The life and writings of Alexander Vinet

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THE LIFE AND WRITINGS

OF

ALEXANDER VINET.
TO MY LOVED AND HONORED FRIEND

PROFESSOR J. F. ASTIÉ,

AUTHOR OF

"L’ESPRIT DE VINET,"
"LE VINET DE LA LÉGENDE ET CELUI DE L’HISTOIRE,"

I DEDICATE

THIS LIFE OF THE TEACHER

WHOM HE HAS HELPED ME TO UNDERSTAND.
THE LIFE AND WRITINGS

OF

ALEXANDER VINET.

BY

LAURA M. LANE.

"The decisive events of the world take place in the intellect."

"All great men are providential."

"Le voir, c'était déjà une lumière et un appel. L'avoir connu est une bénédiction dont on doit reconnaissance à Dieu."—E. Scherer.

With an Introduction

BY

THE VENERABLE F. W. FARRAR, D.D.,
ARCHDEACON OF WESTMINSTER.

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1890.
I have been asked to preface the following pages by a few words of introduction. They need no introduction from me; but I may say without hesitation that readers will here find a deeply interesting account of a sincere and brilliant thinker, who played a difficult part in a time of struggle, of which the issues still remain undecided. Alexander Vinet has many claims on our admiration. He was a critic, a man of letters, a graceful and eloquent writer, a profound theologian. In his lifetime the charm of his manner and the force of his genius won him the friendship of all among whom his lot was cast, and the power of his intellect made itself felt in circles widely separate from his own. A man who has received the homage of writers so different from each other in all their sympathies as De Wette, Victor Hugo, Châteaubriand, and Amiel, could have been no common man. But Vinet was also “a living example of spiritual Christianity,” and it was this which gained him the special honour of one of the finest critics of this age, who has given him a place among his Portraits Contemporains. “To be of the school of Christ;” says Sainte-Beuve, “I learnt to know, from the neighbourhood of Mons. Vinet, what is meant by those words, and the noble meaning
which they convey." Vinet was also the beloved friend of one of the most attractive and large-hearted thinkers of the last generation—Thomas Erskine of Linlathen; and he sympathized to a great extent in that "larger hope" which it was the holy passion of Erskine's life to promulgate and to defend.

The reader will be presented with a succinct but faithful view, derived chiefly from his own letters and writings, of Vinet's share in the great movements of his day in the direction of liberating the free conscience of mankind from the bondage of political tyranny. He will also watch the struggles of a courageous intellect and the misgivings of a tender conscience, in the course of its Divine awakenment from a religion of forms and shibboleths to that vital Christianity which is always presented in the New Testament as deriving its source from oneness with Christ, and evincing its reality by love and good works.

The publication of this book will be a pure gain if it calls the attention of fresh students to the writings of a theologian so independent as Vinet was, yet so supreme in his allegiance to the majesty of truth. Amid the agitations of his career, he abandoned many traditional tenets which failed to stand the test of deepening experience and widening knowledge, but he held fast to those catholic verities which are among the things which cannot be shaken, and shall remain. Those ultimate truths of Christianity have found few defenders in modern days more eloquent and more profound.

F. W. FARRAR.
PREFATORY NOTE.

I OFFER the Life and Writings of Alexander Vinet to the English-reading public, in the belief that many will be glad to make closer acquaintance with the Swiss Professor to whom some of Thomas Erskine's most interesting letters were addressed.

"I made a new acquaintance at Lausanne," wrote Erskine, September 14, 1838, "with M. Vinet, the most remarkable man in the French Protestant Church. . . . He has that basis of thought in him on which thoughts from all quarters can find a footing or a rooting. . . . There are few men like him in the world. Such a combination of mental power and Christian character is the rarest of all things."

Nor was Mr. Erskine the only inhabitant of Great Britain who appreciated Vinet's intellectual and moral gifts. In the Reminiscences of A. P. Stanley, Dean of Westminster, we read,—

"Vinet was constantly going forward: he had a fine power of writing. Yet he says himself he could count those who fully sympathized with him upon 'the ten fingers of his two hands.'"

1 T. Erskine of Linlathen.
In the *Life and Letters of Frederic Denison Maurice* we find the following allusion to Vinet:—

"In Bunsen's account, the political condition of Switzerland is sufficiently sad. In Lausanne, Vinet and the most intelligent of the Swiss are taking up a kind of non-juring doctrine, which they are maintaining with great ability. . . . There is a book which I doubt not you know well, *Sur la manifestation des convictions religieuses*, by Alexander Vinet. I differ from its anti-State doctrines as much as any one can differ. Nevertheless there is more in that book than its great eloquence and earnestness, which moved me when I read it, and which moves me now."¹

Lord Acton, in his article on George Eliot,² deplores the loss that gifted writer sustained by persistently ignoring the phases of religious thought which gather round the names of Rothe and Vinet.³

"The literature of ethics and psychology, so far as it touched religion, dropped out of her sight, and she renounced intercourse with half the talent in the world. The most eminent of the men who pursued like problems in her lifetime, among the most eminent who have thought about them at any time, were Vinet and Rothe. Both were admirable in their lives, and still more in the presence of death; and neither of them could be taxed with thraldom to the formulas of preceding divines. . . . Yet, although she knew and highly valued M. Scherer, she did not remember that he was the friend of Vinet, and that the

¹ To Dean Stanley.
² *Nineteenth Century*, vol. xvii. p. 179, March 1885.
³ This testimony is particularly valuable from a member of the Roman Catholic communion.
history of his opinions is as remarkable as anything to be found in the *Apoloogia* or in her own biography."

To how many others might not the same reproach be addressed. Outside the little world of those who watch with keen interest the struggle between the old and the new theology, the name of Vinet is unknown.

Yet there has always existed in the French-speaking Churches an *élite* who feel for Vinet much of the enthusiasm that the Germans display with regard to Schleiermacher. All theological parties claim him for their own. For the one he is too liberal, for the other he is too orthodox; but neither will relegate him to the opposite camp. Even those who sympathize the least with his views cannot refrain from rendering homage to the beauty and depth of his writings. All share the opinion of Pierson\(^1\) the Dutch critic:—

"Where Vinet is concerned, everything that resembles superficiality is almost sacrilege."

"Vinet’s *coup d’œil,*" writes Edmond de Pressense, "has not the power of Pascal; but his horizon is vaster, and his mind is freer."

But it is not exclusively as a theologian that I wish to introduce Vinet to English readers. He was a many-sided man, a thinker, a moralist, a critic—I might almost say a statesman. Men so widely divergent as Sainte-Beuve, Emile Souvestre, Victor Hugo, Michelet, St. Révé Taillandier, Lamartine, Ravaisson,\(^2\) Henri Amiel, and

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1. Professor of Literature, University of Amsterdam.
Edmond Scherer unite in paying homage to Vinet's "inexhaustible abundance of ideas, originality of expression, literary taste, Christian feeling, and universal sympathy."

The following pages will trace the history of Vinet's magnificent struggle on behalf of religious liberty both within and without the Church: on the one hand, by freeing it from the tyranny of a despotic and brutal majority; and, on the other, by presenting a conception of Christianity which was destined to effect an intellectual revolution whose influence is still spreading in ever-widening circles throughout the world of thought.