

THOUGHTS

ON THE

Christian Religion.

IN A LETTER TO A FRIEND.



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T H O U G H T S
ON THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

DUBLIN, 1796.

DEAR SIR,

AS, in our last conversation, you expressed your concern, that the Christian Religion, which, you said, had been your comfort in all your afflictions, should be exposed to such rude attacks as have lately been made upon it; I was led to consider this subject with some attention; and I hope it will be a relief to your mind, to communicate to you the result of my reflections, which is, that most of the arguments, brought against it, fall of themselves to the ground, as no ways affecting the essential articles
of

of the Christian Faith, which, as I conceive, consist only in a Belief,

IN ONE SUPREME, SELF-EXISTENT BEING, the Creator and Governor of all things, infinite in wisdom, power and goodness ; and,

IN JESUS CHRIST, the true Messiah, commissioned by him,

To instruct mankind in the knowledge of the one only true God, and the worship that was due to him ;

To teach men a most pure system of morals, by which to regulate their conduct towards their fellow-creatures and themselves ;

To reveal to them a future state of retribution ;

To announce the Pardon and Forgiveness of all who should repent and amend their lives, and to assure them of their future happiness in another life ;

To denounce the Judgments of God against all obstinate and impenitent sinners ;

That Christ, as a proof of his divine mission, wrought many miracles, in the most open and unequivocal

equivocal manner, before great numbers, many of whom became his followers ;

That through the influence of the Jews over the Roman governor, he was put to death ;

That, as an evidence and example of a future resurrection, he arose from the dead, and shewed himself to his disciples, and continued with them many days ;

That he commissioned a select number of his disciples, who had been witnesses of the doctrines he had taught, and of the miracles he had wrought, as also of his death and resurrection, to declare these to all nations, calling upon them to repent and amend their lives ;

That these disciples, as an evidence of their mission, were also empowered to work miracles, and which they did perform before multitudes, to the conviction and conversion of great numbers.

If these in fact be the only essential Articles of the Christian Creed, into what a narrow compass is the dispute with infidels brought ?

It is not pretended by them, but such a person as Jesus Christ did exist ; who declared himself to be the messenger of God ; that many believed in him ; that churches were founded in his name, in which records of him were kept ; and that great numbers of his disciples, without having any temporal interest to serve, died martyrs to this belief.

Suppose the enemies of Christianity could prove that many errors and contradictions are to be found in the books of the New-Testament, and that it is uncertain by whom, and precisely when, they were wrote, will they pretend that the truths here mentioned, as the only essential Articles of the Christian's creed, are not agreeable to the current of the scripture, and that they have not been universally believed by Christians, in all ages, since the first establishment of Christianity. What will avail them to prove that the Doctrine of the Trinity is repugnant to common sense ; or that the eternal duration of Hell-torments is inconsistent with every natural idea of the goodness and mercy of God ? Let those who hold these doctrines

trines defend them, if they are able. To them these objections should be made, and not to Christians in general.

If the articles of Faith, here mentioned, as the only ones necessary to salvation, be in fact so, how much is it to be lamented, that they should not be acknowledged as such by all Christian Churches ! Can the belief or disbelief of Christ's pre-existence, his immaculate conception, or the doctrine of atonement, be of any real importance ? I am quite of the opinion of my lately deceased friend, the Rev. Dr. Price, who expresses himself thus on these matters :

“ A deliverance from death, through the power of
 “ Christ, to be judged according to our works, and,
 “ if virtuous, to enter upon a new and happy life,
 “ which shall never end, is the sum and substance of
 “ all that should influence human beings, the evi-
 “ dence of which the Gospel gives, removes all
 “ doubts about it, and is sufficient, whether we be-
 “ lieve any thing else or not, to carry us (if virtuous)
 “ with

“ with triumph through this world—what then fig-
 “ nify the differences among Christians about other
 “ points ; or what consequence is it, that they have
 “ different ways of explaining this point itself? Give
 “ but the fact, that Christ is the resurrection and
 “ the life, and explain it as you will. Give ’em but
 “ this single truth, that eternal life is the gift of God
 “ through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, I shall
 “ be perfectly easy with respect to the contradictory
 “ opinions which are entertained about the dignity
 “ of Christ, about his nature, person and offices, and
 “ the manner in which he saves us. Call him, if
 “ you please, simply a man, endowed with extraor-
 “ dinary powers ; or call him a super-angelic being,
 “ who appeared in human form for the purpose of
 “ accomplishing our salvation ; or say (if you can
 “ adopt a thought so shocking and absurd) that he
 “ was second of three coequal persons in the God-
 “ head, forming one person, with a human soul ;
 “ that he came down from Heaven, and suffered and
 “ died on the cross. Say that he saves us merely by
 “ being

“ being a messenger from God, to reveal to us eternal
 “ life, and to confer it upon us. Or on the contrary,
 “ that he not only reveals eternal life, but has ob-
 “ tained it for us, by offering himself a propitiatory
 “ sacrifice on the cross, and making satisfaction to
 “ the justice of the Deity for our sins. I shall think
 “ such differences of little moment, provided the
 “ fact is allowed, that Christ did rise from the dead,
 “ and that all the righteous penitents will, through
 “ God’s grace in him, be accepted and made happy
 “ forever.”

Many disputes have arisen among Christians re-
 specting the authenticity of some parts of scripture ;
 some considering the whole, without exception, to
 be divinely inspired, while others think that many
 errors have crept into them, and that mistranslations
 and interpolations have designedly taken place, to
 accommodate the peculiar opinions of those who
 collated and translated them. Some think that all
 the opinions and doctrines whatever, taught by the
 apostles, ought to be held sacred as a rule of Faith ;

while others consider them liable to errors in judgment and mistakes, like other good men, whenever they go beyond the commission given them by Christ, which was to bear witness to the miracles which they had seen performed by him, and to teach the doctrines which they had received immediately from his mouth.

But leaving these matters, I come to consider the objections made by Infidels to the books of the Old Testament or Jewish Bible, which, in one respect, are connected with Christianity, inasmuch as our Saviour declares himself to be the true Messias, predicted by the Jewish Prophets ; and this is all that Christians are concerned to defend. But admitting that there may be many and great errors in these Books, and that many things are there ascribed to the Deity which appear unworthy of him ; such as commanding the slaughter of innocent babes ; the pillaging the Egyptians, under pretence of borrowing, &c. &c. ; is it not probable that many of these things, which appear so strange and unaccountable, have
arose

arose from corruptions, which have crept into the Jewish Church, in the same manner as corruptions have taken place in the Christian Church? Be this as it may, it belongs to the Jews, not to Christians, to defend their own Bible.

Will the adversaries of Christianity pretend, that the nation of the Jews had not such evidence, either by tradition or otherwise, of the genuine truths of their history, as to lead them, who certainly were the best judges, to revere the character of Moses; to believe the miracles which he wrought, and to receive the Laws and Ordinances announced by him, as the Oracles of God? Will they pretend, that the coming of the Messiah, to be their Deliverer, was not predicted by their prophets; and that the accomplishment of this prediction was not expected by them? Will they assert, that it is incredible that mankind, blinded by their passions, not having exercised the natural powers given them by God, by which, from the works of creation, they

might

might have learned the knowledge of the true God, and the worship they owed to him ; but instead of this, having become idolaters and wicked in the extreme ? Will they assert, I say, that under these circumstances of the world, that it was incredible that God, in order to reclaim them, by affording them still greater means of knowing him, and the worship that was due to him, should, as an example to other nations, select one nation, to whom he should reveal himself in an extraordinary manner ; and that they might not again become idolatrous, by mixing with other nations, should give to them a code of Laws and Ordinances, peculiar to themselves, commanding them not to intermarry with other nations, but keep themselves a distinct and separate people, that the knowledge of the one only true God might be preserved, at least in one nation on the earth ? Will they say, that, as this institution, not having its natural effect, owing to the extreme corruption of mankind, that it is incredible that God should think fit, in his mercy to mankind, to afford them

greater

greater and more glorious light, by a special messenger, endowed with supernatural power, (as evidence of his divine mission), to instruct them, in the most clear and explicit manner, in the knowledge of himself, and of every moral duty required of them ; and to declare to them his displeasure at sin, and the ruin they would bring on themselves by continuing in it ? Will they say, that all this is, in its nature, incredible, because if God had thought fit to interpose, in order to enlighten mankind in these truths, he would, no doubt, have done it in such a manner as to force conviction on their minds ? But I would ask, would this be analogous to his general conduct towards mankind ?..Would this leave any room for the exercise of the natural powers, which he appears to have designed ?

These appear to me, to be the questions they should answer. Neither the truth nor the falsehood of the Christian Religion are matters of demonstration. The arguments for and against it being weighed, each one will make up his opinion.

Upon

Upon a review of the whole, we may, my friend, solace ourselves with the reflection, that notwithstanding the ridicule and false reasoning with which our Religion has been attacked, no impression has been made on the essential articles of our belief, which, in my opinion, will stand the test of the most rigorous, philosophical examination : And that Tom Paine's attack, as impotent as impudent, instead of injuring its cause, will have a happy tendency to lead Christians to reflect on the grounds of their belief, so as that they may be able to answer the false reasoning of their adversaries.

