

COLLECTION OF PAPERS

ON

POLITICAL, LITERARY

AND

MORAL SUBJECTS.

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CHAPTER XIV.

REPLY TO A LETTER OF DAVID McCLURE, ESQ., ON
THE SUBJECT OF THE PROPER COURSE OF STUDY
IN THE GIRARD COLLEGE, PHILADELPHIA.

New Haven, Oct. 25, 1836.

DEAR SIR—I have received and perused the system of education for the Girard College for Orphans, which you have been so good as to send me, and for which please to accept my thanks.

In regard to the merits of the system, on which you request my opinions, I will make a few remarks, although I do not think myself so well qualified to judge of it as many gentlemen who have been in the employment of instruction in our higher seminaries.

The mode you propose for instructing children in the French and Spanish languages, is nearly the same as I have always supposed to be the best, if not the only mode of making pupils perfectly masters of a foreign language. An accurate pronounciation and familiarity with a language can not easily be acquired, except in youth, when the organs of speech are pliable, and by practice, as we learn our vernacular language.

In regard to your system in general, I can only say, that it appears to be judiciously constructed, and well adapted for the purpose of making thorough scholars. If on trial it should be found susceptible of improvement, experience will direct to the proper amendments. One remark, however, I take the liberty to make. I do not suppose an exact conformity to a particular course of studies to be essential to a thorough education. One course may be preferable to another, but there seems to be "no royal way to geometry;" *close and persevering application only* will make good scholars, and this will accomplish the object, without an adherence to any precise order of studies.

As by Mr. Girard's will, there can not be in the college any instruction in the Christian religion, I shall take the liberty to make a few remarks on that subject.*

In my view, the Christian religion is the *most important and one of the first things* in which *all* children, under a free government, ought to be instructed. In this institution it is of more importance, as the pupils will be orphans, and may be destitute of parental instruction.

No truth is more evident to my mind, than that the Christian religion must be the basis of any government intended to secure the rights and privileges of a free people. The opinion that *human reason*, left without the constant control of divine laws and commands, will preserve a

* The clause in Mr. Girard's will is in the following words: "I enjoin and require that no ecclesiastic, missionary, or minister, of any sect whatever, shall ever hold or exercise any station or duty whatever in the said College; nor shall any such person be admitted for any purpose, or as a visitor, within the premises appropriated to the purposes of said College."

just administration, secure freedom, and other rights, restrain men from violations of laws and constitutions, and give duration to a popular government, is as chimerical as the most extravagant ideas that enter the head of a maniac. The history of the whole world refutes the opinion; the Bible refutes it; our own melancholy experience refutes it.

When I speak of the Christian religion as the basis of government, I do not mean an ecclesiastical establishment, a creed, or rites, forms, and ceremonies, or any compulsion of conscience. I mean primitive Christianity, in its simplicity, as taught by Christ and his apostles; consisting in a belief in the being, perfections, and moral government of God; in the revelation of his will to men, as their supreme rule of action; in man's accountability to God for his conduct in this life; and in the indispensable obligation of all men to yield entire obedience to God's commands in the moral law and in the Gospel. This belief and this practice may consist with different forms of church government, which, not being essential to Christianity, need not enter into any system of education.

Where will you find any code of laws, among civilized men, in which the commands and prohibitions are not founded on Christian principles? I need not specify the prohibition of murder, robbery, theft, trespass; but commercial and social regulations are all derived from those principles, or intended to enforce them. The laws of contracts and bills of exchange are founded on the principles of *justice*, the basis of all security of rights in society. The laws of insurance are founded on the Christian principle of *benevolence*, and intended to protect men from want and distress. The provisions of law for the relief of the poor are in pursuance of Christian principles. Every wise code of laws must embrace the main principles of the religion of Christ.

Now the most efficient support of human laws is, the full belief that the subjects of such laws are accountable to higher authority than human tribunals. The halter and the penitentiary may restrain many men from overt criminal acts; but it is the *fear of God and a reverence for his authority and commands*, which alone can control and subdue the will, when tempted by ambition and interest to violate the laws. Whatever superficial observers may think, it is beyond a question, that the small band of real Christians in Protestant countries has more influence in securing order and peace in society than all the civil officers of government. Just in proportion as the influence of such men is impaired, is the increase of crimes and outrages upon the rights of individuals and upon the public peace.

It has been a misfortune to the citizens of this country, that, from their abhorrence of the ecclesiastical tyranny of certain orders of the clergy in Europe, they have contracted strong prejudices against the clergy in this country, who have neither rank nor temporal power, and whose influence is derived solely from their personal attainments and worth, and their official services.

The clergy in this country are generally men of learning and of good principles. They have been uniformly and preëminently the friends of education and civil liberty. The learned clergy among the first settlers of New England had great influence in founding the first genuine republican governments ever formed, and which, with all the faults and

defects of the men and their laws, were the *best* republican governments on earth. At this moment the people of this country are indebted chiefly to their institutions for the rights and privileges which are enjoyed.

During the Revolution the clergy were very useful in supporting the courage and fortitude of our citizens, and in restraining their intemperate passions. They have uniformly been the supporters of law and order, and to them is popular education, in this country, more indebted than to any other class of men. That such men should be precluded from any concern in the education of youth in a literary institution, is a reproach to a Christian country.

It may be said that the clergy are bigoted men, and often engaged in controversy. But other classes of men are liable to the same imputation; and nothing in the character of clergymen furnishes a good reason for proscribing their aid in the education of youth. Clergymen differ chiefly on speculative points in religion; in the fundamental points to which my description of religion is limited, they are probably *all united*; and in support of them they would join in solid phalanx to resist the inroads of licentiousness.

The foundation of all free government and of all social order, must be laid in families, and in the discipline of youth. Young persons must not only be furnished with *knowledge*, but they must be accustomed to subordination, and subjected to the authority and influence of good principles. It will avail little that youths are made to *understand* truth and correct principles, unless they are accustomed to submit to be governed by them. The speculative principles of natural religion will have little effect, or none at all, unless the pupil is made to yield obedience to the practical laws of Christian morality; and the practice of yielding such obedience must be familiar, and wrought into habit in early life, or the instruction of teachers will, for the most part, be lost on their pupils. To give efficacy to such a course of education, the pupil must believe himself to be accountable for his actions to the Supreme Being, as well as to human laws; for, without such belief, no dependence can be had upon his fidelity to the laws, when urged to violate them by strong passions, or by the powerful temptations of present advantage. The experience of the whole world evinces that all the restraints of religion and law are often insufficient to control the selfish and malignant passions of men. Any system of education, therefore, which limits instruction to the arts and sciences, and rejects the aids of religion in forming the characters of citizens, is essentially defective.

In giving this view of my opinions, I am aware that I expose myself to the obloquy of modern philosophers. But this I disregard; for I have, in support of my opinions, the experience of the whole civilized world, as well as the proofs presented by inspired truth, from the beginning to the end of the Bible; that book which the benevolent Creator has furnished for the express purpose of guiding human reason in the path of safety, and the *only book* which can remedy, or essentially mitigate, the evils of a licentious world.

From a full conviction of these truths, I firmly believe, that without material changes in the principles now prevalent in the United States, our republican government is destined to be of short duration.

An attempt to conduct the affairs of a free government with wisdom and impartiality, and to preserve the just rights of all classes of citizens, without the guidance of Divine precepts, will certainly end in disappointment. God is the supreme moral Governor of the world he has made, and as he himself governs with perfect rectitude, he requires his rational creatures to govern themselves in like manner. If men will not submit to be controlled by *His* laws, he will punish them by the evils resulting from *their own* disobedience.

Be pleased, sir, to accept the respects of your obedient servant,

N. WEBSTER.