

D20. 25. 228 (3)

The Nature of Religious Zeal,

IN TWO

DISCOURSES,

The Substance of which was delivered

AT THE

VISITATION

OF THE

Worshipful PULTER FORESTER, D.D.

ARCH-DEACON OF BUCKS,

AT

NEWPORT PAGNELL,

April 27, 1774.

By J. BRIGGS, A. M.

RECTOR of CALVERTON, BUCKS.

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M.DCC.LXXV.



TO THE

WORSHIPFUL

PULTER FORESTER, D.D.

CHANCELLOR OF LINCOLN,

AND

ARCH-DEACON OF BUCKS,

AND THE REST OF THE

CLERGY OF THE TWO DEANERIES
OF BUCKINGHAM AND NEWPORT PAGNELL;

THESE DISCOURSES ARE,

WITH GREAT RESPECT,

INSCRIBED,

BY THEIR

MOST OBEDIENT,

AND MOST HUMBLE SERVANT,

THE AUTHOR,

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THE
NATURE
OF
RELIGIOUS ZEAL.

General Epistle of St. JUDE, Verse 3.

*That ye should earnestly contend for the Faith
which was once delivered to the Saints.*

WHEN we see a Zeal for Religion
enforced by the Precepts, and by
the Example of our Saviour,
and his Apostles, we cannot but acknow-
ledge it to be a Duty incumbent on
Christians.

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When we consider its Nature, and the Manner of its Operation, how general and powerful an Engine it is in the Hands of Men; and how convenient, and reputable a Cover it supplies for their Errors, their Passions, and their Vices; we are alarmed at the Uses to which it may be applied.

And when we look into the History of those numerous Evils, which it has actually produced in all Ages of the Church, we shrink back with Horror from the Prospect; and, in our first Emotions, are almost tempted to doubt either the Genuine-ness of the Precept, or the Graciousness of its Design.

That a Religion, so conformable to the Dictates of the purest and sublimest Morality, and so friendly to all the tender and benevolent Affections, should have occasioned

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occasioned many of the worst Evils of human Life: that the Gospel of Truth, Mercy, and Peace, should have led to the most odious Falsehood, and have armed Men with more than savage Fury and Cruelty to their mutual Destruction: that the Cause of Heaven should thus, I say, have been fought with the Weapons, and enlarged the Dominion, of the Kingdom of Darkness, may almost stagger our Faith; may excite Reflections injurious to the *Goodness* of God, if such be the Design, or the natural and genuine Effects of the Christian Dispensation; to His *Wisdom*, if Zeal (the authorized and hallowed Weapon of its Warfare) be, contrary to His Intention, generally and uniformly seen to produce them.

The Prejudices and Michiefs to Christianity, that these disgraceful Contentions for it have occasioned, are infinite. They have

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have depreciated its Value, raised Objections to its Truth, retarded its Progress, and diminished its Influence. They have been a Stumbling-block to the weak, and an Offence to the profane; the Shame and Confusion of its Friends, and the Triumph of its Enemies.

It will, however, upon a nearer Inspection of the Subject, appear, that they are perfectly consistent with the Wisdom and Goodness of God; that the Zeal which occasions them, is essential to the Propagation, the Purity, the Influence of the Gospel; natural, necessary, and unavoidable, in its serious Disciples; that the Consequences which spring from it, and which are so justly to be lamented, flow from the Imperfection, Ignorance, and Wickedness of Man, in the same Way that almost every other Evil in Society is produced; on which Account we can

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can scarcely hope they will ever be entirely remedied.

But it is our Duty, *Ours* more particularly, to guard against these malignant Effects of Zeal, both in Ourselves and Others, as much as possible: And let it be an additional Motive to *Us*, that the Sacredotal Character hath been frequently, and Truth obliges us to confess not altogether unjustly, reproached with an opposite Conduct.

It will not, therefore, it is hoped, be thought unsuitable to this Occasion and Audience, if I endeavour, with this View, to bring to your Recollection the Grounds and Measures of the Duty of Religious Zeal: On what Reasons it is founded; by what Causes it is liable to be corrupted; in what Spirit, and with what Temper, it is to be exercised; to what Objects directed,

directed ; and within what Limits restrained.

Zeal, considered in general, springs from the Affection of the Mind for the Objects of seeming Good. To the Love of Happiness we are incited by a natural Impulse ; to the Attainment and Preservation of those Things that we suppose will in any Degree contribute to it, by a natural Desire. In the Warmth and Energy of this Desire, consists the general Nature of Zeal ; a Principle of Action, as universal as the Love of Happiness in Men ; and as various as their Pursuits thereof, in its Objects and Operation.

From hence it is easy to perceive the Reason and Necessity of that Zeal, which has Religion for its Object ; for, if Religion appear as a Good, it must, like every other

other apparent Good, engage the Affections of Men, and stimulate them to such Exertions, as are deemed the proper Means of promoting it.

But, how liable that Zeal must be to Corruption, and how mischievous in its Effects when corrupted, will be obvious if we attend to the Powers it assumes, and to the Nature of Mankind by whom they are exercised. The Bias which Education, Habit, and Authority fix upon the Mind ; and the Weakness of Reason and Conscience, when opposed to Interest and Inclination, are perceived in numberless Instances ; but in none more than those where Men can disguise their Enormities, under honourable Names and Pretences ; and of these the Duty of Religious Zeal furnishes so ample a Fund, that there is hardly any Wickedness that has not been committed with the professed

fessed Design of promoting God's Glory, and the Salvation of Mankind.

Does holy Scripture, in any detached Passages, seem to give a Countenance, and Colour to their Proceedings? It is of little Consequence that those Passages are obscure, are doubtful, are contradicted by others more numerous and more clear, by Reason, and by the whole evident Design of Christianity. These are Considerations they can easily overlook; they have God's express Command for what they do.

Are they even unable to press one single Text into the Service of their Passions, or Designs? They have nevertheless, God's general Authority; their Purposes are holy, and the End is to sanctify the Means.

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And by this kind of Sophistry, not indeed unusual on other Occasions, do Men get rid of their Scruples; hiding both from themselves, and others, the Deformity of vicious Actions, under the Semblance and Pretext of Duty; and sheltering every odious Passion, and corrupt Interest behind the venerable Name of Zeal for Religion!

From such Considerations as these some have been led to assert, it would have been for the Benefit of Mankind, had Zeal never been numbered among Christian Virtues.

But, for the same Reason, our Zeal for Civil Liberty and Civil Government; for Arts and Literature, and indeed for every thing that is most useful and beneficial to Mankind, ought likewise to be proscribed. We should remember, that the best Things

Things are liable, and perhaps are *not* liable, to be perverted to the *worst* Purposes ; and that it is not allowed in just Reasoning, to conclude against the general Use of a Thing, from its accidental *Abuse*. The Necessity of Zeal towards the Propagation of the Gospel, is obvious ; the gracious Purposes of that Dispensation, we know ; and we must be blind, or to the last Degree prejudiced, not to see, or not to acknowledge, the general, great, and beneficial Influence it has had upon Society, notwithstanding those Corruptions.

It is common with Men deploring the Evils of Zeal, to think and speak of them as appropriated to *Religious Zeal* alone. But these exclusive Censures are not just. They flow alike from every kind of Zeal whatever be its Object. And they must necessarily do so in every Contention ;
where

where the Affections, Interests, and Passions of *Men* are concerned, and their Wrath inflamed by Opposition.

And, it is further to be observed, that very many of those particular *Mitchiefs*, that have usually been ascribed to *Religious Zeal*, have, in Truth, owed their Origin to other Causes ; which the discerning Readers of History will see, and the candid will acknowledge.

Religion indeed is so powerful an Engine in a State, that seldom are any great Changes attempted to be introduced therein, where that is allowed to remain entirely inactive and unconcerned. But to ascribe to Religious Zeal, the Evils produced by every Effort of Policy, every Struggle for Power in which it may have happened to be employed as an Auxiliary, is to confound Effects with their Causes ;
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and betrays a want of Attention, of Judgment, or of Candour.

To give an instance of this kind of Partiality. The *Rise* of the Civil Wars in this Kingdom in the last Century, are by a celebrated Historian ascribed to the Operation of *Religious Zeal*; and, to represent it in its lowest State of Degradation, of Zeal for trifling Ceremonies; the Use of the Surplice, the Ring in Marriage, the Sign of the Cross in Baptism. And this he asserts upon the Authority, as he would have us believe, of “all the Historians who lived near that Age; and even of all Authors who have casually mentioned those Transactions; who have agreed in ascribing them to so mean and contemptible an Origin *.”

* Hume's Hist. Vol. vi. p. 389, 390. Edit. Quart. 1773.

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There is hardly however any Truth of this Kind better established in History, than that those Wars *did not* take their rise from a Zeal for those, or for any other Ceremonies; but from a Zeal for the Interests of *Civil Liberty*, almost, if not altogether, unconnected with the Cause of Religion; which did not, till some Time after, come to be blended with them. And so far is it from Truth that all Historians, and even all Authors who have casually mentioned those Transactions, have agreed in ascribing them to the Causes this Writer mentions; that I believe he is the only one, I am sure he is the only one of any Eminence, who has given Way to a Conceit, of which even *his own* Account, prejudiced and partial as it is, furnishes a sufficient Refutation *.

* For a full Verification of these Points, the Reader is referred to “Letters on Mr. Hume's History” (p. 228 et sequentibus).

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There are likewise some Mistakes in the general Nature of Religious Zeal ; which, by ascribing to it Qualities that do not belong to it, would load it with the Ignominy of Crimes, of which it is entirely innocent.

And of this too the same History furnishes a remarkable Instance * : “ It being, according to this Author, almost a general Rule ; that in all Religions, except the true, the Zeal that induces any Man to *suffer* Martyrdom, would also make him willing to *inflict* it on all those who differ from him.” In which Observation it is difficult to discover, either Truth, or Common Sense ; or indeed any thing, but the Malice of its Author. But he knew to what Inferences it would give Rise ; and that it had no very rigor-

* Hume's Hist. Vol. iv. p. 413.

ous

ous Examination to fear, from those for whose Use it was designed *.

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* The Passage not having, that I know of, been taken Notice of before, may be worth preserving, as a Specimen of the “ Candour, the Impartiality, and Ingenuofacts which Mr. Hume's Admirers tell us (vid. Preface to his Dispute with Rousseau) distinguish his Character and Writings.”

“ There was one Philpot, possessed of such Zeal for Orthodoxy, that having been engaged in Dispute with an Arian, he spit in his Adversary's Face, to shew the great Detestation which he had entertained for that Heresy. He afterwards wrote a Treatise to justify this unmanly Expression of Zeal ; and, he said, he was led to it to relieve the Sorrow conceived from such horrid Blaphemy ; and to signify how unworthy such a Mischance was, of being admitted into the Society of any Christian. Philpot was a Protestant ; and now falling into the Hands of People as zealous, and more powerful than himself, he was condemned to the Flames, and suffered at Smithfield.” And then follows this Reflection, of which the Author entertained so good an Opinion, that he added it to the later Editions of his History. “ It seems to be almost a general Rule, that in all Religions, except the true, no Man will suffer Martyrdom, that would not also inflict it willingly on all those who differ from him. The same Zeal for speculative Opinions is the Cause of both.”

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With what view all this is done, it is easy enough to perceive; but whilst we seek not to disguise any of the Corruptions and Mischiefs that have arisen, or that do indeed proceed from a misgoverned Zeal

Here then we see a general Rule, inferred from a single Instance; from an Instance too, wherein it is taken for granted, that one who suffers, when he *cannot avoid suffering*, (that is by falling into the Hands of People more powerful than himself) suffers by his *own Choice*; that a Breach of *good Manners* (for he represents it as no more) implies the worst of *Crimes*; and that *spitting in an Adversary's Face, is little less than roasting him alive*.

As to the Reserve in Favour of the *true* Religion, in which it seems it is possible for a Man to suffer Martyrdom, without wishing to inflict it on all who differ from him; it will not amount to much, with any Person at all acquainted with Mr. Hume's Sentiments of Religion, as they appear in his Writings. At all Events, it belongs to those alone to thank him for the Exception, that have the Benefit of it. A Catholic, a Mahometan, or a Heathen has at least a Chance, that *his* Religion may come under the Denomination of the *true*; from which Piece of good Fortune, Mr. Hume expressly excludes the established Religion of his Country. For it was the Martyrdom of a Protestant, and his supposed Willingness to have inflicted the same Punishment on all who differed from him, with which Mr. Hume introduces, on which he forms; and to which he applies his general Rule.

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for Religion, referring them to their true Cause, the Weakness and Wickedness of Mankind; let us justify it, where Truth and Reason will support us, from those which do not belong to it.

A truly Christian Zeal consists in a sincere and earnest Desire, founded upon a Principle of Duty, to promote the Honour of God, and the Good of Men; by spreading the Knowledge, inculcating the Belief, and enforcing the Practice of the genuine Doctrines of Christianity. What those are, and with what Weapons, and what Degree of Earnestness, our Contentions for them are to be carried on; we are to learn from Scripture and Reason.

The first Care of such a Zeal, will be to inform itself thoroughly of the Doctrines, whether they be of God: Knowing, that

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without