*, which permeate the whole body. It is certain therefore that this soul being of the same nature as that of animals, is annihilated at the death of man, as it is at that of the other creatures. It follows that whatever poets and divines have told us of a future state, is only the chimerical offspring of their own brain, begotten and nourished by them for purposes which is by no means difficult to fathom.

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¹ If a work be translated, it always receives a colouring, which is more or less faint or vivid according to the opinions and ability of the Translator.—*Volney's Lectures on History*. ↑

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CHAPTER VI ON THE SPIRITS CALLED DEMONS

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§ 1.

We have explained in another place how the notion of spirits came to be introduced among men, and proved that they were merely phantoms which existed only in their disordered imagination.

The first instructors of mankind were not very explicit in their “lessons to the million” as to the nature of these phantoms, but they could not help saying what they thought of them. One class, reflecting that these shadows melted into thin air and had no consistence, described them as immaterial or incorporeal, having shapes without matter, but coloured and defined. At the same time however, they denied that they were corporeal existences, or that they were coloured or figured; adding that they could clothe themselves with air as with a garment, when they wished to become visible to the eye of men. A second class assert that they were animated bodies, but that they were composed of air, or some still more subtle matter, which they could thicken at their pleasure, when they chose to make their appearance.

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§ 2.

If the two sorts of philosophers were opposed to each other in their opinion as to those shadows, they agreed as to their name, *viz.*, *Demons*; in which respect they were as those who, when dreaming, believe that they see the souls of people departed, and that it is their own soul which they behold when they look into a mirror—or, in short, those who can believe that the reflections of the stars which they see in the water are the souls of the stars themselves. Out of this truly ridiculous belief they wandered into an era no less absurd; believing that these phantoms possessed unlimited power—an idea sufficiently devoid of reason, but current among the ignorant, who suppose that these beings, whom

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they know not, can exert a fearful influence.

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§ 3.

This most absurd creed was invented and promulgated by legislators, in order to support their own authority. They established this belief in spirits under the name of religion, hoping that the dread of these invisible powers which the people would entertain, might keep them to their duty. To give the more weight to their dogma, they classified those spirits or demons as good and bad; the one species being intended to stimulate men to the observance of their laws, and the other to act as a check and prevent their breaking them.

To ascertain what these demons really were, it is only necessary to read the works of the Greek poets and historians, and above all, the Theogony of Hesiod, where he dwells at great length on the origin of the gods.

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§ 4.

The Greeks invented them. From that people they passed by means of their colonies into Asia, Egypt, and Italy. In this way the Jews, who were dispersed in Alexandria and elsewhere became acquainted with them. They made the same happy use of them as other nations did—with this difference, that, unlike the Greeks, they did not call them demons, or regard them as good and bad spirits indifferently. They considered them all as bad with one single exception, to whom they gave the name of the Spirit, or God; and they termed those men prophets who said that they were inspired by the good Spirit. Farther, they viewed as the operations of this divine Spirit whatever they considered as a great blessing; and on the other hand, they looked upon whatever they thought to be a great evil, as proceeding from some cacodemon or evil spirit.

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§ 5.

This distinction between good and evil led them to the use of the appellation *demoniacs*, which they applied to lunatics, madmen, furious persons, and epileptics, as also to those who made use of “the unknown tongues.” A man deformed and somewhat deranged, was said to be possessed of an unclean spirit; and a dumb man by a dumb spirit. These words, spirit and demon, became so familiar to them that they used them on every occasion. It follows that the Jews believed with the Greeks, that these phantoms were neither chimerical nor visionary, but real and substantial agents.

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§ 6.

Hence it is that the Bible is filled with tales of spirits, and demons, and demoniacs; but in no place of that book is it said how and when they were created—an omission scarcely pardonable on the part of Moses, who undertakes to give an account of the creation both of the heavens and of the earth. Christ who speaks very frequently of angels and spirits, good and bad, does not inform us whether they are material or immaterial. This makes it evident that both of them were ignorant of the fact that the Greeks had instructed their ancestors in this strange belief. Were the case otherwise, Jesus Christ would be no less culpable for his silence on the subject, than he is for his refusal to grant to the majority of the human race, that grace, that faith, and that piety, which he assures them it is in his power to bestow.

But to return to the subject of Spirits. It is certain these words *Demons*, *Satan*, *Devil*, are only proper names intended to apply to any obnoxious individual of our own species; and that, at no period did any but the most ignorant believe in their existence, either amongst the Greeks who invented, or the Jews who adopted the terms. After the latter became infected with such notions, they applied these words which signify *enemy*, *accuser*, and *destroyer*, at one time to invisible Powers, and at another, to those which are visible. Thus, they declared of the Gentiles, that their dwelling was in the kingdom of Satan; there being none other than themselves (by their own account of the matter) who dwelt in the kingdom of God.

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Jesus Christ being a Jew, and consequently imbued with these opinions, we need not be surprised when we meet in the gospels and the writing of his disciples the words *Devil*, *Satan*, and *Hell*, as if they were anything real or substantive. We have showed before that there can be nothing more chimerical; but although what was said might suffice to satisfy rational men, we are not the less necessitated to add a few words, in an attempt to convince the bigotted.

All Christians agree that God is the source of everything; that he created all things—that he sustains them, and that without his support they would drop into annihilation.—From these principles, it is certain that he created that being whom they call the Devil, or Satan. Whether he were created good or evil is nothing to the argument; he is incontestibly the work of the great Head, and if he continue to exist, all wicked as they represent him to be, it must only be at the good pleasure of God. Now, how is it possible to conceive that God would preserve one of his creatures, who not only hates him mortally, and blasphemes him without end, but who sets himself to seduce the friends of the Almighty for the sole purpose of mortifying him. How is it possible, I repeat, that God can permit this Devil to exist, who turns aside from his worship the favored and the elect, and who would dethrone him were it in his power?

This is what we wish to say in speaking of God, or rather in speaking of the Devil and Hell. If God is almighty, and if nothing can happen without his permission, how comes it that the devil hates him, blasphemes him, and seduces his worshippers? The Deity either consents to this or he does not. If he consents to it, the Devil in blaspheming him is only doing his duty, since he can do nothing but what God wishes, and consequently it is not the Devil, but God himself who blasphemes himself,—a fearfully absurd supposition. If he does not consent to it he cannot be omnipotent, and there must be two principles, the one of good, and the other of evil—the one aiming at one thing, and the other at its direct opposite.

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To what then leads our reasoning? To this; that neither God, nor the Devil, nor Paradise, nor Hell, nor the Soul, are such as religion has represented them to be, and as most reverend divines have maintained. These latter sell their fables for truths, being people of bad faith who abuse the credulity of the ignorant by making them believe whatever they please; as if the vulgar were absolutely unfitted to hear the truth and could be nourished by nothing but those absurdities, in which a rational mind can only discover a vast of nothing, and a waste of folly.

The world has been long infected with these most absurd opinions, yet in every age men have been found—truth-loving men—who have striven against the absurdities of their day. This little treatise has been written from like motives, and in it the lovers of truth will doubtless meet with some things satisfactory. It is to them that I appeal, caring little for the opinion of those who substitute their own prejudices in place of infallible oracles.

Happy the man, who, studying Nature's laws,
Through known effects can trace the secret cause;
His mind possessing in a quiet state,
Fearless of Fortune, and resigned to Fate.

Dryden's Translation of Virgil, Georgics, Book II. l. 700.

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The *De Tribus Impostoribus*, or "Treatise on the three impostors", is a unique book. Unique in that it was known, heavily criticized, and banned, but never read, half a millennium before it was written. Its title alone was enough to arouse rage and anger with religious institutions, as the three impostors the title refers to are Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Anger for calling the founding figure of their religion an impostor, and, maybe even worse, for equating him with the founding figures of competing creeds. Its mythical nature meant it couldn't be attacked on its content and was untouchable for even the most sophisticated apologist. It was only in the early 18th century—the time of the enlightenment—that some freethinkers took up the challenge and actually produced a book under this title. This book is a kind of a mystification, pretending to be the medieval book so many religious leaders have fulminated against. Who has done it, and its history is still something of a mystery. The original book was in Latin, but translations in French, and German also appeared. Two English

translations were made, one in 1846 and one in 1904. This edition is based on the 1846 edition, which includes quite a long introduction. Georges Minois gives a fascinating account of this work and its history in his 2012 book *The Atheist's Bible: The Most Dangerous Book That Never Existed*.

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Corrections

The following corrections have been applied to the text:

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8 , 74	[<i>Not in source</i>]	,
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14	Christiana	Christina
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17	overthown	overthrown
17	'	"
18	Michiavel	Machiavel
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18	Pomponacious	Pompanacius
20	aferwards	afterwards
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23	INPOSTORS	IMPOSTORS
23	Burchard Gottheffle Struves	Burkhard Gotthelf Struve
24	oportunity	opportunity
26	wirrtten	written
26	excommnicated	excommunicated
28	pagaraphs	paragraphs

28	slighest	slightest
29	tittle	title
29	sixth	six
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