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1779

Natural Religion aided by Revelation
and perfected in Christianity.

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AT THE
LECTURE
FOUNDED BY THE
Hon. PAUL DUDLEY, Esq;


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Natural Religion aided by Revelation,
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In the first chapter of the book of GENESIS,
26th and 27th verses, it is written,

And God said, let us make man in our
image, after our likeness: and let them have
dominion over the fish of the sea, and over
the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and
over all the earth, and over every creeping
thing that creepeth upon the earth.—
So God created man in his own image, in
the image of God created he him: male and
female created he them.”——

 THE Jewish Historian, furnished with mate-
rials from on high, hath given us this concise
account of the origin of man:—He tells us,
That God created him, male and female,
in his own image, and after his likeness.

In conformity to the instructions thus received,
and partly in consequence of it, the wise and virtuous,
in all ages and places, ascribing their existence to the
same cause, have believed, that the Spirit of God hath
made them, and the breath of the Almighty hath given
them life.

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Many and various have been the opinions of Divines, both ancient and modern, in regard to what, and how much is intended by, and included in the Image of God, wherein man is said to be created. Every similitude of God, and every degree thereof, in the creature, man or angel, is doubtless so far his Image; and so it appears to be explained, in his Image, after his likeness. Had the Image of God in man been no where mentioned in the book of Revelation, but in this part of sacred history, it is more than probable, there would not have been such a diversity of sentiment about it; but that it would have been confined (not indeed exclusively of the intellectual faculties of the human mind, and the original rectitude of them, for there is similitude in these; but) chiefly to that communicated right of sovereignty, which man received at his creation: That as God was supreme Lord and Governor over all; so he should be over the creatures of this lower world, and have dominion on earth. This restricted sense appears to offer the most obviously of any from the history itself:—But as men advance in the powers of reason, in their moral qualities, or in any kind of resemblance towards the Deity, the idea of his Image in them, is necessarily varied, and enlarged:—Hence it has been differently spoken of in other parts of revelation; especially by the New Testament writers, who have sometimes represented it as consisting in holiness. And from this various use and signification of the Image of God in man, many learned and good men have supposed, it ought to be understood from the first as a complex idea, made up of several ingredients. So much I have thought not improper to say in regard to the Image of God, in which man was created; and, indeed, I could not well avoid it, as it makes part of the history, placed at the
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head of this discourse. Sensible, however, of my inability to offer any thing on the point, that has not already been much better done by others; and the design of this Lecture demanding no such investigation, I should, perhaps, have been acquitted if I had passed it in silence.

Other disquisitions are now to be made, which, it is hoped, will have some tendency, “to prove, explain or shew the proper use and improvement of the principles of Natural Religion,” which is our present subject.

For this purpose, and the more just arrangement of our thoughts, the creature man, and the religion of his nature, shall be the subject of our promiscuous inquiry: This will prepare the way for some observations and reflections, which will close the present discourse.

The faculty of reason, with which man is endowed, enables him, by obvious deductions from the contemplation of the beauty, order and majesty of the world, and the evident impressions of power, wisdom and goodness, which it every where bears, both to argue the being of a God, and to admit also, that there is one, when told, that it must be so; and of consequence, to make considerable discoveries in religion.

Religion, both natural and revealed, in the just and proper notion of it, has an immediate respect to the Deity; and in this view, though not in any other, it may be distinguished from just sentiment, and right action, which have no regard to his authority. It is founded in the divine existence and perfections; that is, if God did not exist, or if he were not possessed of those perfections, which are necessarily essential to a self-existent Being, there could be no religion. The perception of
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the obligation of religion on man arises from his believing that God is, from the knowledge he has of his intellectual capacities, the circumstances he is placed in, and the relations he bears to the Creator. The obligation of religion, and the perception of this obligation in the human mind are distinct and different ideas; and the former must be supposed to exist prior, in the order of nature, to the latter.—What I intend is, that religion is naturally and in itself right: It is fit and proper conduct in the creature to worship and obey the Creator, and it cannot be otherwise, so long as the relations between them remain: But then the obligation to do so is only felt, when, and so far as this is perceived to be fit and proper. It is very possible for man, so far to abuse his intellectual faculties, neglect enquiry and every rational deduction, as not to feel the force of this obligation, or at least to have but dark, indeterminate and confused notions about it. This is more or less the case with all such as have fallen into any kinds of idolatrous worship. The perception of the obligation of religion, in instances, where the proper object of worship is mistaken, cannot be supposed equally clear and vigorous, as in those, where it is not; for superstition, about which there is often the greatest zeal, is no other than the corruption of pure religion. Men fall into the former, in the same proportion as they lose the proper sense of the obligation of the latter. It would, I trust, be far from the truth to affirm, that the obligation to worship the One only living and true God ceases, in proportion as the perception of it in the mind does so, or becomes less clear and manifest: Yet so it must be, if the obligation of religion be not prior to, distinct from, and independent on the perception of it. From the denial of this position,

it will, I think, follow, that if any individual among men should ever unhappily sink even below idolatry itself, and so darken his notions of the author of nature, as to pay him no kind of religious homage at all (which is no impossible supposition) the obligation thereto would become totally extinct. This obligation, therefore, to religion is to be considered as something permanent and fixed in the nature and relations of things; founded in the divine Being, and attributes, resulting from the rectitude of his will, and suited to the rational faculties of men: Suitable, I say, to their rational faculties; because, though it be an immoveable unabating principle of religious service to every one; yet is it not, I suppose, exactly the same in all; that is, it does not demand precisely the same services towards God from all. It would, indeed, do so, were the rational faculties of men, their opportunities, means of moral science and improvement, every where equal: But as they are manifestly various, and even widely different, this obligation is to each, as are his faculties and opportunities to know God, and his duty to him.

What were the intellectual capacities of the original progenitors of mankind is difficult to determine.— What has been often said of one of them, in particular, his most extensive knowledge of natural things, animate and inanimate, their natures, qualities, uses and ends; and his comprehensive and clear discernment of moral truths, is, I believe, meer hypothesis, altogether unsupported by any thing recorded in sacred history, of what he ever said or did. It appears extremely unphilosophical, as well as inconsistent with every analogical argument, to imagine, that, at the instant of his creation, he was invested with as ample powers of reason and moral reflection, as he was made capable

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of attaining to, and did, probably, afterwards possess. The faculties of this mysterious man for improvement in natural and moral science, were, doubtless, every way sufficient for his necessities; for his duly observing the law he was under, and to qualify him for that higher and more perfect happiness for which his benevolent Creator designed him. This, however, determines nothing, as to the comparative strength of his faculties; or whether they were greater, or less, than those of the generality of his posterity. The knowledge he had, the moment of his being brought into existence (if, indeed, he had any, besides the perception that he did exist) must have been communicated. But to affirm, that the communication was coeval with his existence, or that his knowledge was concreated with him, is to say much more than is necessary. It is not only incapable of any proof, but is, moreover, unsupported by the argument of analogy. We are, indeed, it must be acknowledged, very incompetent judges of what Omnipotence can do. It far surpasses the comprehension of creatures, boldly to assert, that God has not done, or cannot do, thus or so; merely, because we have no conception of the modus of his operations. It is as daringly impious, as it is weak and inconclusive arguing, and it directly militates against the plainest fact in nature, the work of creation itself; for we do not know how things were made.— We are, notwithstanding, to judge of things, when we have a right to judge at all, with the faculties which he has bestowed, in the best manner we are able, and according to that rule which the known methods of the divine conduct furnish us with. This rule, the best we have, leads us to suppose, that the knowledge of the first man was communicated and acquired after he had received his existence; and that it was not coeval

eval, or concreated with him. The same great and important ends would be equally obtained on the former as on the latter supposition. No doctrine of religion, that I know of, natural or revealed, would, in any degree, be affected, much less injured by it: It is indisputably more consonant to the subsequent ways of divine providence. We can have no conception of knowledge in man, or indeed in any other creature, but that, which is made up of ideas gradually admitted, and properly ordered by the understanding. We have, however, some colour of reason to suppose, that the first man's capacity to receive those ideas, out of which he was to form his knowledge, was not, as in after ages, by the slow degrees of infancy and youth; but in more speedy and free succession, both by frequent divine suggestions, and the continual presentation of external objects: This being more adapted to the original method of his constitution, and the full-made strength of his bodily senses. It is most probable, that he was greatly aided by the Creator, in amassing and perfecting the furniture of his understanding; that he was told who his maker was, as soon as he could make proper use of such knowledge; and that the great variety of living creatures, and thing inanimate, which he saw around him, had the same cause of existence with himself, and were the care of the same providence. Hence, by deduction, he would soon come to have some knowledge of the law of his nature, his dependence on and duty to the Creator; and on every reflection would arrive to more perfect notions hereof. Had he not been favoured with the aids of intimation by his Maker, but left to his own investigations, and improvements on ideas admitted by the senses from outward objects only, however large we may suppose his capacity to receive

and make use of them ; and however disposed we may be to allow that he would, at length, by the deductions of reason, have learnt to consider himself as the effect of some cause ; yet, I believe, it may be justly questioned, whether it would not have been much longer before he could have had any notion of this cause being invisible. He would not, untaught, very readily have had any conception of there being invisible exhalations, or have extended his views beyond the visible world, or have formed any just and tolerable notions of a Being so spiritual and incomprehensible, as God. — What conception could he possibly have had, at first, uninstructed, as we now suppose him, of the divine unity, infinity and eternity, which are so essential to the proper notion of the Deity? The knowledge of these was not to be obtained, but in a course of just reasoning and deduction ; and as imperfect as his notions were, so proportionably imperfect must his religion have been. There appears sufficient foundation from the history of the early periods of man's life to suppose, that he received very great and seasonable helps from the Creator. It is manifest, that he was favoured with visits from his Lord ; and some circumstances make it probable, that they were frequent. It is, moreover, certain, that he was instructed by him, in regard to his worldly conduct and temporal felicity. Judging from the notions we now have of the divine character, which from eternity is unchangeably the same, we cannot, we must not suppose, that less care was taken of him, with respect to moral sentiment and religious worship. Although the dispensation, man was at first put under, was that of strict and rigorous law, “obey and live ;” “transgress and die ;” a dispensation, which admitted of no promise of aid under any exigency, no provision of pardon for any crime, for these would have changed

it's nature; yet, it is no way inconsistent with this dispensation, but, on the contrary, plainly deducible from the perfections of the Deity, that man should be favoured with every necessary instruction with regard to the law itself; that he might have a full understanding of it, be able to keep it, and apprised of the consequences of obeying or transgressing it. Such instruction he received. As, by the same means he learned, much sooner than otherwise he would have done, who had given him existence, on whom he depended, and from what source the manifold favours and blessings, with which he was so liberally encompassed, were derived; so he was brought to know what the religion of his nature was. He saw the fitness, he felt the obligation of loving and serving his Maker; of expressing his sentiments of piety, dependence and gratitude, in such ways only, and by such acts of external homage as the Deity should please to appoint. He perceived it to be right, therefore his duty, to submit to the divine authority in all things, to obey his will, to do his pleasure, in whatever instance made known; in particular, with regard to that of his avoiding the interdicted tree. Had he kept his station, as he might, had he opened and enlarged his rational faculties, according to his advantages, and improved by those divine hints that were afforded him; his sense of right and of religious obligation would have been daily rendered more perfect and extensive. But he transgressed; and by transgression, the dispensation of strict law ended; that of grace, under the Mediator, commenced; and sin and death entered into the world. Whatever were the ability and advantages of man to keep his original state and preserve his primitive innocence, it is an incontestible fact, that his defection took place in consequence of the first temptation. Sacred history

mentions

mentions no other ; nor have we any reason to think he ever resisted one. This, by the way, is no argument of his possessing supereminent intellectual powers, or moral discernment, above the common standard of mankind.—He transgressed, and he must die. This is the just demerit and threatened penalty of sin. His Creator, however, did not forsake him ; but continued his providential care and watchfulness towards him. A plan of grace, on the foresight of transgression, had been previously laid in the divine counsels, whereby both the actual transgressor, and his posterity, who were now born to die, were, in future time, to be restored to life, through him who is the resurrection and the life. From this period, God has thought fit to treat with the creature man, by the mediation of his Son, opening and discovering divine truths to them, as they should be able to bear them, and were prepared to profit by them. Such discoveries were made, at first, as appear to be adapted to the infant state of the world. The knowledge which the first man had of the Deity, and of moral obligation and truth, he, doubtless, communicated to his posterity. For, though he must have greatly felt the unhappy bias of a depraved heart, yet we know not that his intellectual powers, or meer knowledge of moral truth, were, at all, impaired by the transgression. The contrary rather appears, as higher orders of beings, who have also sinned, are, notwithstanding, represented as being very sagacious and knowing, though indisposed to all good. But I hope, whatever may be true of individuals, or even whole nations, since, that it will not deserve censure, if we do not carry the moral indisposition of man, at this time, so far as to equal it with that of Devils. The notions, which he now had of a future state and an immortal life after death, must,

must, I think, have been collected out of that discourse which God held with him after his defection.—The only possible idea he could have of immortality in innocence, is that of continuance in life—Obey and live. It did not accord with the nature of the dispensation he was under, that he should have any other. What he now believed about a future state, he made known to his children, with the grounds of it. This called forth the exertion of their intellectual faculties, and they improved, grew wiser, and had hope.—This hope God was pleased afterwards greatly to strengthen, particularly by the translation of Enoch, whose piety was conspicuous. The reason of man was sufficient, from hints, to deduce many important truths; and to see the fitness and obligation of several things, which, merely of itself, would not have been so soon or easily discovered. Hence, I am inclined to think that natural religion is not so properly defined to be that, which mankind have, or might come to the knowledge of, merely by the strength of unassisted reason; as that, which reason sees to be right, and feels the force of, when it is known, What reason knows to be fit, what it assents to, approves and rests satisfied in, when it is perceived, tho' it be offered to it, answers precisely the same purposes as to religion and moral obligation, and indeed, as to its being the foundation and test of revelation itself, that it would do, were it discovered in its own strength. To affirm, however, that the reason of man cannot come to the knowledge of God and his duty to him, by any contemplations and deductions of his own, is to say a great deal too much. Reason, properly employed, will make very great discoveries, and by attending to the constitution and order of things, be led up to their cause. This notwithstanding, had the immediate posterity of Adam received

received no light from him, or communications from the Deity, their progress in moral science would, undoubtedly, have been very slow. It is evident, that God did not see fit to leave them, merely, to their own investigations. He superadded his daily assistance to the powers of reason, with which he had endowed them. He manifested himself to them, and directed his own worship. There is no accounting for the early practice of sacrificing on any other principle. Such care God has, certainly, taken of man from the beginning. He even condescended to reason with Cain, in regard to the mistake he had made in his offering.

Although natural religion is founded in the existence of God, and the relation man stands in to him; and is, therefore, unalterably the same, whether understood by man or not; that is, it is an eternal truth, that the obligation of religion results from such existence and relations; yet this has not been discovered merely by the faculty of reason, exclusive of aid: but it has had helps; it has been set to work; and when the discovery has been made, religion has been found to be altogether agreeable to the understanding: it consents to and feels the force of it, and it can no more reject or call it in question, than it can those truths, which necessarily result from any other natural relations, and the agreement or disagreement of ideas. We cannot, however, argue, from natural religion's being founded in relations that cannot but exist between the Deity and man, and the obligation of it being alike derived from this source on all, that the quantity thereof to each must therefore be the same. The notion of a general natural religion for the human race will, I trust, on examination be found to be groundless, and no way consonant to the nature of things.

things. Natural religion hath respect not to collective bodies of men, much less to the whole mass of mankind, but to individuals ; each one has his own natural religion, and it is more or less as is the reason of each, or at least, as it might be, were it duly exercised and improved. Indeed it makes no difference here, whether we consider the reason of each man as it is, or as it would be, had it been exercised and improved by every one to the utmost. In either case it is possessed in unequal portions. On the latter supposition, tho' each one would know more than he now does, or in other words, would have more reason than he now has, and consequently, would have more natural religion ; yet there would be as real a diversity among men as there is at present :—That is, they would not all have the same quantity of reason, and, therefore, could not all have the same quantity of natural religion ; the latter being always proportionate to the former.

Every man is accepted according to that he hath, and not according to that he hath not. When the gifts of nature are small, and the opportunities and advantages for the acquisition of knowledge inferior, the less will be required. From him to whom one or two talents are committed the same improvements will not be exacted as from him who hath had five :—For it is equally true on the plan of nature, as that of revelation, that, to whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required. A sufficiency is given on either plan by the benevolent author of both, if duly cultivated and improved, to promote and secure the happiness of every one. Less capacities are filled with less enjoyments. It is, notwithstanding a good, much to be desired, to have our capacities enlarged, to know more of God and truth, natural and moral, that our

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happiness

happiness may be also enlarged. The wise and good author of our nature hath, accordingly, so framed them, that happiness is made to depend on ourselves. It is unnecessary, to observe, that I do not intend, it is so, exclusively of those aids, which, from the perfections of the Deity, are to be expected under the law of nature; and from his promise, under the dispensation of grace. Happiness, I say, depends on ourselves; arises out of our own industry and progress in those moral improvements, which are commonly made to better advantage by the means of natural ones. The one does not, indeed, necessarily follow from the other, as effects from causes; but there is a tendency in the latter to beget the former; though, at the same time, from the principle of human liberty, the effect may not be, and often is not, produced. The greater, however, and the more extensive our knowledge is of natural, the greater may it be of moral truths. The more we know of the latter, the more may we love and embrace them, and conform to them, in temper and conduct towards God and the world around us. This is natural religion. From this happiness results. When we consider the intellectual powers of human nature, as original faculties to attain knowledge by aid and suggestion; to improve every degree thereof; to extend and enlarge it; to argue, by this means, the being and perfection of the Deity, from his works, and the obligation of the several duties we owe him, in due and proper order, from his attributes; it is not easy to speak in too exalted strains of them.—They are truly great and noble. They have in many instances been carried far. To what lengths they might be pushed, even in this state, in regard of both natural and moral science, did not the decay and dissolution of the body hinder enquiry, is impossible to determine.

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Of this, however, we are certain, that the larger the stock of science is in any mind, the better it is able to advance; the farther it goes, the farther may it go, and the clearer will be it's apprehensions of there being things, yet to be known; and the progress might be endless, as, in the other state, it will, doubtless, be strictly so. The most rational and consistent notion we can form of the condition of good men in heaven, is, that of continual advances in knowledge and holiness; approaching towards the Deity, and perfecting their image of him. Hence happiness must arise, and increase in just proportion. But if the rational faculties of man are supposed to be left to discover truths meerly in their own strength, without aid or intimation, it will then be very difficult to say how great they will ever shew themselves, or what they may possibly do. It is not manifest, that the trial has ever yet been made; the contrary rather appears. And hence it may be justly inferred, that the wise and benevolent author of our beings never designed, that the creature man, who was so admirably formed, with capacities to receive by instruction and improve upon every hint, should be left to the slow and uncertain acquisition of, and progress in knowledge, by the sole exertion of his own faculties. The argument from what man can now do, with the helps he has had, instructed and enlightened as he is, to what he would, or could have done, without these advantages, is inconclusive and illusory. Let the conjectures we have made, in regard to the first man, turn out as they may, however great his knowledge, or in what way soever he came by it, learned men, who have made the most philosophical enquiries, generally agree, that his posterity came into the world destitute of knowledge, or even the materials of it, having only capacities to receive it.

The opinion of innate ideas and principles, which prevailed for so long a time, is now, almost, universally given up; and that of the human mind receiving them afterwards distinct and simple; comparing, compounding and disposing of them, together with the perception of those operations, is adopted in its room, as the original of knowledge. Succeeding generations are supposed, in the mean time, to have the assistance of those who have gone before; for it appears to be the plan of providence, that in addition to these sources, and besides the communications, at any time, afforded by the Deity, man should help man; parents teach their children; and, in the prophetic stile, many run to and fro, and knowledge be increased. What truths man possibly could discover, in the due exercise of his rational faculties without aid, is one thing; what he probably would, is another.

The most celebrated philosophers have not pretended to investigate the most important truths of the moral kind, whereof they had no knowledge, ~~or~~ so much as aimed to establish those on fixed principles, and render them plainer by their reasoning, which have been handed down to them by tradition. This is the case with several; with that weighty one, a future state of retribution in particular. And what shall we say in regard to the clearest and most fundamental truth in nature, that which is the basis of all other truth? In what age or country has he lived, and what is his name, or his son's name, who, without any previous intimation, merely by deduction and argument, has, in fact, proved the divine existence? Though it is most undeniably to be done from the things that are made; yet who has ever been put to the necessity of doing it? If we look among the ancient or modern philosophers, who have attempted

attempted the proof of the divine Being and perfections, either by arguments *a priori* or *a posteriori*, do we not find them before possessed of the most essentially necessary truth? The fact is, that it has been transmitted from the beginning, and spread among all nations; and this has precluded the necessity of that proof, which is very capable of being made; and indeed if it be allowed that the divine existence is most incontestibly to be argued from his works (and what can be more manifest?) and if the reason of man, in proper exercise, can see, and does see that it is so; where then is the harm, and what can be risked, by supposing, as appears to be the case, that God has been before hand with us, as he is, with respect to many favours, and has given us intimations of himself prior to our reasoning about him?

To what has been advanced, I think the authority of St. Paul cannot be opposed, who hath said, The invisible things of him since the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and god-head; so that they are without excuse. The Apostle is here speaking of the heathens, but for what does he blame them? And on what account were they without excuse? Was it because they did not seek after and find the true God, from his works, whom they had never before known? Does he not represent them as knowing God already, but not glorifying him as God? As not liking to retain him in their knowledge? And as holding the truth in unrighteousness, because that which may be known of God, is manifest in them, for God hath shewed it unto them? And does he not speak of them, as being without excuse; because they had so far lost the knowledge they once had of him, as to change the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible

ruptible man, and to birds and four footed beasts, and creeping things ; when, at the same time, they had so clear and striking an argument, before their eyes, of the invisible things of him ; even his eternal power and godhead, as the things that are made did afford them ? and had afforded all mankind, ever since they were made ? This is evidently the scope of the Apostle's reasoning ; and the argument is truly powerful and convincing ; there is no resisting its force, where proper attention is given, If the things that are made are sufficient to prove the being, as cannot be denied, much more are they so, to preserve the knowledge, of God, in every rational mind. And the intellectual faculties of men, duly employed, cannot but consent to this, and immediately perceive it to be so. Without excuse, therefore, must they be, to lose the knowledge of him, after they have once had it, and change the truth of God into a lie, and worship and serve the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever.

On what has been, thus far, discoursed of man ; the capacities he is endowed with ; the means he enjoys of knowing God, and his duty to him ; and the proportionate religion of his nature, several things may be noticed.

First, we may observe, with the most undissembled piety and gratitude, that the divine care of man, in every period, has been suited to the circumstances he came under ; commensurate to the exigencies of his condition ; and calculated to open and enlarge his views of moral science, and the most fundamental principles of natural religion. In innocence, his Creator was his friend and patron, his daily protector and guide ; and this, in a way so consistent with that
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liberty and active power with which he was endowed, as to leave room for merit and self-satisfaction in the exercise of his own faculties. When he had sinned, he did not depart from him, and abandon him to the horrors of despair and ruin. Highly displeased and dishonored, as he certainly was, with his transgression; and notwithstanding the fullest testimony he bore against it; shewing his extreamest abhorrence, by suffering the consequences thereof to come on, agreeable to the threatening; "in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die;" yet he took occasion, from this very act, to make farther discoveries of his grace and kindness. He applied remedies against the prevalency of sin and lust, which had now entered into the world, and corrected and restrained their growth, by new instructions and appointments, adapted to the degraded condition of humanity. He took the most effectual measures, had they been regarded, to preserve and spread the knowledge of himself and his worship in the world; and finally, to procure the restoration of men, from the darkness of death to a state of immortal life and glory. The paternal care which God saw fit to take of man, from the beginning of his weakness and depravity, and the wise and gracious methods he has all along pursued, to convey the most useful instruction to him, and keep a sense of religion and moral obligation in his heart, cannot be recollected by us, in the present age of the world, who so richly enjoy the benefits hereof, but with the most pleasing astonishment and gratitude. By favoring man, with many appearances from the angel of his presence, he declared himself and his ways to them, as far as the necessity of their temporal concerns would admit, and their capacities were able to improve and receive advantage by such instructions: He communicated the
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Spirit of prophecy to many, and some have supposed, as from several intimations in sacred history it appears not improbable, that he made it "hereditary, in the heads of families;" and for many years men enjoyed the benefit of the tradition of the most useful and important truths, by the means of longevity, through but very few hands. "There were but two generations from Adam to Noah. So that we cannot well imagine that the knowledge and true worship of God, during that time, could be entirely lost, in any part of the world."

After the general deluge, considering what had so recently happened, to manifest the divine displeasure against iniquity, and make his power known, and also that the world was, as it were, beginning anew; the most essential truths of natural religion, as they were acknowledged, might be very well left, for some time, to traditional conveyance, and the common reasoning of mankind, without any new communications from the Deity. But no sooner did men begin to fall away, and corrupt and darken their notions of the one supreme God, and incline to idolatry, than he saw fit to interpose to prevent it, and to take various methods to invigorate the impression of himself, and some of the most leading and essential truths, and enforce the obligation of religious homage. And when, notwithstanding the paternal care, which God exercised over his offspring, they had grown too generally refractory and disobedient, obliterating their natural notions of him, and corrupting the first principles of reason, even so far as to darken their understandings, and render themselves unfit subjects of the divine communications: inasmuch that he was, as it were, obliged to withhold favors of this sort, as being no longer suitable for them.

them. This, I say, being the case, he did not fail to make use of other means, which had now become more adapted to the obscurity of their understandings, and the depravity of their hearts, to do them good; to recover their lost notions of God, and the religion of their nature. He raised up and furnished certain individuals of mankind, who had retained more just and rational notions of the Deity and their duty to him, and of the general obligations of religious fear, worship and obedience, than the rest, to guide, teach and instruct them, as both themselves and these had before been taught of God. For this important purpose, Abraham was called and very much distinguished, together with his posterity, by notable discoveries of God and religion, and many benefits and privileges, both of a temporal and spiritual kind. But, as a very eminently learned and judicious writer has observed, —“ we cannot think, that it was so much on his own account, that he was thus distinguished; or that, for his sake only, faith, or sincerity, is said to be imputed to him for righteousness; but rather for the common benefit of mankind was all this done; in order to make him an instrument, in the hand of providence (and a fit one he was) to convey the same faith and fear of God to all the nations round him.” And besides Abraham, there were many other persons, spread abroad in almost every nation, who were burning and shining lights, in dark ages and places; and who, notwithstanding the too great prevalency of idolatry, had preserved, some of them, considerably pure and rational, others, by far more consistent notions of the one true God, than the generality. Even the spirit of prophecy, which had been possessed by many, before Abraham’s time, did not utterly cease among the several nations, in his day; nor soon after it. There

were also other means of conveying divine admonitions to men, and some were instructed by visions and revelations; whereby the knowledge of God and natural religion was, in some measure, kept up in the world. But that, which had the most direct and distinguished tendency to enlighten mankind; to reform their idolatrous practices and vices; and to recover and diffuse, among all nations, proper conceptions of the power, justice and majesty of the God of nature, and the religious obedience which he required and would accept of reasonable beings, was his afterwards giving a written law to the Jews; statutes and judgments, more righteous than those of other nations; and making himself, as it were, the political head of their state; guiding and regulating their moral governmental and ecclesiastical affairs. In every part of which he seems to have had in view the same divine intention, which he had prosecuted from the first, *viz.* That of applying to, calling forth and aiding the human reason; and adapting his providential care to the circumstances and necessities of mankind. God had before, in various instances, revealed his will to particular persons for the common benefit; that is, he had made it known, at such times, and in such ways and degrees, as he saw best suited to accomplish his benevolent purpose of informing mens minds, and giving spring to the exertion of their rational faculties; but he never had, 'till now, written his law for their constant perusal. The learned Bishop, to whom I am already indebted, and some others, have supposed, with great probability, that Moses was divinely taught on this occasion, and that this was the origin of letters. Nor was the law confined to the Jewish nation; it had respect also to the stranger: And all nations had, and were originally designed to have, a share of blessings, in the adoption and blessing of Abraham,

Abraham, and the giving of the law. Accordingly the Jews were made use of, in a great variety of ways, for the grand end of spreading the doctrine of the divine unity thro' the world, and restoring and establishing the essential principles of natural religion. Whether they pursued their own inclination, in many instances, and aimed to be blessings to other nations or not, is of no consequence to enquire ; since, in either case, the divine plan is carried forward ; and " the rest of the world reap almost the same benefit by them, whether they keep their law and prosper, or disobey it and are in distress." By their rewards and by their punishments, by their victories, and by their captivities, the name of Jehovah is made known, and the great truths of religion spread abroad and confirmed.

Secondly, It is a just and obvious remark from the foregoing discourse, that the divine conduct towards men in the several ages of the world, and in all the darkness and diversity of their circumstances, has been calculated to furnish their minds with such degrees of light and knowledge, in regard to their moral state, and the necessities of nature, as to dispose them for the easier reception of the gospel revelation, when it should be offered to them, and for the many distinguished privileges and advantages, which it brings along with it. Men see their wants by the means of light, and their having been accustomed to receive it, prepares them for more. They can in reason, have no prejudice against new discoveries, when they have been used to old ones ; or to further and more perfect assistance, when they have already had some, though more restrained and partial ; yet always such as was best adapted to their moral circumstances. The christian dispensation may be properly considered, as the perfection

of the general plan of conduct in this world, pursued by the Deity with respect to the human race from the beginning. He early began in diverse ways and manners to give them just notions of the religion of their nature; and by his several dispensations, has been uniformly carrying forward the same design; 'till it at length, issued in the superior light and advantage of the gospel revelation. It is not essential to the just and proper notion of natural religion, that it should be discovered, by the meer strength of human reason; it is sufficient, if it be consonant to reason, and founded in nature. The way and manner of knowing it, does not come into the account; or make it more or less natural religion.

Let a part of the human race, in some dark corner of the earth, be supposed totally ignorant of all the natural religion that ever was in the world; let a few of them be now so happy, as to discover it by contemplation, and the proper use of their own faculties; and let them communicate it to the rest. In this case, I ask, would it not be equally natural religion in them all? And would it make any difference here, if the communication should proceed from some other quarter, or even from the Deity? If it has its foundation in the divine perfections, and the relation there is between God and man; is not this enough to constitute it the religion of nature, in whatever way men are supposed to come to the knowledge of it? To speak, therefore, of what is called natural religion and revealed, as though they were totally distinct, and essentially and substantially different, is, I believe, to give an undue representation of them both; and to administer very unnecessary support to the cause of infidelity. The grand design of revelation, in every instance, has been, either directly or consequentially to open, enlarge and establish the

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the genuine principles of natural religion ; that is, the religion that is adapted to the nature and circumstances of the creature, man. In this way, and with this design, the benevolent Father of the universe has gone on, with respect to the human race, from the beginning down to the present time; rising in the perspicuity and fulness of his manifestations; until he saw fit, in the unfathomable depths of his wisdom, to bless the world with the Gospel revelation, and the dispensation of his grace, under the immediate conduct and administration of the Son of his love; wherein the great principles and duties of natural religion are more perfectly taught, explained and understood; and more clearly and authoritatively enforced and confirmed, than they had ever before been under any former dispensation. There is now, by the means of the Gospel, more natural religion in the world than the reason of man, with all the assistance and instruction that has been given it, had ever before brought him acquainted with; insomuch, that it may be truly affirmed, that those societies, or even individuals, who have the most Christianity, have also the most natural religion among them. It must, indeed, be confessed, to the praise of the divine grace, that the Gospel has made glorious discoveries of things, which the reason of man could never come to the knowledge of, but by revelation. They are, however, such as have a tendency to promote the principles, and oblige us to the practice of the several duties of natural religion. The general doctrine of the mediation of Christ, and it's appendages; that of atonement and justification in his merits; and, indeed, the several offices, executed by him, in the great and glorious work of redemption, have for their object, the giving men just views of the divine character; bringing them to a true sense of their own,

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and the state they are in; forming them to proper tempers towards God and one another, and leading them to a correspondent conduct: So that the scheme of Christianity is calculated to subdue sin, which degrades human nature; and to direct and influence men to act according to it's law, which dignifies and exalts it. But I pass on to observe,

Thirdly, That if the Deity has seen fit all along to aid the reason of man by frequent discoveries, according to its necessities, as we have heard, then no objection can be justly formed against revelation in general; nor of consequence against the christian revelation in particular, which is no other than his continuing to do the same. It has been said, with great reason and judgment, "That the several dispensations of what we call revealed religion, have hitherto been, in the main, conformable to those of providence, in both the natural and moral world." And if so, then revealed religion "may possibly come from the same author, and receive yet farther increase, which these also do, as they are better understood."

It is indeed owing, in part to the greater improvements, which later ages have made in general science and literature, than former ages had done, that the modern Deists know more, and more they do certainly know than their predecessors, the ancient philosophers. But this is chiefly to be attributed to the advantage of the christian revelation, which has been a rich blessing, even to those who do not believe in it. One would be ready to imagine that we meet the Deists on their own ground, and give them all their wishes, when we undertake to shew that the christian revelation is the fulfilment and perfection of the same plan, which the
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Deity has pursued with men, from the first ; and that the great aim and tendency of it is to give them more just and enlarged notions of the principles, and more strongly to oblige them to the duties of natural religion. Whether this be the case or not, they themselves will allow, is worthy their most serious consideration.

The discourse, we have now had, may remind us all of the singular advantages we enjoy, in this age of light and improvement, both to know and do our duty. But I cannot help felicitating my young brethren the Students of this university, in particular, on the peculiar blessedness of their situation, and the prospects they have before them. In this seat of learning, kind Providence has honored them with privileges above the common portion of mankind ; or even of those who are figuratively said to be lifted up to heaven, with respect to theirs. And if they desire to answer the just and reasonable expectations of God, their friends or their country from them, it should be their care, that their literary and religious accomplishments rise in some proportion to such happy enjoyments. When we are told of their general virtues, their regular behavior, their easy submission to the good orders, instruction and government of this society ; or of their honoring themselves and this favored seminary, by their literary performances, we are glad : Rejoicing in their personal glory, and wishing them every blessing, we anticipate the happiness of future time, when they shall be called forth to act their parts in places of trust and eminence both in church and state. But we are made sorry with every report of a different kind, and console ourselves only with the hope, that it cannot be true. We, who have trod the paths of science before them, may

may possibly, as we do most willingly, afford them our friendly aid, but they must not think to bound their progress in literature by the limits that have been set to ours. They must go beyond us. They enjoy happy opportunities for this. Their advantages, by means of daily improvements, are better than ours were. And if they do not surpass us, they will have a greater account to give up before God at last. In addition to human literature, and the assiduous cultivation of the liberal arts and sciences, which will lead them to an easier and more extensive acquaintance with the foundations both of natural and revealed religion, their minds must be furnished with divine science. They must acquire and cherish the most reverential thoughts of the holy Scriptures, which are able to make them wise unto salvation. Their hearts must be replenished with the divine grace. They must know God, and Jesus Christ whom he hath sent, whom to know is eternal life. Wisdom is the principal thing: Therefore, get wisdom; but with all thy getting, get understanding.

A M E N.

