

MISSIONARY MAGAZINE;

OR

EVANGELICAL INTELLIGENCER.

THE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY'S

MISSIONARY MAGAZINE;

OR

EVANGELICAL INTELLIGENCER:

FOR 1805.

WILLIAM P. FARRAND, EDITOR.

VOL. I.

PHILADELPHIA:

PRINTED FOR, AND PUBLISHED BY, WILLIAM P. FARRAND AND CO.
N^o 170, MARKET STREET.

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1806.

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APRIL, 1805.

NO. IV.

MODERN MISSIONARY SOCIETIES.—CONTINUED.

THE CONNECTICUT MISSIONARY SOCIETY.

The Missionary Society of Connecticut was instituted in 1798; and, since that period, has uniformly and successfully pursued the objects for which it was formed. Its attention has been principally directed to the promulgation of the gospel, and the establishment of churches, in the new settlements in the northern part of Vermont, in the north and west parts of the State of New-York, and in the northwestern parts of Pennsylvania. Very considerable attempts to instruct and christianize the savages have been made, and the friends of the undertaking have much cause to rejoice for past success, and to be encouraged to future exertions. Wherever Missionaries from this society have gone, they have met with very favourable reception; great attention has been given to their preaching: and the hearers have generally expressed great obligations to their brethren in Connecticut for the pains which they take for their salvation. In many parts, schools and churches have been established, the children have been instructed and baptized, the Lord's Supper administered, and the Missionaries have much cause to hope that, by the blessing of God upon their labours, *many souls ready to perish have been brought to a saving knowledge of divine truth.*

events have confirmed the truth of christianity, and that the predictions connected with them have been fulfilled. But, if the faith of the missionary rests on the signatures of the divine perfections appearing in the word itself, he will be chiefly concerned to display to the ignorant the pure and simple doctrines of the cross.

THE CELEBRATED OBJECTION OF MR. HUME TO THE MIRACLES OF THE GOSPEL.

When the defenders of christianity thought they had established the evidences of the miraculous history of our Saviour upon foundations which could no longer be shaken, the ingenious Mr. Hume invented an argument which revived the spirits of vanquished infidelity, and has since been triumphantly urged by all the enemies of religion, as irrefragable, and decisive against every proof that can possibly be alledged in favour of divine revelation. His celebrated argument is this,—That miracles are, in their own nature, incredible, and that, therefore, no testimony can ever verify them. The only rational foundation of our belief of what has ever happened, or what can happen in the world is our own *experience* of what does constantly take place in the course of nature. Men may be false, or may be deceived, but nature never changes. As we, then, have had no experience of any miraculous changes in the order of the world, it is unreasonable to believe that any have ever existed, whatever may be the number, or the character of the men by whom they are attested.—This reasoning was esteemed, by those who were inclined to reject divine revelation, to be unanswerable, and, for a moment, it seemed to its friends to be the most formidable attack which had yet been made on the authenticity of the sacred scriptures. It has since, however, been vigorously repelled, and I think effectually overthrown by many pious and excellent writers, and by none with more skill and force than by Bishop Watson in his letter on this subject to Mr. Gibbon.

But, it appears to me that Mr. Hume's redoubted argument may be destroyed by a process more simple and obvious than most of those which have hitherto been employed against it. And a plain, concise, and popular refutation of such

an adversary, whose writings are in the hands of almost all young persons, may answer some of the valuable ends contemplated by your Magazine.

On Mr. Hume's principle, that no miracle is credible because it is contrary to our experience of the uniformity of the course of nature, it would be impossible for God to make any revelation of his will to the world, distinct from the structure of the world itself, whatever reasons for it might exist in the state of human nature. Such a revelation would itself be a miracle, whether made to mankind immediately by a voice from heaven, or by the more humble instrumentality of prophets and apostles. And, if by the agency of the latter, their divine mission could be authenticated only by such works of omnipotence as would be a sufficient demonstration to the world that the spirit of God accompanied and instructed them. This is a consequence of the principle, I am aware, not at all alarming to those by whom it is urged, but rather a subject of their triumph. But, I trust, there are few reasonable and serious men who are willing to say that it is impossible for God to make any extraordinary communication of his will to his erring and miserable creatures.

But, I add, that this principle leads to Atheism—acted upon to its full extent it would resist all improvements in science,—it refutes itself.

It leads to Atheism. For if our own experience of the uniformity of nature is the sole test of a reasonable belief concerning whatever has been, or what ever shall be, in the history of the world, it is impossible that the world should ever have had a beginning, it is impossible that it should ever have an end. It must have existed, it must continue to exist, eternally in the same order in which we now behold it. There can be no future state of existence, no future judgment, no future retribution to the virtuous and the wicked; for these are all contrary to our experience; there can be, therefore, no foundation for religion. The world, eternal in its own nature, must exist independent on any intelligent and omnipotent cause. But the only proof of the being of God is derived from the wise order and harmony of the world; and if this is order eternal and uncreated, it would at least be unphilosophical to suppose the existence of a Deity who would then be a superfluous and unnecessary appendage to the universe. We must receive the absurd idea of an eternal succession of mutable and perishing beings governed only by their own internal and immutable laws. We must believe, that there is no God, or

embrace the old Aristotelian hypothesis, which is but one step removed from Atheism, that the universe itself is God.

These consequences flow so obviously from the principle, that I have been surprised not to find them urged with more point and force than they have been by the friends and defenders of christianity. Indeed, I have scarcely seen them touched except transiently by the judicious and ingenious Dr. Allen*. They are consequences, however, which, though not displeasing to a part of the followers of Mr. Hume, yet, I trust, were never contemplated by the greater portion of them. Atheism has not yet become so fashionable in Great Britain. And if they are, as I believe, the genuine results of the principles, they must be decisive against it in the opinion of every pious and virtuous man.

Another consequence of this principle, though not so gross and impious as the former, tends not less to demonstrate its absurdity ;—it would, if acted upon to its full extent, arrest all improvements in science. Permit me, by a familiar example to illustrate and confirm this proposition. When first the effects of the electric or magnetic influence were discovered, how ought all philosophers, on this ground, if, on this ground a philosopher could have ever existed, to have treated the history of them ? precisely as infidels have treated the history of the gospel, rejected them instantly, and without examination, as absurd and impossible, because contrary to all their *experience*. Do you say let them repeat the same experiments by which these new powers in nature were originally discovered ? But, if the principle which we are combating be certain and infallible, a wise man could have no motive for making the experiment, since his own past experience of the course of nature is the criterion of whatever is possible, or credible. Even if he should repeat the experiment, I do not know whether he could consistently admit the testimony of his senses to a new fact ; certainly not the testimony of other persons. And what are

* *A celebrated French Refugee in England, in his reflections on the books of the sacred scriptures.*

This work was published in London, 1688 ; and shews that the objection of Mr. Hume to the evidences of christianity, is not novel, but has only been set in a new and stronger light by that ingenious writer.

the greater portion of mankind to do, who have neither the skill nor the means of experimenting?

Let us take another example where no counter experience can possibly be applied. The inhabitants of a torrid climate never can have the effects of frost made obvious to their senses. Congelation is as great a mystery to them as any mystery, or miracle of the christian religion. According to this favourite maxim of infidelity, then, they ought never to believe it, and the king of Siam acted right in punishing the Dutch navigator for attempting to insult his understanding by incredible stories, who assured him that in Holland, during part of the year, water became sufficiently hard to bear men, and carriages drawn by horses, upon its surface. If testimony, then, were under no circumstances, sufficient to vouch to us, facts which not only are not conformable, but which, in many instances, are wholly contrary to all our past experience, science must be arrested in the very commencement of its progress. This consequence was, certainly, not adverted to by the ingenious writer who invented, or gave its present form, to the principle against which we contend. But, when we are testing the merit of a principle, if it is not found to hold universally, or co-extensively with the latitude of its terms, it ought to be rejected. For, by what rule shall we apply it only to the facts of religion, when it is found absolutely false in its application to the facts of science?

I maintain, in the last place, that this celebrated argument, drawn from our experience of the uniformity of nature, refutes itself. For, if the physical course of nature, on which the argument rests, is found to be stable and uniform, the moral order of things appears to be not less steady and invariable. If the former of these facts, upon Mr. Hume's principle, stands in the way of the admission of any miraculous history, the latter, upon the same ground, forbids the rejection of the history, if, by rejecting it, we must contradict all the moral phenomena of human nature. Admitting, then, what can hardly be denied by the bitterest enemies of religion, that the apostles and evangelists were men of the soundest understanding,* and the most upright hearts, it is contrary to all

* *The perfection of the moral system published by these humble fishermen, so far excelling all the philosophy of their age, demonstrates, that either they were inspired from above, to admit which, is yielding the question, or they were men of superior*

that we know of the motives of conduct among mankind, that, for the sake of propagating a most improbable imposture, they should voluntarily submit to incessant toils and extreme sufferings, they should abandon honour, interest, family, all that is usually accounted most dear to the human heart, and march with intrepidity through perpetual persecutions to certain death, inflicted in the most excruciating and dreadful forms. They were evidently not frantic in their writings, which are always rational and simple, and in which there appears to be no tincture of enthusiasm; yet they yielded all their original prejudices, and all their hopes from a triumphant Messiah, to their deep conviction of the divine mission, and the miraculous power of a suffering Master, for whom they encountered every actual evil, and every possible hazard. If, then, we should suppose, with the objectors, that the gospel is not true, here are contradictions to the moral order of things, that is, to all the ordinary principles of conduct among men which have ever occurred to our *experience* in other cases, not less wonderful, and out of the course of nature, than the miracles themselves for which the apostles, and companions of our Lord, and witnesses of his life, made such astonishing and almost incredible sacrifices.*

This so much vaunted objection, then, against the miracles of the gospel evidently refutes itself, inasmuch as in its application to the established moral order of things it contradicts the conclusion which the enemies of religion have so triumphantly drawn from their physical order. This particular view of the subject merits, and, to give it its full force, would require a more extensive elucidation. But, that I might not encumber your Magazine, I have chosen to represent it with all the conciseness which I thought in any way consistent with perspicuity. It ought to carry with it the greater conviction to the objectors, since they equally subject the natural and the moral world to the laws of necessity, so that the ordinary and natural motives of human conduct must be those also, which are certain and necessary. S.

minds to the profoundest writers of Greece or Rome. Which is yielding almost as much.

* *Some men have encountered great dangers, and endured great sufferings even for an erroneous opinion; but there is a wide difference between dying for an opinion, and in attestation of a fact.*