

RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATIONS.

THE LIFE OF SIMON PETER, THE APOSTLE.

(Continued from p. 212.)

HONOURED as St. Peter had been while his Lord was on earth, he became after his ascension a still more distinguished character: and when the time was fully come for opening the Gospel dispensation, and the Apostles were baptized with the Holy Ghost, St. Peter was the first who exercised the ministry intrusted to him by Christ. It would be superfluous to pass any encomiums on the close reasoning and energetic eloquence with which he pressed on the consciences of his auditors, that Jesus, whom they had crucified, was Lord and Christ. The success which attended his discourse sufficiently proves its power and excellence: three thousand souls were converted to the Faith; a circumstance which could not fail to encourage the Apostles to prosecute, with unwearied diligence, the great work they had so happily begun.

In contemplating the wonders of this memorable day, we are led to observe, that the mighty rushing wind and fiery tongues were only transient symbols. Other miraculous gifts of the Spirit, having accomplished the purposes for which they were bestowed, have long disappeared; nor are they likely to revive, at least until God bare his arm to bring his Church out of the wilderness. Those, however, which constitute the very life of our Religion remain. The enlightening, sanctifying, and consolatory influences of the Spirit then shed abundantly on the Apostles, are still promised to every Believer; and how much are these to be preferred to miraculous gifts! Let any one read the account of St. Paul's perils, labours, and sufferings; and he will perceive, that even miraculous gifts were inadequate to such a warfare. They overcome not the world. They reconcile not the

soul to want, contempt, pain, and death. Those supernatural weapons must have blasted the hands of the Apostles, had they not been under the guidance of Divine Wisdom; had they not been armed with *power from on high*; and had not the effect of the spirit's effusion been a courage, zeal, patience, disinterestedness, deadness to the world, and devotedness to God, far greater than human nature was able to exert. From this era we read of no contests among them for pre-eminence; we remark no confident rashness, no intemperate zeal, no dastardly fear. Firm, tranquil, united, they exhibit their heavenly conversation with meekness of wisdom. They are the patterns of the doctrine they teach. For wealth they entertain the most perfect indifference: they seek no honour from man: they preach not themselves; and they ever speak and act, not as lords over God's heritage, but as helpers of their faith. For them, life has no allurements—the grave, no terror—death no sting: They are crucified to the world and the world to them: Their affections and conversation are in heaven. Here we lose sight of the fishermen of Galilee, and recognise the accomplished Apostles, whose character, no less than their high office, stamps them the best and greatest of men.

Such were the benefactors of the world, who, after planting truth, and peace, and righteousness among civilized and savage nations, to give new vigour to those noble plants, gladly watered them with their blood. Venerable names! ever dear to the true followers of Christ! Ye still live and speak, and your fires still, from time to time, warm the cold bosom of the fainting Church. O Lord, arise and look upon the Church,

Antioch; but that though he would now draw all ecclesiastical authority to himself, yet if he does not discharge the proper duties of his office, if he does not administer the Holy Sacraments, if he neglects to instruct, to admonish, to teach the people, he is not, in any admissible use of the terms, either a bishop or even a simple presbyter. The word "bishop," St. Augustine observes, is not an empty title, but denotes a function, giving us to understand that he is no bishop who aspires to the rank, while he declines the service.

On the contrary, we maintain that neither he, nor any other among men, can with more propriety be called the head, or universal bishop, than he can be called the bridegroom, the light, the salvation, or the life of the church; that these are the exclusive titles and prerogatives of Christ, and to him alone are strictly and fully applicable. Never before the times of Phocas, of whose elevation to the imperial dignity by the execrable murder of Mauricius his royal master we are not left ignorant, a period six hundred and thirteen years from the birth of our Saviour, never was it heard that a bishop of Rome had suffered himself to be addressed by so ostentatious a title. We know that the council of Carthage guarded by express provision against the use of the style "Sovereign Pontiff," or Supreme Head of the Priesthood, to any bishop of the Church; and affirm, that since the bishop of Rome assumes this style, and exhibits claims in prejudice of other men's authority, he not only acts in undisguised opposition to the decrees of ancient councils, and to the decisions of the fathers, but (if he will hear Gregory, one of his predecessors) appropriates to himself a title which is at once arrogant, profane, sacrilegious, and antichristian—is the Prince of pride—the Lucifer, who exalts himself above his brethren—has cast off the faith—and is the forerunner of Antichrist.

With respect to our ministers, we hold that they must be duly called, as well as regularly and in order appointed to their situations in the

Church; and as we by no means allow that any man at his pleasure or discretion may intrude into the sacred office, the greater is the injury we sustain from them who do not cease to represent us as totally devoid of order and decency, irregular and tumultuous in all our proceedings, and every man, indiscriminately and as it may happen, as being a minister, a teacher, or an expositor of the Scriptures.

REPLY TO MR. HUME'S ARGUMENT
AGAINST MIRACLES.

THE credibility of Miracles is a doctrine upon which all Revealed Religion may be said to depend. For, as the external proofs of Revelation are divided into Miracles, properly so called, and Prophecies, which, taken along with their accomplishments, are but another species of Miracles; if facts like these are themselves incapable of being proved by any testimony, they are also incapable of being applied as evidences of a revelation from God.

On this account it is of the highest importance to the interests of Christianity to refute an opinion of Mr. Hume, which he seems to have adopted on account of the powerful evidence which attests the Miracles of the Gospel, an evidence not to be overturned or shaken, but by this bold and novel paradox, namely, that they are incapable of proof by any testimony whatever.

Mr. Hume's position is this:

That no testimony in behalf of Miracles ought to be admitted, unless the falsehood of such testimony would be a greater Miracle than the supernatural facts asserted to have taken place, in which case the value of the testimony would be no more than a balance between two contending improbabilities.

Now, in the first place, it is little better than nonsense to consider the falsehood of a proposition as a Miracle; for a Miracle is a fact, and a Miracle performed is a fact already past. But, as no interposition of the Almighty in arresting and suspending the common course of nature, which is the idea of a Miracle, can make an event to have happened which has not happened, or *vice versa*, so neither can any similar

interposition diminish one shade of probability which attaches to the evidence of such an event. The falsehood of testimony may, therefore, be improbable in the highest degree; but it is an abuse of language to call it miraculous.

If the impropriety of the terms employed by Mr. Hume on this occasion be not yet sufficiently clear, let the reader substitute to the word "miraculous," a paraphrase, which is exactly equivalent to it.

"No testimony in behalf of Miracles is to be admitted, unless the falsehood of such testimony would be a fact inferring a greater violation of the order of nature, than the Miracles to be proved."

Not to take advantage, however, of Mr. Hume's inaccuracy in the use of terms (in which, however, no small portion of the fallacy of his argument consists) and in order to afford to his opinion every fair advantage in the representation, let him be understood to mean, "unless the falsehood of the testimony were impossible," which nearly amounts to the same thing with saying that it is not to be admitted at all.

By this time, perhaps, the reader may feel some anxiety to learn on what grounds so extraordinary a sentiment was founded. It is, we are told, because Miracles are contrary to experience, and experience is the proper test of credibility.

The ambiguity and fallacy of this objection are evident; for whatever is applied as a test, by which truth and falsehood are to be distinguished from each other, must be something positive and definite; whereas experience is in the highest degree fluctuating and uncertain. Nay, the term itself is scarcely intelligible, unless in combination with some person, age, or country, to which it relates; and even then, whose experience are we to select? This is no unnecessary question; for, compare only the experience of one, who has scarcely seen any thing beyond his own village, with that of a second, who has traversed the kingdom, and the experience of this second person with that of a third, who is acquainted with every quarter of the globe: compare, again, the general experience of an enlightened age with that of some dark and unobserving pe-

riod which went before it, and by such a test we must be compelled to reject, not Miracles only, but some of the most obvious and well attested facts in nature.

A native of the torrid zone has never beheld water congealed to ice,* and is almost as slow in admitting the fact upon testimony, as Mr. Hume is in allowing the reality of Miracles. Yet do we not consider this conduct of the understanding as irrational and absurd? Does it not lead to a conclusion obviously false! For, after all, such a substance as ice really exists.

Again, I have never beheld, and, therefore, have no experience of the fiery eruptions of *Ætna* or *Vesuvius*: I have never felt any one of those earthquakes which have shaken continents and laid cities prostrate; am I, therefore, warranted in refusing my assent to the fact, that mountains may break forth into flames, or that the earth may be agitated by internal convulsions?

Once more.—Few of the phænomena of electricity had been observed before the last century; yet would it have been right to deny the existence of such a property in matter a century before, had any of its effects been casually discovered at that time, and delivered upon competent testimony?

And thus, with respect to any other qualities in nature yet undiscovered, a philosopher may, indeed, have reason to suspend or withhold his assent to the evidence on which the discovery may rest; but supposing that evidence to be such as had never deceived him in any other instance, however extraordinary, however unlike to any thing observed before the appearances might be, he would not hold himself at liberty to reject them as incredible in themselves.

* Mr. Hume was so pinched by this argument, as to maintain, for consistency's sake, that the King of Siam was right in rejecting the evidence of Europeans for the existence of ice? What! right in rejecting the evidence of a real fact? But the use he intended to make of this strange position was, that the evidence in favour of miracles ought, in common sense, to be rejected, even though they were true; and, indeed, this accords with the tenor of the whole argument, which is directed not so much against the existence of Miracles, as against the proof of them.

Neither is this trial of the understanding at all unfrequent. The science of chemistry exhibits many appearances little less revolting to an uninformed mind than Miracles themselves.

To this argument, however, two objections will be opposed. 1st. That in the instances adduced above, two experiences are opposed to each other, and, as the stronger are allowed to prevail, experience is still assumed as the test of credibility. 2dly. That the instances themselves are physical facts, and, therefore, neither prove nor disprove any thing with respect to phænomena confessedly miraculous.

The first of these admits of an easy solution; for the medium through which alone the experience of one man can be brought into contact with that of another, is testimony: thus, for example; A, who has never travelled out of England, believes in the reality of volcanoes, not upon B's experience, not because B hath beheld such appearances, but because B is a credible witness, and affirms that he hath seen them.

The second objection seems entitled to more consideration. If, however, the real difference between the essence of physical and preternatural phænomena be attentively considered, it will appear to be much less than is commonly supposed, so little indeed as to remove every thing formidable out of the argument. For if we reason upon theistical principles, and this essay is not addressed to Atheists, Miracles are, in reality, no farther improbable in themselves, than as they are unusual; in other words, there is no antecedent presumption arising from the nature of the Godhead, or the constitution of things established in the present world, which should lead us to think it unlikely that the Almighty, for great and wise purposes, may suspend the operation of his own established laws. But there *is* a presumption arising from the wisdom, the dignity, the general order of his government, that such interruptions would rarely occur. Both these suppositions harmonize with the Christian testimony in favour of Miracles. But to proceed. Whoever attends to the process of his own understanding in considering this subject, will scarcely fail to discover a

fallacy which he puts upon himself, as if miracles were more difficult to be achieved than ordinary facts, and therefore more difficult to be proved. Surely, while we reason thus, we forget in whose world we are, or whose operations we are discussing. To a power short of omnipotence, the common operations of nature would be impossible; for the Almighty it implies no more power to raise the dead than to expand a flower.

In order to set this idea in a clearer light; let it be supposed (and it is at least conceivable, though contrary to fact) that miracles, as we call them, were matters of frequent occurrence; that diseases, for instance, were as frequently healed by a word or a wish, as by the operation of medicine; or, that the dead were as often restored to life by similar means, as the living are swept away by violent and accidental causes. In either of these cases, the frequency of the facts would occasion them to be confounded with the ordinary course of nature, and no one would conceive the production of such effects to require more power than any of the common operations of Providence. The degree of improbability, therefore, which belongs to Miracles, will be allowed to arise merely from the circumstance of their being unusual.

But if no extraordinary degree or effort of divine power be required to the production of these effects, however stupendous, and if there be no antecedent improbability that in certain circumstances they may be produced, an important consequence will follow, which is, not only that they may be proved by evidence in general, but by the same evidence on which we admit the truth of other physical, though extraordinary facts.

The last observation applies directly to the testimony of the Evangelists; for in their narratives we have the evidence of two original spectators at least, with respect to miraculous operations; and these operations are mingled with a great number of ordinary facts, generally arose out of them, and were occasioned by them. The evidence of the one and the other, therefore, is precisely the same. Is it then reasonable to garble this evidence at pleasure, to admit whatever is natural in it, and reject

what is otherwise, or abandon both together, on account of the conceived improbability of one; or shall we not rather, and does not the preceding argument leave us free to admit both, in consequence of those unequivocal characters of probity, simplicity, and original information, which are stamped upon every part of the evangelic story?

It must also be observed, that the actions there recorded as miraculous, were as properly objects of observation, and that to ordinary men, as the most familiar appearances in nature. They were not like the result of many philosophical experiments, which require a scientific eye to remark, and a scientific pen to report them. A Galilæan peasant, who had eyes and honesty, was as capable of attesting that he saw sight restored to the blind, and limbs to the lame, and life to the dead, as a philosopher of Athens.

To the same purpose it is to be observed, that in order to produce assent to the Miracles related in the Gospels, we are not called upon to lend our minds to long trains of reasoning, and adopt at last conclusions formed by the Evangelists, but we take a plain story related by plain men, and conclude for ourselves.

Hitherto we have been reasoning principally against Mr. Hume's conclusion. It may now be worth while to consider whether his minor ought to be allowed; or whether, after all, experience is *against the existence of Miracles*. If an advocate for the reality of these mighty works were to reason thus, I affirm that such suspensions of the order of nature have taken place in many ages and countries; surely then they are so far forth *agreeable*, to experience—what could be opposed to the argument, but that all this is learned from testimony? And how has Mr. H. been able to collect a much wider experience on the other side, but from the same source? In fact, there is partial experience on both sides, and that experience is acquired by means of testimony.

But, in the last place, it will be asked, whether experience be allowed to have no concern in regulating our assent to evidence? Undoubtedly it has a very important concern; for though we have

shewn that no experience, however extensive, can render all testimony whatever inapplicable to any given facts, so as to constitute them antecedently incapable of proof; yet it has an extensive province of its own, which is, not to sit in judgment upon facts to be proved, but upon the characters of those who are to prove them. Experience will decide that testimony is generally found to be true or false, according to the integrity, competence, and original information of the witnesses; and when it hath decided that an union of these circumstances alone, without regard to the nature of the facts to be proved (supposing them to imply no contradiction) is entitled to belief, experience, instead of an adversary, becomes a firm and faithful ally of Revelation. O. U. I.

THOUGHTS ON SLOTH.

SLOTH and self-indulgence are extremely natural to man. Whoever has informed himself respecting the character of our fellow creatures in their most savage, which is, unquestionably, their most natural state, will be prepared to admit the truth of this observation. The native Indian, as Dr. Robertson remarks, will lie on the ground for many days, and even weeks together; and will only shake off his sloth when excited by appetite, or raised by some violent gust of passion. The case of persons in civilized society is not altogether different. Their artificial wants, indeed, are multiplied, and in consequence of these a system of more permanent industry is produced; but when appetite, as well as ambition and vanity, are satisfied, even civilized man, except so far as Religion has new created him, relapses into his native Sloth.

Let us proceed to point out the manner in which the spirit of idleness and self-indulgence shews itself in this country among the higher and middling ranks of life.

How many hours are needlessly spent by some on their beds; by others in the most idle and frivolous conversation; by others in reading, with a view to the mere gratification of the fancy; by others in unprofitable amusements, in amusements, we mean, which tend to kill time rather than to afford that re-