

SCEPTICISM *not separable from* IMMORALITY; *illustrated in the Instances of* HUME and GIBBON.

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED IN THE

CHURCH OF ALL-SAINTS,
NORTHAMPTON,

AT THE

VISITATION

OF THE

REV. THE ARCHDEACON

OF THE

DIOCESE OF PETERBOROUGH,

ON THE 8TH OF MAY, 1799.

By CHRISTOPHER HUNTER, B. D.

RECTOR OF GAYTON, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR G. NICOL, PALL-MALL; J. SEWELL,
CORNHILL; BIRDSALL, NORTHAMPTON; AND
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TO

THOMAS MARCH PHILLIPPS, Esq.

GARENDON PARK, LEICESTERSHIRE.

DEAR SIR,

I am encouraged to prefix your name to this imperfect vindication of Christianity, not more by the experience of a long tried friendship, than by a conviction of the advantage that name can confer on the object of the composition. *Plus boni mores valent, quam bonæ leges.* This remark, confined by *Tacitus* to our *German progenitors*, may be extended to every age, and to every nation.

Few fathers or masters have so wide a domestic circle to direct as you: *fewer* still are, like you, disposed to direct it by the pure precepts of Revelation. Were such wisdom not rare, the *Machiavellian* politics and the irreligion of *France* would cease to be formidable to mankind.

I am, Dear Sir,

with great consideration,

your obliged, and faithful

humble Servant,

CHR. HUNTER.

B

A SERMON.

iv. *Chap.* ii. *Ep. Cor.* 4 *Verse.*

IN WHOM THE GOD OF THIS WORLD HATH
BLINDED THE MINDS OF THEM WHICH BE-
LIEVE NOT; LEST THE LIGHT OF THE GLO-
RIOUS GOSPEL OF CHRIST, WHO IS THE IMAGE
OF GOD, SHOULD SHINE UNTO THEM.

CHRISTIANITY is compared by a learned writer to the *stone** that assays gold; it tries the human heart, and ascertains its purity or its debasement. The arguments by which *Christianity* is supported and confirmed, must be examined with diligence and attention; must be applied with honesty and impartiality; and appear only to ingenuous minds with the full radiance of truth. For, may we not refuse to search for the arguments by which this truth is made manifest? May we not consider them with negligence? May we not overlook or suppress them, when opposing a favourite inclination?

* Ita sermo Evangelii tanquam lapis esset Lydius, ad quem ingenia sanabilia explorarentur. Grotius de Verit, Rel. Christ: lib. 2. §. 19.

If the *Gospel* could ever be said to act irresistibly on the mind, it would be in the case of those, who are incapable of examining minutely the evidence for its truth. Such persons, unequal to the task of a tedious investigation, seldom fail, however, to see and to admire the beauty of the Scripture morality; and receive, with a full conviction, a religion recommended to their acceptance, by precepts which are few, plain, and reasonable. But even these still retain a liberty of rejecting this evidence in its favour. By the indulgence of sensual and unfriendly passions, they may so weaken their moral principle, as to feel no approbation of the doctrines promulgated by the *Gospel*; as to conceive that these doctrines are unnecessary, or severe, or impracticable. In this, as in other subjects, we readily believe that to be unattainable, which we wish not to acquire; and treat as contemptible enjoyments, what we have not learned to relish.

The *Gospel* therefore may be considered as a trial of the character of every rank and condition of men. To the *uninformed* and *illiterate* it presents a pure and simple code of doctrines and precepts, enforced by sanctions present and future: precepts, which none can reject in their full

extent without incurable depravity. It is, however, in some of its parts difficult and refined; and thus adapts itself *to higher improvements* of the heart and understanding. It commands us to discipline our thoughts, and restrain them by wholesome severity, even from the imagination of any evil thing: it requires us to forgive injuries, however bitter and unprovoked: it expects that our dearest interests be relinquished, and the most dreadful sufferings endured, when religion and virtue are at stake.

To persons of *improved and cultivated minds*, the *Gospel* affords a trial of another kind. To these, it offers itself for examination upon evidence, probable indeed, but not unquestionable; which requires candid and assiduous deliberation, and which may be rejected. In considering, therefore, the proofs of Revelation, *our virtues must be exercised, or our vices indulged*; and thus, what is deemed a speculative enquiry, will occasion a real change in the heart and manners. *The Christian Religion*, when offered to the understanding as a subject of investigation, influences our moral characters; it is *the touchstone* which discovers their genuine value.

Permit me to take a more particular view of

the virtues we may exercise *upon this occasion*, and of *the vices* to which we are inclined.

A virtue which we ought to exercise in examining the evidences for Christianity, is *industry*: the opposite vices to which we are prone, are *indolence* and *inattention*.

A religion, representing the present life as a *moment* in human existence; but a moment from which all the remainder will derive its character and colour, must be important enough to justify, and even to exact, the most earnest solicitude of inquiry. To refuse any pains to such an object, is highly impolitic and irrational; especially, since our labour cannot in any event be prejudicial to us. Supposing, indeed, what is not possible, that the result of our industrious researches should be, that man's expectations concerning the future, are idle dreams, founded upon conjecture, and sanctified by antiquity; *that death, in the language of the Atheists of the Continent, is eternal sleep*, this, it must be confessed, would be a discovery most melancholy and afflicting. For were we convinced, that, as the present scene is hastening to a conclusion, as soon as it shall be finished, the curtain will be dropped upon us for ever, hope would retire from the breast, and be succeeded by langour and

despair. Sorrowful in such a case, beyond the lot of other animals, would be the fate of man! Indulging his sensual appetites to excess, and by his frame incapable of unremitted fruition, his pleasures would be perpetually interrupted, and the long interval be marked with misery.

With regard to inferior animals, Nature seems to have intended that they should not suffer any intermission of their enjoyments. Their time is divided between rest and refreshment; if we except those exertions of strength or agility, which occasionally intervene, and afford them considerable delight. *Their brief existence* is to them *an immortality*; but man, receiving no satisfaction from within, must sink in sorrow and despondence; the only being in the compass of creation, endued with talents and energies, which never shall be gratified.

Can we then sacrifice to presumptuous* sceptics the uniform experience, and the whole analogy of nature?

* *Presumptuous* may seem a singular epithet to apply to philosophers, *who would be thought to doubt* of every thing, from a *modest suspicion* of the powers of the mind; but surely it must be something very like *presumption*, that can induce men to shake opinions long established, and most beneficial to mankind. And to make room for what? *The poisonous substitutions of France.*

Why has she not also with the same cruel prodigality, enabled animals, destined for the food of man, to anticipate their pangs, and to discover with human foresight, that they are doomed to slaughter?

No art therefore nor contrivance of man, will enable him to gather this absurd conclusion: how then can we apprehend that such will be the consequence of laborious and impartial inquiry?

For what are the usual effects in other subjects of *diligence and assiduity*? These not only give a general vigour and alacrity to the mind, but also infuse into it a certain confidence in, and affection for the object, upon which it has employed its attention: they enable it to place that object in every point of view; to discern all the advantages, to extract all the delights, which it is capable of bestowing. How variously is history, philosophy, or any inferior acquisition, improved and adorned by the art of man!

On the other hand, what are the effects of *negligence and inattention*? They are commonly ignorance of what it is our principal duty to know; want, vexation, and distress, an aversion from useful study and meditation, a fondness for unprofitable and frivolous amusements.*

* On the subject of industry and amusement, a female

Similar are the effects upon the human mind of *industry and of negligence* with respect to religion. Some men, when they condescend to make inquiries upon this subject, inquire in a careless, impatient manner; and are easily seduced by every deceitful argument, because they will not take the pains to examine it with attention.

If any difficulty appear in religion, they do not labour to remove it; but, in order to free themselves from the uneasiness of suspense, make a hasty conclusion that is not true.

The motives on the contrary which stimulate the discreet to *pains and industry* upon other occasions, are augmented in religious pursuits, by the dignity and sublimity of their object. *Industry* of all kinds contributes to our tranquillity; it repays us too with something that is profitable; it improves our understanding, and renders us beneficial to mankind. But how much does *that industry* tend to our tranquillity, how amply does it compensate for its own exertions, which enables us “*to lay hold of the hope set before us, as an anchor both sure and steadfast!*” How certainly will *that diligence* writer gives a useful and ingenious precept. “Let those who have leisure, find employment, and those who have business, find leisure.” Cecilia, Vol. iv. p. 296.

improve the understanding, to which the divine favor is particularly promised! How great is its utility to mankind! *It gives instruction to the ignorant and to them that are out of the way*, the noblest and most exalted of all employments.

Another cause which leads to error in religious investigations, is *Pride*. *Pride* occasions singularity; and singularity is seldom the parent of truth. The proud deem none preferable to themselves, conceiving their own judgment to be infallible; and therefore the errors into which they may chance to fall, are fatal and irretrievable. But *Pride*, apt as it is in all cases to preclude us from the means of information, more particularly indisposes us for knowledge of the religious and moral kind. That we are ignorant, dependent, erroneous; that our best services are blended with imperfection, and have little to recommend them but their sincerity, is the uniform language of reason and Scripture; but this is an humiliating view of human nature, and such as the high minded constantly labour to remove from their thoughts.

Prejudices, thirdly, are a fruitful source of error in religious inquiries. Every one will acknowledge that these are in all cases a powerful obstacle to the attainment of truth. But who is exempt from

their dominion? And are they not in some instances useful? *Prejudice is a judgment formed upon a subject before we have received due information, and while we are inclined in its favour.** In this sense much of the knowledge we receive in the early part of life may be said to be a sort of *prejudices*; for we are then incapable of discerning the reasons for it, and admit it upon the authority of others. In this sense too all the knowledge of the lower classes may be deemed *a prejudice*; that part of it especially which depends upon arguments they have not leisure to investigate, nor talents to comprehend. But *prejudices like these*, if indeed they can be called by that name, are necessary, and therefore excusable; but there are other *less venial prejudices*, which will not permit us to correct our mistakes, even when the means of correcting them are in our power.

There is no error so obvious, no absurdity so glaring, to which men of enlarged and cultivated minds have not at one time or other submitted; † and to what cause can we attribute this, but to their

* Jortin.

† Tacitus, Plutarch, Galen, Seneca, the Elder, and the Younger Pliny, Epictetus, and Marcus Antoninus, all men of excellent understandings in various respects, discovered

not examining the subject at all, or to their examining it partially and imperfectly? Most propositions, not even excepting those which are capable of demonstrative evidence, may have something alleged against them, as well as in their favour; and it is easy to guess what will be his opinion, who considers only the reasonings on one side. Some of the advocates for *Christianity* may have been faulty in this respect; and, certainly such unfair conduct is practised even by its most respectable opponents. They have decided after a full hearing only of one party; and what is that party? Malignant and disingenuous foes; ignorant of the religion they reject, and arguing against it from the corrupt systems of Pagan ages.

It may be suggested to such hasty examiners, that a taste for error may be acquired by habit, as well as a taste for truth; and the longer an impartial inquiry is delayed, the greater will be their reluctance to that inquiry, and the less their probability of success. Were we even to admit their own premises; were we to grant, a painful concession to Christians, that our indefatigable enemies have on the subject of Christianity an indifference or contempt, which nothing but the strongest prejudices can account for.

See Gibbon's Hist. Vol. I. p. 516.

carried their researches fairly, as far as *scepticism* and *hesitation*; yet, surely, in a matter of *doubt*, to embrace that side where there is *no hazard*, and where there *may possibly be considerable advantage*; not that where there *can be no advantage*, and where there *is undoubtedly great hazard*, must be most consistent with *philosophical caution*.

There were two writers* of eminence in the present age, to whom may be applied the above observations. In works, abounding with amusing reflections, and recommended by an elegant and engaging style, several assertions occasionally occur, tending to the disparagement of revealed religion.

The fact seems to have been that these seducing writers considered it as unnecessary labour to examine the evidences for religion, and chose rather to abide by such hasty conclusions as flowed from their own *prejudices*. *Christianity* however had undoubtedly a claim to a fair and attentive scrutiny, and merited not to have been confounded with those erroneous theological systems which they condemn.

What must have been the *prejudice of the moralist* † in favour of *incredulity*, when he extolled the

* Hume and Gibbon.

† Mr. Hume.

judgment of the Indian king,* who denied the concreting energies of frost; energies which he himself must have experienced? From *a hasty, limited, and partial inquiry* each ventured to decide on the wonders of nature, and on the counsels of God; and the *result* was *error*, overwhelming, in equal ignominy the prince and the philosopher. —

The inaccuracies and faults of *the historians* of which ample and unquestionable proof has been

* “The Indian prince,” says Mr. Hume, “who refused to believe the first relations concerning the effects of frost, *reasoned justly*; and it naturally required very strong testimony to engage his assent to facts, that arose from a state of nature with which he was unacquainted, and which bore so little analogy to those events of which he had had constant and uniform experience.” *Hume’s Essays, Vol. II. p. 130.*

In a note upon this passage, Mr. Hume makes an observation somewhat inconsistent with the above remark, and more conformable to our opinion of the Indian’s judgment. “The inhabitants of *Sumatra* have always seen water fluid in their own climate, and the freezing of their rivers ought to be deemed a prodigy; but they never saw water in *Muscovy* during the winter; and therefore they cannot *reasonably be positive* what would there be the consequence.” Thus *the truth* sometimes steals even from *Sceptical Philosophers*, in spite of themselves.

given by several able writers,* are faults of a similar complexion and character. An ardent desire for literary fame, was, by their own acknowledgement, the predominating passion of both: let us not therefore wonder, that truth should be sacrificed to popularity; and instead of well authenticated histories, furnished *with simple and severe realities*, that the reader should be presented *with visionary narratives, with graceful vanities, and agreeable fictions*.

But of the different sources of *error*, the most dangerous and inexcusable are *habits of vice*. Perhaps not all, perhaps not the greater part of religious mistakes, have proceeded from this cause; but that many such mistakes must have proceeded from it, is evident from its effects in other cases. *Vice* gives strength to the passions, to those especially which it is accustomed to indulge; it weakens the judgment, it debases the heart, engaging it in sensual and transitory pursuits.† It induces men se-

* Messrs. Davis, Whitaker and Milner, Dr. Chelsum, Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, Randolph, Bishop of Oxford, &c.

† The Mufti of Aleppo desired Mr. Russell, when he described the Mahomedan religion in England, to represent it as directly opposite to the practice of its votaries. Alas!

cretly to wish, that there may be no state of final retribution; such a state they must view with dread; and there is no alternative to lull their anxiety, but either not to think on the subject at all, or to adapt their reasonings to their conduct.

To what cause but this shall we attribute *writings* now disseminated with industrious malignity, in which *novelty* stands in the place of argument, and *abuse* gives energy to falsehood; where the sure guidance of experience being disdained, the *boldest theories* are hazarded on abstract questions of religion and politics,* which the ignorant indeed may not know to be false, but which no *sleight of men and cunning craftiness*, whereby they lie in wait to deceive, shall ever prove to be true.

Since therefore there are many, who through *negligence* and *inattention* examine not the evidences for revelation; since there are many, whose *pride*

is it the disciple of Mahomet alone, who forgets the precepts of his master? *Russell's Aleppo.*

* The words which the profound historian of ancient Rome, puts in the mouth of Petilius Cerealis, the Roman general, may aptly be applied to such pretenders. “*Libertas et speciosa nomina prætexuntur; nec quisquam alienum servitium et dominationem sibi concupivit, ut non eadem ista vocabula usurparet.*” *Tacit. Hist. Lib. iv. cap. 73.*

and whose *prejudices* attract them more strongly to difficulties than to proofs, and to objections than to the answers which have been given them; since there are many lastly *infatuated by vicious pleasures*, and, consequently, disinclined to expect, or even to think of a future judgment; it is not unaccountable, that there now exists amongst men, so bitter an opposition *to Christianity*; an opposition, indeed, that bears a hostile, but surely not a formidable aspect: *for how shall the gates of hell prevail against the church of Christ?* Its enemies are the enemies of truth and innocence; persons “*whom the God of this world hath blinded, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.*”

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