

PART III.

A BRIEF CONSIDERATION OF SOME POPULAR OBJECTIONS.

CHAPTER I.

THE DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN THE SEVERAL GOSPELS.

I KNOW not a more rash or unphilosophical conduct of the understanding, than to reject the substance of a story by reason of some diversity in the circumstances with which it is related. The usual character of human testimony is substantial truth under circumstantial variety. This is what the daily experience of courts of justice teaches. When accounts of a transaction come from the mouths of different witnesses, it is seldom that it is not possible to pick out apparent or real inconsistencies between them. These inconsistencies are studiously displayed by an adverse pleader, but oftentimes with little impression upon the minds of the judges. On the contrary, a close and minute agreement induces the suspicion of confederacy and fraud. When written histories touch upon the same scenes of action; the comparison almost always affords ground for a like reflection. Numerous, and sometimes important, variations present themselves; not seldom, also, absolute and final contradictions; yet neither one nor the other are deemed sufficient to shake the credibility of the main fact. The embassy of the Jews to deprecate the execution of Claudian's order to place his statute, in their temple, Philo places in harvest, Josephus in seed time; both contemporary writers. No reader is led by this inconsistency to doubt whether such an embassy was sent, or whether such an order was given. Our own history supplies examples of the same kind. In the account of the Marquis of Argyle's death, in the reign of Charles the Second, we have a very remarkable contradiction. Lord Clarendon relates that he was condemned to be hanged, which was performed the same day; on the contrary, Burnet, Woodrew, Heath, Echard, concur in stating that he was beheaded; and that he was condemned upon the Saturday, and executed upon the Monday. (See Biog. Britann.) Was any reader of English history ever sceptic enough to raise from hence a question whether the Marquis of Argyle was executed or not? Yet this ought to be left in uncertainty, according to the principles upon which the Christian history has sometimes been attacked. Dr. Middleton contended, that the different hours of the day assigned to the crucifixion of Christ, by John and by the other Evangelists, did not admit of the reconciliation which learned men had proposed: and then concludes the discussion with this hard remark; "We must be forced, with several of the critics, to leave the difficulty just as we found it, chargeable with all the consequences of manifest inconsistency." (Middleton's Reflections answered by Benson, Hist. Christ. vol. iii. p. 50.) But what are these consequences? By no means the discrediting of the history as to the principal fact, by a repugnancy (even supposing that repugnancy not to be resolvable into different modes of computation) in the time of the day in which it is said to have taken place.

A great deal of the discrepancy observable in the Gospels arises from omission; from a fact or a passage of Christ's life being noticed by one writer which is unnoticed by another. Now, omission is at all times a very uncertain ground of objection. We perceive it, not only in the comparison of different writers, but even in the same writer when compared with himself. There are a great many particulars, and some of them of importance, mentioned by Josephus in his Antiquities, which, as we should have supposed, ought to have been put down by him in their place in the Jewish Wars. (Lardner, part i. vol. ii. p. 735, et seq.) Suetonius, Tacitus, Dio Cassius, have, all three,

written of the reign of Tiberius. Each has mentioned many things omitted by the rest, (Lardner, part i. vol. ii. p. 743.) yet no objection is from thence taken to the respective credit of their histories. We have in our own times, if there were not something indecorous in the comparison, the life of an eminent person written by three of his friends, in which there is very great variety in the incidents selected by them; some apparent, and 'perhaps some real contradictions; yet without any impeachment of the substantial truth of their accounts, of the authenticity of the books, of the competent information or general fidelity of the writers.

But these discrepancies will be still more numerous, when men do not write histories, but memoirs: which is, perhaps, the true name and proper description of our Gospels: that is, when they do not undertake, nor ever meant to deliver, in order of time, a regular and complete account of all the things of importance which the person who is the subject of their history did or said; but only, out of many similar ones, to give such passages, or such actions and discourses, as offered themselves more immediately to their attention, came in the way of their inquiries, occurred to their recollection, or were suggested by their particular design at the time of writing.

This particular design may appear sometimes, but not always, nor often. Thus I think that the particular design which Saint Matthew had in view whilst he was writing the history of the resurrection was to attest the faithful performance of Christ's promise to his disciples to go before them into Galilee; because he alone, except Mark, who seems to have taken it from him, has recorded this promise, and he alone has confined his narrative to that single appearance to the disciples which fulfilled it. It was the proconcerted, the great and most public manifestation of our Lord's person. It was the thing which dwelt upon Saint Matthew's mind, and he adapted his narrative to it. But, that there is nothing in Saint Matthew's language which negatives other appearances, or which imports that this his appearance to his disciples in Galilee, in pursuance of his promise, was his first or only appearance, is made pretty evident by Saint Mark's Gospel, which uses the same terms concerning the appearance in Galilee as Saint Matthew uses, yet itself records two other appearances prior to this: "Go your way, tell his disciples and Peter, that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him as he said unto you" (xvi. 7). We might be apt to infer from these words, that this was the first time they were to see him; at least, we might infer it, with as much reason as we draw the inference from the same words in Matthew: the historian himself did not perceive that he was leading his readers to any such conclusion; for, in the twelfth and following verses of this chapter, he informs us of two appearances, which, by comparing the order of events, are shown to have been prior to the appearance in Galilee. "He appeared in another form unto two of them, as they walked, and went into the country; and they went and told it unto the residue, neither believed they them: afterwards he appeared unto the eleven, as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief, because they believed not them that had seen him afar he was risen."

Probably the same observation, concerning the particular design which guided the historian, may be of use in comparing many other passages of the Gospels.

CHAPTER II.

ERRONEOUS OPINIONS IMPUTED TO THE APOSTLES.

A species of candour which is shown towards every other book is sometimes refused to the Scriptures: and that is, the placing of a distinction between judgment and testimony. We do not usually question the credit of a writer, by reason of an opinion he may have delivered upon subjects unconnected with his evidence: and even upon subjects connected with his account, or mixed with it in the same discourse or writing, we naturally separate facts from opinions, testimony from observation, narrative from argument.

To apply this equitable consideration to the Christian records, much controversy and much objection has been raised concerning the quotations of the Old Testament found in the New; some of which quotations, it is said, are applied in a sense and to events apparently different from that which they bear, and from those to which they belong in the original. It is probable, to my apprehension, that many of those quotations were intended by the writers of the New Testament as nothing more than accommodations. They quoted passages of their Scripture which suited, and fell in with, the occasion before them, without always undertaking to assert that the occasion was in the view of the author of the words. Such accommodations of passages from old authors, from books especially which are in every one's hands, are common with writers of all countries; but in none, perhaps, were more to be expected than in the writings of the Jews, whose literature was almost entirely confined to their Scriptures. Those prophecies which are alleged with more solemnity, and which are accompanied with a precise declaration that they originally respected the event then related, are, I think, truly alleged. But were it otherwise; is the judgment of the writers of the New Testament, in interpreting passages of the Old, or sometimes, perhaps, in receiving established interpretations, so connected either with their veracity, or with their means of information concerning what was passing in their own times, as that a critical mistake, even were it clearly made out, should overthrow their historical credit?--Does it diminish it? Has it anything to do with it?

Another error imputed to the first Christians was the expected approach of the day of judgment. I would introduce this objection by a remark upon what appears to me a somewhat similar example. Our Saviour, speaking to Peter of John, said, "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" (John xxi. 22.) These words we find had been so misconstrued, as that a report from thence "went abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die." Suppose that this had come down to us amongst the prevailing opinions of the early Christians, and that the Particular circumstance from which the mistake sprang had been lost (which, humanly speaking, was most likely to have been the ease), some, at this day, would have been ready to regard and quote the error as an impeachment of the whole Christian system. Yet with how little justice such a conclusion would have been drawn, or rather such a presumption taken up, the information which we happen to possess enables us now to perceive. To those who think that the Scriptures lead us to believe that the early Christians, and even the apostles, expected the approach of the day of judgment in their own times, the same reflection will occur as that which we have made with respect to the more partial, perhaps, and temporary, but still no less ancient, error concerning the duration of Saint John's life. It was an error, it may be likewise said, which would effectually hinder those who entertained it from acting the part of impostors.

The difficulty which attends the subject of the present chapter is contained in this question; If we once admit the fallibility of the apostolic judgment, where are we to stop, or in what can we rely upon it? To which question, as arguing with unbelievers, and as arguing for the substantial truth of the: Christian history, and for that alone, it is competent to the advocate of Christianity to reply, Give me the apostles' testimony, and I do not stand in need of their judgment; give me the facts, and I have complete security for every conclusion I want.

But, although I think that it is competent to the Christian apologist to return this answer, I do not think that it is the only answer which the objection is capable of receiving. The two following cautions, founded, I apprehend, in the most reasonable distinctions, will exclude all uncertainty upon this head which can be attended with danger.

First, to separate what was the object of the apostolic mission, and declared by them to be so, from what was extraneous to it, or only incidentally connected with it. Of points clearly extraneous to the religion nothing need be said. Of points incidentally connected with it something may be added. Demoniacal possession is one of these points: concerning the reality of which, as this place will not admit the examination, nor even the production of the argument on either side of the question, it would be arrogance in me to deliver any judgment. And it is unnecessary. For what I am concerned to observe is, that even they who think it was a general, but erroneous opinion of those times; and that the writers of the New Testament, in common with other Jewish writers of that age, fell into the manner of speaking and of thinking upon the subject which then universally prevailed, need not be alarmed by the concession, as though they had anything to fear from it for the truth of Christianity. The doctrine was not what Christ brought into the world. It appears in the Christian records, incidentally and accidentally, as being the subsisting opinion of the age and country in which his ministry was exercised. It was no part of the object of his revelation, to regulate men's opinions concerning the action of spiritual substances upon animal bodies. At any rate it is unconnected with testimony. If a dumb person was by a word restored to the use of his speech, it signifies little to what cause the dumbness was ascribed; and the like of every other cure wrought upon these who are said to have been possessed. The malady was real, the cure was real, whether the popular explication of the cause was well founded or not. The matter of fact, the change, so far as it was an object of sense, or of testimony, was in either case the same.

Secondly, that, in reading the apostolic writings, we distinguish between their doctrines and their arguments. Their doctrines came to them by revelation properly so called; yet in propounding these doctrines in their writings or discourses they were wont to illustrate, support, and enforce them by such analogies, arguments, and considerations as their own thoughts suggested. Thus the call of the gentiles, that is, the admission of the Gentiles to the Christian profession without a previous subjection to the law of Moses, was imported to the apostles by revelation, and was attested by the miracles which attended the Christian ministry among them. The apostles' own assurance of the matter rested upon this foundation. Nevertheless, Saint Paul, when treating of the subject, often a great variety of topics in its proof and vindication. The doctrine itself must be received: but it is not necessary, in order to defend Christianity, to defend the propriety of every comparison, or the validity of every argument, which the apostle has brought into the discussion. The same observation applies to some other instances, and is, in my opinion, very well founded; "When divine writers argue upon any point, we are always bound to believe the conclusions that their

reasonings end in, as parts of divine revelation: but we are not bound to be able to make out, or even to assent to all the premises made use of by them, in their whole extent, unless it appear plainly, that they affirm the premises as expressly as they do the conclusions proved by them."(Burnets Expos. art. 6.)

CHAPTER III.

THE CONNEXION OF CHRISTIANITY WITH THE JEWISH HISTORY.

UNDOUBTEDLY our Saviour assumes the divine origin of the Mosaic institution: and, independently of his authority, I conceive it to be very difficult to assign any other cause for the commencement or existence of that institution; especially for the singular circumstance of the Jews adhering to the unity when every other people slid into polytheism; for their being men in religion, children in everything else; behind other nations in the arts of peace and war, superior to the most improved in their sentiments and doctrines relating to the Deity.*

* "In the doctrine, for example, of the unity, the eternity, the omnipotence, the omniscience, the omnipresence, the wisdom, and the goodness of God; in their opinions concerning providence, and the creation, preservation, and government of the world." Campbell on Mir. p. 207. To which we may add, in the acts of their religion not being accompanied either with cruelties or impurities: in the religion itself being free from a species of superstition which prevailed universally in the popular religions of the ancient world, and which is to be found perhaps in all religions that have their origin in human artifice and credulity, viz. fanciful connexions between certain appearances and actions, and the destiny of nations or individuals. Upon these conceits rested the whole train of auguries and auspices, which formed so much even of the serious part of the religions of Greece and Rome, and of the charms and incantations which were practised in those countries by the common people. From everything of this sort the religion of the Jews, and of the Jews alone, was free. Vide. Priestley's Lectures on the Truth of the Jewish and Christian Revelation; 1794.

Undoubtedly, also, our Saviour recognises the prophetic character of many of their ancient writers. So far, therefore, we are bound as Christians to go. But to make Christianity answerable, with its life, for the circumstantial truth of each separate passage of the Old Testament, the genuineness of every book, the information, fidelity, and judgment of every writer in it, is to bring, I will not say great, but unnecessary difficulties into the whole system. These books were universally read and received by the Jews of our Saviour's time. He and his apostles, in common with all other Jews, referred to them, alluded to them, used them. Yet, except where he expressly ascribes a divine authority to particular predictions, I do not know that we can strictly draw any conclusion from the books being so used and applied, beside the proof, which it unquestionably is, of their notoriety and reception at that time. In this view, our Scriptures afford a valuable testimony to those of the Jews. But the nature of this testimony ought to be understood. It is surely very different from what it is sometimes represented to be, a specific ratification of each particular fact and opinion; and not only of each particular fact, but of the motives assigned for every action, together with the judgment of

praise or dispraise bestowed upon them. Saint James, in his Epistle, says, "Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord." Notwithstanding this text, the reality of Job's history, and even the existence of such a person, have been always deemed a fair subject of inquiry and discussion amongst Christian divines. Saint James's authority is considered as good evidence of the existence of the book of Job at that time, and of its reception by the Jews; and of nothing more. Saint Paul, in his Second Epistle to Timothy, has this similitude: "Now, as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth." These names are not found in the Old Testament. And it is uncertain whether Saint Paul took them from some apocryphal writing then extant, or from tradition. But no one ever imagined that Saint Paul is here asserting the authority of the writing, if it was a written account which he quoted, or making himself answerable for the authenticity of the tradition; much less that he so involves himself with either of these questions as that the credit of his own history and mission should depend upon the fact whether Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses or not. For what reason a more rigorous interpretation should be put upon other references it is difficult to know. I do not mean, that other passages of the Jewish history stand upon no better evidence than the history of Job, or of Jannes and Jambres (I think much otherwise); but I mean, that a reference in the New Testament to a passage in the Old does not so fix its authority as to exclude all inquiry into its credibility, or into the separate reasons upon which that credibility is founded; and that it is an unwarrantable as well as unsafe rule to lay down concerning the Jewish history, what was never laid down concerning any other, that either every particular of it must be true, or the whole false.

I have thought it necessary to state this point explicitly, because a fashion, revived by Voltaire, and pursued by the disciples of his school, seems to have much prevailed of late, of attacking Christianity through the sides of Judaism. Some objections of this class are founded in misconstruction, some in exaggeration; but all proceed upon a supposition, which has not been made out by argument, viz. that the attestation which the Author and first teachers of Christianity gave to the divine mission of Moses and the prophets extends to every point and portion of the Jewish history; and so extends as to make Christianity responsible, in its own credibility, for the circumstantial truth (I had almost said for the critical exactness) of every narrative contained in the Old Testament.

CHAPTER IV.

REJECTION OF CHRISTIANITY.

We acknowledge that the Christian religion, although it converted great numbers, did not produce an universal, or even a general conviction in the minds of men of the age and countries in which it appeared. And this want of a more complete and extensive success is called the rejection of the Christian history and miracles; and has been thought by some to form a strong objection to the reality of the facts which the history contains.

The matter of the objection divides itself into two parts; as it relates to the Jews, and as it relates to Heathen nations: because the minds of these two descriptions of men may have been, with respect

to Christianity, under the influence of very different causes. The case of the Jews, inasmuch as our Saviour's ministry was originally addressed to them, offers itself first to our consideration.

Now upon the subject of the truth of the Christian religion; with us there is but one question, viz., whether the miracles were actually wrought? From acknowledging the miracles, we pass instantaneously to the acknowledgment of the whole. No doubt lies between the premises and the conclusion. If we believe the works of any one of them, we believe in Jesus. And this order of reasoning has become so universal and familiar that we do not readily apprehend how it could ever have been otherwise. Yet it appears to me perfectly certain, that the state of thought in the mind of a Jew of our Saviour's age was totally different from this. After allowing the reality of the miracle, he had a great deal to do to persuade himself that Jesus was the Messiah. This is clearly intimated by various passages of the Gospel history. It appears that, in the apprehension of the writers of the New Testament, the miracles did not irresistibly carry even those who saw them to the conclusion intended to be drawn from them; or so compel assent, as to leave no room for suspense, for the exercise of candour, or the effects of prejudice. And to this point, at least, the evangelists may be allowed to be good witnesses; because it is a point in which exaggeration or disguise would have been the other way. Their accounts, if they could be suspected of falsehood, would rather have magnified than diminished the effects of the miracles.

John vii. 21--31. "Jesus answered and said unto them, I have done one work, and ye all marvel.--If a man on the Sabbath-day receive circumcision, that the law of Moses should not be broken; are ye angry at me, because I have made a man every whit whole on the Sabbath-day? Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment. Then said some of them of Jerusalem, Is not this he whom they seek to kill? But lo, he speaketh boldly, and they say nothing to him: do the rulers know indeed that this is the very Christ? Howbeit we know this man, whence he is: but when Christ cometh, no man knoweth whence he is. Then cried Jesus in the temple as he taught, saying, Ye both know me, and ye know whence I am: and I am not come of myself, but He that sent me is true, whom ye know not. But I know Him, for I am from Him, and He hath sent me. Then they sought to take him: but no man laid hands on him, because his hour was not yet come. And many of the people believed on him and said, When Christ cometh, will he do more miracles than those which this man hath done?"

This passage is very observable. It exhibits the reasoning of different sorts of persons upon the occasion of a miracle which persons of all sorts are represented to have acknowledged as real. One sort of men thought that there was something very extraordinary in all this; but that still Jesus could not be the Christ, because there was a circumstance in his appearance which militated with an opinion concerning Christ in which they had been brought up, and of the truth of which, it is probable, they had never entertained a particle of doubt, viz. That "when Christ cometh, no man knoweth whence he is." Another sort were inclined to believe him to be the Messiah. But even these did not argue as we should; did not consider the miracle as of itself decisive of the question; as what, if once allowed, excluded all further debate upon the subject; but rounded their opinion upon a kind of comparative reasoning, "When Christ cometh, will he do more miracles than those which this man hath done?"

Another passage in the same evangelist, and observable for the same purpose, is that in which he relates the resurrection of Lazarus; "Jesus," he tells us (xi. 43, 44), "when he had thus spoken, cried

with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth: and he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go." One might have suspected, that at least all those who stood by the sepulchre, when Lazarus was raised, would have believed in Jesus. Yet the evangelist does not so represent it:--" Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him; but some of them went their Ways to the Pharisees, and told them what things Jesus had done." We cannot suppose that the evangelist meant by this account to leave his readers to imagine, that any of the spectators doubted about the truth of the miracle. Far from it. Unquestionably, he states the miracle to have been fully allowed; yet the persons who allowed it were, according to his representation, capable of retaining hostile sentiments towards Jesus. "Believing in Jesus" was not only to believe that he wrought miracles, but that he was the Messiah. With us there is no difference between these two things; with them there was the greatest; and the difference is apparent in this transaction. If Saint John has represented the conduct of the Jews upon this occasion truly (and why he should not I cannot tell, for it rather makes against him than for him), it shows clearly the principles upon which their judgment proceeded. Whether he has related the matter truly or not, the relation itself discovers the writer's own opinion of those principles: and that alone possesses considerable authority. In the next chapter, we have a reflection of the evangelist entirely suited to this state of the case: "But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet believed they not on him."(Chap. xii. 37.) The evangelist does not mean to impute the defect of their belief to any doubt about the miracles, but to their not perceiving, what all now sufficiently perceive, and what they would have perceived had not their understandings been governed by strong prejudices, the infallible attestation which the works of Jesus bore to the truth of his pretensions.

The ninth chapter of Saint John's Gospel contains a very circumstantial account of the cure of a blind man; a miracle submitted to all the scrutiny and examination which a sceptic could propose. If a modern unbeliever had drawn up the interrogatories, they could hardly have been more critical or searching. The account contains also a very curious conference between the Jewish rulers and the patient, in which the point for our present notice is, their resistance of the force of the miracle, and of the conclusion to which it led, after they had failed in discrediting its evidence. "We know that God spake unto Moses, but as for this fellow, we know not whence he is." That was the answer which set their minds at rest. And by the help of much prejudice, and great unwillingness to yield, it might do so. In the mind of the poor man restored to sight, which was under no such bias, and felt no such reluctance, the miracle had its natural operation. "Herein," says he, "is a marvellous thing, that ye know not from whence he is, yet he hath opened mine eyes. Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth. Since the world began, was it not heard, that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind. If this man were not of God, he could do nothing." We do not find that the Jewish rulers had any other reply to make to this defence, than that which authority is sometimes apt to make to argument, "Dost thou teach us?"

If it shall be inquired how a turn of thought, so different from what prevails at present, should obtain currency with the ancient Jews; the answer is found in two opinions which are proved to have subsisted in that age and country. The one was their expectation of a Messiah of a kind totally contrary to what the appearance of Jesus bespoke him to be; the other, their persuasion of the agency of demons in the production of supernatural effects. These opinions are not supposed by us

for the purpose of argument, but are evidently recognised in the Jewish writings as well as in ours. And it ought moreover to be considered, that in these opinions the Jews of that age had been from their infancy brought up; that they were opinions, the grounds of which they had probably few of them inquired into, and of the truth of which they entertained no doubt. And I think that these two opinions conjointly afford an explanation of their conduct. The first put them upon seeking out some excuse to themselves for not receiving Jesus in the character in which he claimed to be received; and the second supplied them with just such an excuse as they wanted. Let Jesus work what miracles he would, still the answer was in readiness, "that he wrought them by the assistance of Beelzebub." And to this answer no reply could be made, but that which our Saviour did make, by showing that the tendency of his mission was so adverse to the views with which this being was, by the objectors themselves, supposed to act, that it could not reasonably be supposed that he would assist in carrying it on. The power displayed in the miracles did not alone refute the Jewish solution, because the interposition of invisible agents being once admitted, it is impossible to ascertain the limits by which their efficiency is circumscribed. We of this day may be disposed possibly to think such opinions too absurd to have been ever seriously entertained. I am not bound to contend for the credibility of the opinions. They were at least as reasonable as the belief in witchcraft. They were opinions in which the Jews of that age had from their infancy been instructed; and those who cannot see enough in the force of this reason to account for their conduct towards our Saviour, do not sufficiently consider how such opinions may sometimes become very general in a country, and with what pertinacity, when once become so, they are for that reason alone adhered to. In the suspense which these notions and the prejudices resulting from them might occasion, the candid and docile and humble-minded would probably decide in Christ's favour; the proud and obstinate, together with the giddy and the thoughtless, almost universally against him.

This state of opinion discovers to us also the reason of what some choose to wonder at, why the Jews should reject miracles when they saw them, yet rely so much upon the tradition of them in their own history. It does not appear that it had ever entered into the minds of those who lived in the time of Moses and the prophets to ascribe their miracles to the supernatural agency of evil being. The solution was not then invented. The authority of Moses and the prophets being established, and become the foundation of the national polity and religion, it was not probable that the later Jews, brought up in a reverence for that religion, and the subjects of that polity, should apply to their history a reasoning which tended to overthrow the foundation of both.

II. The infidelity of the Gentile world, and that more especially of men of rank and learning in it, is resolvable into a principle which, in my judgment, will account for the inefficacy of any argument or any evidence whatever, viz. contempt prior to examination. The state of religion amongst the Greeks and Romans had a natural tendency to induce this disposition. Dionysius Halicarnassensis remarks, that there were six hundred different kinds of religions or sacred rites exercised at Rome. (Jortin's Remarks on Eccl. Hist. Vol. i. p. 371.) The superior classes of the community treated them all as fables. Can we wonder, then, that Christianity was included in the number, without inquiry into its separate merits, or the particular grounds of its pretensions? It might be either true or false for anything they knew about it. The religion had nothing in its character which immediately engaged their notice. It mixed with no politics. It produced no fine writers. It contained no curious speculations. When it did reach their knowledge, I doubt not but that it appeared to them a very strange system,--so unphilosophical,--dealing so little in argument and discussion, in such arguments however and discussions as they were accustomed to entertain. What

is said of Jesus Christ, of his nature, office, and ministry, would be in the highest degree alien from the conceptions of their theology. The Redeemer and the destined Judge of the human race a poor young man, executed at Jerusalem with two thieves upon a cross! Still more would the language in which the Christian doctrine was delivered be dissonant and barbarous to their ears. What knew they of grace, of redemption, of justification, of the blood of Christ shed for the sins of men, of reconciliation, of mediation? Christianity was made up of points they had never thought of; of terms which they had never heard.

It was presented also to the imagination of the learned Heathen under additional disadvantage, by reason of its real, and still more of its nominal, connexion with Judaism. It shared in the obloquy and ridicule with which that people and their religion were treated by the Greeks and Romans. They regarded Jehovah himself only as the idol of the Jewish nation, and what was related of him as of a piece with what was told of the tutelar deities of Other countries; nay, the Jews were in a particular manner ridiculed for being a credulous race; so that whatever reports of a miraculous nature came out of that country were looked upon by the Heathen world as false and frivolous. When they heard of Christianity, they heard of it as a quarrel amongst this people about some articles of their own superstition. Despising, therefore, as they did, the whole system, it was not probable that they would enter, with any degree of seriousness or attention, into the detail of its disputes or the merits of either side. How little they knew, and with what carelessness they judged of these matters, appears, I think, pretty plainly from an example of no less weight than that of Tacitus, who, in a grave and professed discourse upon the history of the Jews, states that they worshipped the effigy of an ass. (Tacit. Hist. lib. v. c. 2.) The passage is a proof how prone the learned men of those times were, and upon how little evidence, to heap together stories which might increase the contempt and odium in which that people was holden. The same foolish charge is also confidently repeated by Plutarch. (Sympos. lib. iv. quaest. 5.)

It is observable that all these considerations are of a nature to operate with the greatest force upon the highest ranks; upon men of education, and that order of the public from which writers are principally taken: I may add also upon the philosophical as well as the libertine character; upon the Antonines or Julian, not less than upon Nero or Domitian; and, more particularly, upon that large and polished class of men who acquiesced in the general persuasion, that all they had to do was to practise the duties of morality, and to worship the Deity more patriotically; a habit of thinking, liberal as it may appear, which shuts the door against every argument for a new religion. The considerations above mentioned would acquire also strength from the prejudices which men of rank and learning universally entertain against anything that originates with the vulgar and illiterate; which prejudice is known to be as obstinate as any prejudice whatever.

Yet Christianity was still making its way: and, amidst so many impediments to its progress, so much difficulty in procuring audience and attention, its actual success is more to be wondered at, than that it should not have universally conquered scorn and indifference, fixed the levity of a voluptuous age, or, through a cloud of adverse prejudications, opened for itself a passage to the hearts and understandings of the scholars of the age.

And the cause which is here assigned for the rejection of Christianity by men of rank and learning among the Heathens, namely, a strong antecedent contempt, accounts also for their silence concerning it. If they had rejected it upon examination, they would have written about it; they

would have given their reasons. Whereas, what men repudiate upon the strength of some prefixed persuasion, or from a settled contempt of the subject, of the persons who propose it, or of the manner in which it is proposed, they do not naturally write books about, or notice much in what they write upon other subjects.

The letters of the younger Pliny furnish an example of this silence, and let us, in some measure, into the cause of it. From his celebrated correspondence with Trajan, we know that the Christian religion prevailed in a very considerable degree in the province over which he presided; that it had excited his attention; that he had inquired into the matter just so much as a Roman magistrate might be expected to inquire, viz., whether the religion contained any opinions dangerous to government; but that of its doctrines, its evidences, or its books, he had not taken the trouble to inform himself with any degree of care or correctness. But although Pliny had viewed Christianity in a nearer position than most of his learned countrymen saw it in, yet he had regarded the whole with such negligence and disdain (further than as it seemed to concern his administration), that, in more than two hundred and forty letters of his which have come down to us, the subject is never once again mentioned. If, out of this number, the two letters between him and Trajan had been lost, with what confidence would the obscurity of the Christian religion have been argued from Pliny's silence about it, and with how little truth!

The name and character which Tacitus has given to Christianity, "exitiabilis superstitio" (a pernicious superstition), and by which two words he disposes of the whole question of the merits or demerits of the religion, afford a strong proof how little he knew, or concerned himself to know, about the matter. I apprehend that I shall not be contradicted, when I take upon me to assert, that no unbeliever of the present age would apply this epithet to the Christianity of the New Testament, or not allow that it was entirely unmerited. Read the instructions given by a great teacher of the religion to those very Roman converts of whom Tacitus speaks; and given also a very few years before the time of which he is speaking; and which are not, let it be observed, a collection of fine sayings brought together from different parts of a large work, but stand in one entire passage of a public letter, without the intermixture of a single thought which is frivolous or exceptionable:--" Abhor that which is evil, cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another, with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality. Bless them which persecute you; bless, and curse not. Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one towards another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord: therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for, in so doing, thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that

which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For, for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues; tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

"Owe no man anything, but to love one another; for he that loveth another, hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

"And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep ~ for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand; let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying."(Romans, xii. 9--xiii. 13.)

Read this, and then think of "exitabilis superstitio!" Or, if we be not allowed, in contending with Heathen authorities, to produce our books against theirs, we may at least be permitted to confront theirs with one another. Of this "pernicious superstition" what could Pliny find to blame, when he was led, by his office, to institute something like an examination into the conduct and principles of the sect? He discovered nothing but that they were wont to meet together on a stated day before it was light, and sing among themselves a hymn to Christ as a God, and to bind themselves by an oath, not to the commission of any wickedness, but, not to be guilty of theft, robbery, or adultery; never to falsify their word, nor to deny a pledge committed to them, when called upon to return it.

Upon the words of Tacitus we may build the following observations:

First; That we are well warranted in calling the view under which the learned men of that age beheld Christianity an obscure and distant view. Had Tacitus known more of Christianity, of its precepts, duties, constitution, or design, however he had discredited the story, he would have respected the principle. He would have described the religion differently, though he had rejected it. It has been very satisfactorily shown, that the "superstition" of the Christians consisted in worshipping a person unknown to the Roman calendar; and that the "perniciousness" with which they were reproached was nothing else but their opposition to the established polytheism; and this view of the matter was just such an one as might be expected to occur to a mind which held the sect in too much contempt to concern itself about the grounds and reasons of their conduct.

Secondly; We may from hence remark how little reliance can be placed upon the most acute judgments in subjects which they are pleased to despise; and which, of course, they from the first consider as unworthy to be inquired into. Had not Christianity survived to tell its own story, it must have gone down to posterity as a "pernicious superstition;" and that upon the credit of Tacitus's account, much, I doubt not, strengthened by the name of the writer, and the reputation of his sagacity.

Thirdly; That this contempt, prior to examination, is an intellectual vice, from which the greatest faculties of mind are not free. I know not, indeed, whether men of the greatest faculties of mind are not the most subject to it. Such men feel themselves seated upon an eminence. Looking down from their height upon the follies of mankind, they behold contending tenets wasting their idle strength upon one another with the common disdain of the absurdity of them all. This habit of thought, however comfortable to the mind which entertain it, or however natural to great parts, is extremely dangerous; and more apt than almost any other disposition to produce hasty and contemptuous, and, by consequence, erroneous judgments, both of persons and opinions.

Fourthly; We need not be surprised at many writers of that age not mentioning Christianity at all, when they who did mention it appear to have entirely misconceived its nature and character; and, in consequence of this misconception, to have regarded it with negligence and contempt.

To the knowledge of the greatest part of the learned heathens, the facts of the Christian history could only come by report. The books, probably, they had never looked into. The settled habit of their minds was, and long had been, an indiscriminate rejection of all reports of the kind. With these sweeping conclusions truth hath no chance. It depends upon distinction. If they would not inquire, how should they be convinced? It might be rounded in truth, though they, who made no search, might not discover it.

"Men of rank and fortune, of wit and abilities, are often found, even in Christian countries, to be surprisingly ignorant of religion, and of everything that relates to it. Such were many of the heathens. Their thoughts were all fixed upon other things; upon reputation and glory, upon wealth and power, upon luxury and pleasure, upon business or learning. They thought, and they had reason to think, that the religion of their country was fable and forgery, a heap of inconsistent lies; which inclined them to suppose that other religions were no better. Hence it came to pass, that when the apostles preached the Gospel, and wrought miracles in confirmation of a doctrine every way worthy of God, many Gentiles knew little or nothing of it, and would not take the least pains to inform themselves about it. This appears plainly from ancient history."(Jortin's Disc. on the Christ. Rel. p. 66, ed. 4th.)

I think it by no means unreasonable to suppose that the heathen public, especially that part which is made up of men of rank and education, were divided into two classes; these who despised Christianity beforehand, and those who received it. In correspondency with which division of character the writers of that age would also be of two classes; those who were silent about Christianity, and those who were Christians. "A good man, Who attended sufficiently to the Christian affairs, would become a Christian; after which his testimony ceased to be pagan and became Christian.(Hartley, Obs. p. 119.)

I must also add, that I think it sufficiently proved, that the notion of magic was resorted to by the heathen adversaries of Christianity, in like manner as that of diabolical agency had before been by the Jews. Justin Martyr alleges this as his reason for arguing from prophecy rather than from miracles. Origen imputes this evasion to Celsus; Jerome to Porphyry; and Lactantius to the heathen in general. The several passages which contain these testimonies will be produced in the next chapter. It being difficult, however, to ascertain in what degree this notion prevailed, especially the

superior ranks of the heathen communities, another, and think an adequate, cause has been assigned for their infidelity. It is probable that in many cases the two causes would together.

CHAPTER V.

THAT THE CHRISTIAN MIRACLES ARE NOT RECITED, OR APPEALED TO, BY EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS THEMSELVES SO FULLY OR FREQUENTLY AS MIGHT HAVE BEEN EXPECTED.

I SHALL consider this objection, first, as it applies to the letters of the apostles preserved in the New Testament; and secondly, as it applies to the remaining writings of other early Christians.

The epistles of the apostles are either hortatory or argumentative. So far as they were occupied in delivering lessons of duty, rules of public order, admonitions against certain prevailing corruptions, against vice, or any particular species of it, or in fortifying and encouraging the constancy of the disciples under the trials to which they were exposed, there appears to be no place or occasion for more of these references than we actually find.

So far as these epistles are argumentative, the nature of the argument which they handle accounts for the infrequency of these allusions. These epistles were not written to prove the truth of Christianity. The subject under consideration was not that which the miracles decided, the reality of our Lord's mission; but it was that which the miracles did not decide, the nature of his person or power, the design of his advent, its effects, and of those effects the value, kind, and extent. Still I maintain that miraculous evidence lies at the bottom of the argument. For nothing could be so preposterous as for the disciples of Jesus to dispute amongst themselves, or with others, concerning his office or character; unless they believed that he had shown, by supernatural proofs, that there was something extraordinary in both. Miraculous evidence, therefore, forming not the texture of these arguments, but the ground and substratum, if it be occasionally discerned, if it be incidentally appealed to, it is exactly so much as ought take place, supposing the history to be true.

As a further answer to the objection, that the apostolic epistles do not contain so frequent, or such direct and circumstantial recitals of miracles as might be expected, I would add, that the apostolic epistles resemble in this respect the apostolic speeches, which speeches are given by a writer who distinctly records numerous miracles wrought by these apostles themselves, and by the Founder of the institution in their presence; that it is unwarrantable to contend that the omission, or infrequency, of such recitals in the speeches of the apostles negatives the existence of the miracles, when the speeches are given in immediate conjunction with the history of those miracles: and that a conclusion which cannot be inferred from the speeches without contradicting the whole tenour of the book which contains them cannot be inferred from letters, which in this respect are similar only to the speeches.

To prove the similitude which we allege, it may be remarked, that although in Saint Luke's Gospel the apostle Peter is represented to have been present at many decisive miracles wrought by Christ; and although the second part of the same history ascribes other decisive miracles to Peter himself, particularly the cure of the lame man at the gate of the temple (Acts iii. 1), the death of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts v. 1), the cure of Aeneas (Acts ix. 34), the resurrection of Dorcas (Acts ix. 40); yet out of six speeches of Peter, preserved in the Acts, I know but two in which reference is made to the miracles wrought by Christ, and only one in which he refers to miraculous powers possessed by himself. In his speech upon the day of Pentecost, Peter addresses his audience with great solemnity thus: "Ye men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you, by miracles, and wonders, and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know:"(Acts ii. 22.) &c. In his speech upon the conversion of Cornelius, he delivers his testimony to the miracles performed by Christ in these words: "We are witnesses of all things which he did, both in the" land of the Jews and in Jerusalem."(Acts x. 39.) But in this latter speech no allusion appears to the miracles wrought by himself notwithstanding that the miracles above enumerated all preceded the time in which it was delivered. In his speech upon the election of Matthias,(Acts i. 15.) no distinct reference is made to any of the miracles of Christ's history except his resurrection. The same also may be observed of his speech upon the cure of the lame man at the gate of the temple;(Acts iii. 12.) the same in his speech before the Sanhedrim;(Acts iv. 8.) the same in his second apology in the presence of that assembly Stephen's long speech contains no reference whatever to miracles, though it be expressly related of him, in the book which preserves the speech, and almost immediately before the speech, "that he did great wonders and miracles among the people."(Acts vi. 8.) Again, although miracles be expressly attributed to Saint Paul in the Acts of the Apostles, first generally, as at Iconium (Acts xiv. 3), during the whole tour through the Upper Asia (xiv. 27; xv. 12), at Ephesus (xix. 11, 12); secondly, in specific instances, as the blindness of Elymas at Paphos,(Acts xiii. 11.) the cure of the cripple at Lystra,(Acts xiv. 8.) of the pythoness at Philippi,(Acts xvi. 16.) the miraculous liberation from prison in the same city,(Acts xvi. 26.) the restoration of Eutychus,(Acts xx. 10.) the predictions of his shipwreck,(Acts xxvii. 1.) the viper at Melita, the cure of Publius's father;(Acts xxvii. 8.) at all which miracles, except the first two, the historian himself was present: notwithstanding, I say, this positive ascription of miracles to St. Paul, yet in the speeches delivered by him, and given as delivered by him, in the same book in which the miracles are related, and the miraculous powers asserted, the appeals to his own miracles, or indeed to any miracles at all, are rare and incidental. In his speech at Antioch in Pisidia,(Acts xiii. 16.) there is no allusion but to the resurrection. In his discourse at Miletus,(Acts xx. 17.) none to any miracle: none in his speech before Felix;(Acts xxiv. 10.) none in his speech before Festus;(Acts xxv. 8.) except to Christ's resurrection and his own conversion.

Agreeably hereunto, in thirteen letters ascribed to Saint Paul, we have incessant references to Christ's resurrection, frequent references to his own conversion, three indubitable references to the miracles which he wrought;(Gal. iii. 5; Rom. xv. 18, 19; 2 Cor. xii. 12.) four other references to the same, less direct, yet highly probable;(1Cor. ii. 4,5; Eph. iii. 7; Gal. ii. 8; 1Thess. i. 8.) but more copious or circumstantial recitals we have not. The consent, therefore, between Saint Paul's speeches and letters is in this respect sufficiently exact; and the reason in both is the same, namely, that the miraculous history was all along presupposed, and that the question which occupied the speaker's and the writer's thoughts was this: whether, allowing the history of Jesus to be true, he

was, upon the strength of it, to be received as the promised Messiah; and, if he was, what were the consequences, what was the object and benefit of his mission?

The general observation which has been made upon the apostolic writings, namely, that the subject of which they treated did not lead them to any direct recital of the Christian history, belongs to the writings of the apostolic fathers. The epistle of Barnabas is, in its subject and general composition, much like the epistle to the Hebrews; an allegorical application of divers passages of the Jewish history, of their law and ritual, to those parts of the Christian dispensation in which the author perceived a resemblance. The epistle of Clement was written for the sole purpose of quieting certain dissensions that had arisen amongst the members of the church of Corinth, and of reviving in their minds that temper and spirit of which their predecessors in the Gospel had left them an example. The work of Hermas is a vision; quotes neither the Old Testament nor the New, and merely falls now and then into the language and the mode of speech which the author had read in our Gospels. The epistles of Polycarp and Ignatius had for their principal object the order and discipline of the churches which they addressed. Yet, under all these circumstances of disadvantage, the great points of the Christian history are fully recognised. This hath been shown in its proper place. (Vide supra, pp. 48-51. [Part 1, Chapter 8])

There is, however, another class of writers to whom the answer above given, viz. the unsuitableness of any such appeals or references as the objection demands to the subjects of which the writings treated, does not apply; and that is the class of ancient apologists, whose declared design it was to defend Christianity, and to give the reasons of their adherence to it. It is necessary, therefore, to inquire how the matter of the objection stands in these.

The most ancient apologist of whose works we have the smallest knowledge is Quadratus. Quadratus lived about seventy years 'after the ascension, and presented his apology to the Emperor Adrian. From a passage of this work, preserved in Eusebius, it appears that the author did directly and formally appeal to the miracles of Christ, and in terms as express and confident as we could desire. The passage (which has been once already stated) is as follows: "The works of our Saviour were always conspicuous, for they were real: both they that were healed, and they that were raised from the dead, were seen, not only when they were healed or raised, but for a long time afterwards; not only whilst he dwelled on this earth, but also after his departure, and for a good while after it; insomuch as that some of them have reached to our times," (Euseb. Hist. I. iv. c. 3.) Nothing can be more rational or satisfactory than this.

Justin Martyr, the next of the Christian apologists, whose work is not lost, and who followed Quadratus at the distance of about thirty years, has touched upon passages of Christ's history in so many places, that a tolerably complete account of Christ's life might be collected out of his works. In the following quotation he asserts the performance of miracles by Christ, in words as strong and positive as the language possesses: "Christ healed those who from their birth were blind, and deaf, and lame; causing, by his word, one to leap, another to hear, and a third to see; and having raised the dead, and caused them to live, he, by his works, excited attention, and induced the men of that age to know him: who, however, seeing these things done, said that it was a magical appearance, and dared to call him a magician, and a deceiver of the people." (Just. Dial. p. 258, ed. Thirlby.)

In his first apology, (Apolog. prim. p. 48, ib.) Justin expressly assigns the reason for his having recourse to the argument from prophecy, rather than alleging the miracles of the Christian history; which reason was, that the persons with whom he contended would ascribe these miracles to magic; "lest any of our opponents should say, What hinders, but that he who is called Christ by us, being a man sprung from men, performed the miracles which we attribute to him by magical art?" The suggestion of this reason meets, as I apprehend, the very point of the present objection; more especially when we find Justin followed in it by other writers of that age. Irenaeus, who came about forty years after him, notices the same evasion in the adversaries of Christianity, and replies to it by the same argument: "But if they shall say, that the Lord performed these things by an illusory appearance (phantasiados), leading these objectors to the prophecies, we will show from them, that all things were thus predicted concerning him, and Strictly came to pass." (Iren. I. ii. c. 57.) Lactantius, who lived a century lower, delivers the same sentiment upon the same occasion: "He performed miracles;--we might have supposed him to have been a magician, as ye say, and as the Jews then supposed, if all the prophets had not with one spirit foretold that Christ should perform these very things." (Lactant. v. 3.)

But to return to the Christian apologists in their order. Tertullian:--" That person whom the Jews had vainly imagined, from the meanness of his appearance, to be a mere man, they afterwards, in consequence of the power he exerted, considered as a magician, when he, with one word, ejected devils out of the bodies of men, gave sight to the blind, cleansed the leprous, strengthened the nerves of those that had the palsy, and lastly, with one command, restored the dead to life; when he, I say, made the very elements obey him, assuaged the storms, walked upon the seas, demonstrating himself to be the Word of God." (Tertul. Apolos. p. 20; ed. Priorii, Par. 1675.)

Next in the catalogue of professed apologists we may place Origen, who, it is well known, published a formal defence of Christianity, in answer to Celsus, a heathen, who had written a discourse against it. I know no expressions by which a plainer or more positive appeal to the Christian miracles can be made, than the expressions used by Origen; "Undoubtedly we do think him to be the Christ, and the Son of God, because he healed the lame and the blind; and we are the more confirmed in this persuasion by what is written in the prophecies: 'Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall hear, and the lame man shall leap as a hart.' But that he also raised the dead, and that it is not a fiction of those who wrote the Gospels, is evident from hence, that if it had been a fiction, there would have been many recorded to be raised up, and such as had been a long time in their graves. But, it not being a fiction, few have been recorded: for instance, the daughter of the ruler of a synagogue, of whom I do not know why he said, She is not dead, but sleepeth, expressing something peculiar to her, not common to all dead persons: and the only son of a widow, on whom he had compassion, and raised him to life, after he had bid the bearers of the corpse to stop; and the third, Lazarus, who had been buried four days." This is positively to assert the miracles of Christ, and it is also to comment upon them, and that with a considerable degree of accuracy and candour.

In another passage of the same author, we meet with the old solution of magic applied to the miracles of Christ by the adversaries of the religion. "Celsus," saith Origen, "well knowing what great works may be alleged to have been done by Jesus, pretends to grant that the things related of him are true; such as healing diseases, raising the dead, feeding multitudes with a few loaves, of which large fragments were left." (Orig. cont. Cels. lib. ii. sect. 48.) And then Celsus gives, it

seems, an answer to these proofs of our Lord's mission, which, as Origen understood it, resolved the phenomena into magic; for Origen begins his reply by observing, "You see that Celsus in a manner allows that there is such a thing as magic." (Lardner's Jewish and Heath. Test, vol. ii. p. 294, ed. 4to.)

It appears also from the testimony of St. Jerome, that Porphyry, the most learned and able of the heathen writers against Christianity, resorted to the same solution: "Unless," says he, speaking to Vigilantius, "according to the manner of the Gentiles and the profane, of Porphyry and Eunomius, you pretend that these are the tricks of demons." (Jerome cont. Vigil.)

This magic, these demons, this illusory appearance, this comparison with the tricks of jugglers, by which many of that age accounted so easily for the Christian miracles, and which answers the advocates of Christianity often thought it necessary to refute by arguments drawn from other topics, and particularly from prophecy (to which, it seems, these solutions did not apply), we now perceive to be gross subterfuges. That such reasons were ever seriously urged and seriously received, is only a proof what a gloss and varnish fashion can give to any opinion.

It appears, therefore, that the miracles of Christ, understood as we understand them in their literal and historical sense, were positively and precisely asserted and appealed to by the apologists for Christianity; which answers the allegation of the objection.

I am ready, however, to admit, that the ancient Christian advocates did not insist upon the miracles in argument so frequently as I should have done. It was their lot to contend with notions of magical agency, against which the mere production of the facts was not sufficient for the convincing of their adversaries: I do not know whether they themselves thought it quite decisive of the controversy. But since it is proved, I conceive with certainty, that the sparingness with which they appealed to miracles was owing neither to their ignorance nor their doubt of the facts, it is, at any rate, an objection not to the truth of the history, but to the judgment of its defenders.

CHAPTER VI.

WANT OF UNIVERSALITY IN THE KNOWLEDGE AND RECEPTION OF CHRISTIANITY, AND OF GREATER CLEARNESS IN THE EVIDENCE.

Or, a Revelation which really came from God, the proof, it has been said, would in all ages be so public and manifest, that no part of the human species would remain ignorant of it, no understanding could fail of being convinced by it.

The advocates of Christianity do not pretend that the evidence of their religion possesses these qualities. They do not deny that we can conceive it to be within the compass of divine power to have communicated to the World a higher degree of assurance, and to have given to his communication a stronger and more extensive influence. For anything we are able to discern, God could have so formed men, as to have perceived the truths of religion intuitively; or to have carried

on a communication with the other world whilst they lived in this; or to have seen the individuals of the species, instead of dying, pass to heaven by a sensible translation. He could have presented a separate miracle to each man's senses. He could have established a standing miracle. He could have caused miracles to be wrought in every different age and country. The and many more methods, which we may imagine if we once give loose to our imaginations, are, so far as we can judge, all practicable.

The question therefore is, not whether Christianity possesses the highest possible degree of evidence, but whether the not having more evidence be a sufficient reason for rejecting that which we have.

Now there appears to be no fairer method of judging concerning any dispensation which is alleged to come from God, when question is made whether such a dispensation could come God or not, than by comparing it with other things which acknowledged to proceed from the same counsel, and to produced by the same agency. If the dispensation in question labour under no defects but what apparently belong to dispensations, these seeming defects do not justify us in setting aside the proofs which are offered of its authenticity, if they otherwise entitled to credit.

Throughout that order then of nature, of which God is the author, what we find is a system of beneficence: we are or never able to make out a system of optimism. I mean, there are few cases in which, if we permit ourselves to range in possibilities, we cannot suppose something more perfect, and, more unobjectionable, than what we see. The rain which descends from heaven is confessedly amongst the contrivances of the Creator for the sustentation of the animals and vegetables which subsist upon the surface of the earth. Yet how partially: and irregularly is it supplied! How much of it falls upon sea, where it can be of no use! how often is it wanted where it would be of the greatest! What tracts of continent are rendered deserts by the scarcity of it ! Or, not to speak of extreme cases, how much sometimes do inhabited countries suffer by its deficiency or delay!--We could imagine, if to imagine were our business, the matter to be otherwise regulated. We could imagine showers to fall just where and when they would do good; always seasonable, everywhere sufficient; so distributed as not to leave a field upon the face of the globe scorched by drought or even a plant withering for the lack of moisture. Yet, does the difference between the real case and the imagined case, or the seeming inferiority of the one to the other, authorise us to say, that the present disposition of the atmosphere is not amongst the productions or the designs of the Deity? Does it check the inference which we draw from the confessed beneficence of the provision? or does it make us cease to admire the contrivance? The observation which we have exemplified in the single instance of the rain of heaven may be repeated concerning most of the phenomena of nature; and the true conclusion to which it leads is this--that to inquire what the Deity might have done, could have done, or, as we even sometimes presume to speak, ought to have done, or, in hypothetical cases, would have done; and to build any propositions upon such inquiries against evidence of facts, is wholly unwarrantable. It is a mode of reasoning which will not do in natural history, which will not do in natural religion, which cannot therefore be applied with safety to revelation. It may have same foundation in certain speculative a priori ideas of the divine attributes, but it has none in experience or in analogy. The general character of the works of nature is, on the one hand, goodness both in design and effect; and, on the other hand, a liability to difficulty and to objections, if such objections be allowed, by reason of seeming incompleteness or uncertainty in attaining their end. Christianity participates of this character. The true similitude between nature and revelation

consists in this--that they each bear strong marks of their original, that they each also bear appearances of irregularity and defect. A system of strict optimism may, nevertheless, be the real system in both cases. But what I contend is, that the proof is hidden from us; that we ought not to expect to perceive that in revelation which we hardly perceive in anything; that beneficence, of which we can judge, ought to satisfy us that optimism, of which we cannot judge, ought not to be sought after. We can judge of beneficence, because it depends upon effects which we experience, and upon the relation between the means which we see acting and the ends which we see produced. We cannot judge of optimism because it necessarily implies a comparison of that which is tried with that which is not tried; of consequences which we see with others which we imagine, and concerning many of which, it is more than probable, we know nothing; concerning some that we have no notion.

If Christianity be compared with the state and progress of natural religion, the argument of the objector will gain nothing by the comparison. I remember hearing an unbeliever say 'that, if God had given a revelation, he would have written it in the skies. Are the truths of natural religion written in the skies, or in a language which every one reads? or is this the case with the most useful arts, or the most necessary sciences of human life? An Otaheitean or an Esquimaux knows nothing of Christianity; does he know more of the principles of deism or morality? which, notwithstanding his ignorance, are neither untrue, nor unimportant, nor uncertain. The existence of Deity is left to be collected from observations, which every one does not make, which every man, perhaps, is not capable of making. Can it be argued that God does not exist if he did, he would let us see him, or discover himself to mankind by proofs (such as, we may think, the nature of the subject merited) which no inadvertency could miss, no prejudice withstand?

If Christianity be regarded as a providential instrument the melioration of mankind, its progress and diffusion that of other causes by which human life is improved diversity is not greater, nor the advance more slow, in than we find it to be in learning, liberty, government, laws. The Deity hath not touched the order of nature in vain. The Jewish religion produced great and permanent effects; the Christian religion hath done the same. It hath disposed the world to amendment: it hath put things in a train. It is by no means improbable that it may become universal; and that the world may continue in that stage so long as that the duration of its reign may bear a vast proportion to the time of its partial influence.

When we argue concerning Christianity, that it must necessarily be true because it is beneficial, we go, perhaps, too far on one side; and we certainly go too far on the other when we conclude that it must be false because it is not so efficacious as we could have supposed. The question of its truth is to be tried upon its proper evidence, without deferring much to this sort of argument on either side. "The evidence," as Bishop Butler hath rightly observed, "depends upon the judgment we form of human conduct, under given circumstances, of which it may be presumed that we know something; the objection stands upon the supposed conduct of the Deity, under relations with which we are not acquainted."

What would be the real effect of that overpowering evidence which our adversaries require in a revelation it is difficult to foretell; at least we must speak of it as of a dispensation which we have no experience. Some consequences, however, would, it is probable, attend this economy, which do not seem to befit a revelation that proceeded from God. One is, that irresistible proof would restrain the

voluntary powers too much; would not answer the purpose of trial and probation; would call for no exercise of candour, seriousness, humility, inquiry, no submission of passion, interests, and prejudices, to moral evidence and to probable truth; no habits of reflection; none of that previous desire to learn and to obey the will of God, which forms perhaps the test of the virtuous principle, and which induces men to attend, with care and reverence, to every credible intimation of that will, and to resign present advantages and present pleasures to every reasonable expectation of propitiating his favour. "Men's moral probation may be, whether they will take due care to inform themselves by impartial consideration; and, afterwards, whether they will act, as the case requires, upon the evidence which they have. And this we find by experience is often our probation in our temporal capacity." (Butler's Analogy, part ii. c. 6.)

II. These modes of communication would leave no place for the admission of internal evidence; which ought, perhaps, to bear a considerable part in the proof of every revelation, because it is a species of evidence which applies itself to the knowledge, love, and practice, of virtue, and which operates in proportion to the degree of those qualities which it finds in the person whom it addresses. Men of good dispositions, amongst Christians, are greatly affected by the impression which the Scriptures themselves make upon their minds. Their conviction is much strengthened by these impressions. And this perhaps was intended to be one effect to be produced by the religion. It is likewise true, to whatever cause we ascribe it (for I am not in this work at liberty to introduce the Christian doctrine of grace or assistance, or the Christian promise that, "if any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God" John vii. 17.),--it is true, I say, that they who sincerely act, or sincerely endeavour to act, according to what they believe, that is, according to the just result of the probabilities, or, if you please, the possibilities in natural and revealed religion, which they themselves perceive, and according to a rational estimate of consequences, and, above all, according to the just effect of those principles of gratitude and devotion which even the view of nature generates in a well-ordered mind, seldom fail of proceeding farther. This also may have been exactly what was designed.

Whereas, may it not be said that irresistible evidence would confound all characters and all dispositions? would subvert rather than promote the true purpose of the Divine counsels; which is, not to produce obedience by a force little short of mechanical constraint. (which obedience would be regularity, not virtue, and would hardly perhaps differ from that which inanimate bodies pay to the laws impressed upon their nature), but to treat moral agents agreeably to what they are; which is done, when light and motives are of such kinds, and are imparted in such measures, that the influence of them depends upon the recipients themselves? "It is not meet to govern rational free agents in via by sight and sense. It would be no trial or thanks to the most sensual wretch to forbear sinning, if heaven and hell were open to his sight. That spiritual vision and fruition is our state in patria." (Baxter's Reasons, p. 357.) There may be truth in this thought, though roughly expressed. Few things are more improbable than that we (the human species) should be the highest order of beings in the universe: that animated nature should ascend from the lowest reptile to us, and all at once stop there. If there be classes above us of rational intelligences, clearer manifestations may belong to them. This may be one of the distinctions. And it may be one to which we ourselves hereafter shall attain.

III. But may it not also be asked, whether the perfect display of a future state of existence would be compatible with the activity of civil life, and with the success of human affairs? I can easily conceive that this impression may be overdone; that it may so seize and fill the thoughts as to leave no place for the cares and offices of men's several stations, no anxiety for worldly prosperity, or even for a worldly provision, and, by consequence, no sufficient stimulus to secular industry. Of the first Christians we read, "that all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need; and continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart"(Acts ii. 44-46.) This was extremely natural, and just what might be expected from miraculous evidence coming with full force upon the senses of mankind: but I much doubt whether, if this state of mind had been universal, or long-continued, the business of the world could have gone on. The necessary art of social life would have been little cultivated. The plough and the loom would have stood still. Agriculture, manufactures, trade, and navigation, would not, I think, have flourished, if they could have been exercised at all. Men would have addicted themselves to contemplative and ascetic lives, instead of lives of business and of useful industry. We observe that St. Paul found it necessary frequently to recall his converts to the ordinary labours and domestic duties of their condition; and to give them, in his own example, a lesson of contented application to their worldly employments.

By the manner in which the religion is now proposed, a great portion of the human species is enabled and of these multitudes of every generation are induced, to seek and effectuate their salvation through the medium of Christianity, without interruption of the prosperity or of the regular course of human affairs.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SUPPOSED EFFECTS OF CHRISTIANITY.

That a religion which under every form in which it is taught holds forth the final reward of virtue and punishment of vice, and proposes those distinctions of virtue and vice which the wisest and most cultivated part of mankind confess to be just, should not be believed, is very possible; but that, so far as it is believed, it should not produce any good, but rather a bad effect upon public happiness, is a proposition which it requires very strong evidence to render credible. Yet many have been found to contend for this paradox, and very confident appeals have been made to history and to observation for the truth of it.

In the conclusions, however, which these writers draw from what they call experience, two sources, I think, of mistake may be perceived.

One is, that they look for the influence of religion in the wrong place.

The other, that they charge Christianity with many consequences for which it is not responsible.

I. The influence of religion is not to be sought for in the councils of princes, in the debates or resolutions of popular assemblies, in the conduct of governments towards their subjects, of states and sovereigns towards one another; of conquerors at the head of their armies, or of parties intriguing for power at home (topics which alone almost occupy the attention, and fill the pages of history); but must be perceived, if perceived at all, in the silent course of private and domestic life. Nay, even there its influence may not be very obvious to observation. If it check, in some degree, personal dissoluteness, if it beget general probity in the transaction of business, if it produce and humane manners in the mass of the community, and occasional exertions of laborious or expensive benevolence in individuals, it is all the effect which can offer itself to notice. The kingdom of heaven is within us. That which the substance of the religion, its hopes and consolation, its intermixture with the thoughts by day and by night, the of the heart, the control of appetite, the steady direction of will to the commands of God, is necessarily invisible. Yet these depend the virtue and the happiness of millions. This cause renders the representations of history, with respect to religion, defect and fallacious in a greater degree than they are upon any other subject. Religion operates most upon those of whom history knows the least; upon fathers and mothers their families, upon men-servants and maid-servants, upon orderly tradesman, the quiet villager, the manufacturer at his loom, the husbandman in his fields. Amongst such, its collectively may be of inestimable value, yet its effects, in mean time, little upon those who figure upon the stage of world. They may know nothing of it; they may believe nothing of it; they may be actuated by motives more impetuous than those which religion is able to excite. It cannot, be thought strange that this influence should elude the grasp and touch of public history; for what is public history but register of the successes and disappointments, the vices, the follies, and the quarrels, of those who engage in contentions power?

I will add, that much of this influence may be felt in public distress, and little of it in times of public wealth and security. This also increases the uncertainty of any opinions that we draw from historical representations. The influence of Christianity is commensurate with no effects which history states. We do not pretend that it has any such necessary and irresistible power over the affairs of nations as to surmount the force of other causes.

The Christian religion also acts upon public usages and institutions, by an operation which is only secondary and indirect. Christianity is not a code of civil law. It can only reach public institutions through private character. Now its influence upon private character may be considerable, yet many public usages and institutions repugnant to its principles may remain. To get rid of these, the reigning part of the community must act, and act together. But it may be long before the persons who compose this body be sufficiently touched with the Christian character to join in the suppression of practices to which they and the public have been reconciled by causes which will reconcile the human mind to anything, by habit and interest. Nevertheless, the effects of Christianity, even in this view, have been important. It has mitigated the conduct of war, and the treatment of captives. It has softened the administration of despotic, or of nominally despotic governments. It has abolished polygamy. It has restrained the licentiousness of divorces. It has put an end to the exposure of children and the immolation of slaves. It has suppressed the combats of gladiators,* and the impurities of religions rites. It has banished, if not unnatural vices, at least the toleration of them. It has greatly meliorated the condition of the laborious part, that is to say, of the mass of every community, by procuring for them a day of weekly rest. In all countries in which it is professed it has produced numerous establishments for the relief of sickness and poverty; and in

some, a regular and general provision by law. It has triumphed over the slavery established in the Roman empire: it is contending, and I trust will one day prevail, against the worse slavery of the West Indies.

* Lipsius affirms (Sat. b. i. c. 12) that the gladiatorial shows sometimes cost Europe twenty or thirty thousand lives in a month; and that not only the men, but even the women of all ranks were passionately fond of these shows. See Bishop Porteus, Sermon XIII.

A Christian writer, (Bardesanes, ap. Euseb. Praep. Evang. vi. 10.) so early as in the second century, has testified the resistance which Christianity made to wicked and licentious practices though established by law and by public usage:--" Neither in Parthia do the Christians, though Parthians, use polygamy; nor in Persia, though Persians, do they marry their own daughters; nor among the Bactri, or Galli, do they violate the sanctity of marriage; nor wherever they are, do they suffer themselves to be overcome by ill-constituted laws and manners."

Socrates did not destroy the idolatry of Athens, or produce the slightest revolution in the manners of his country.

But the argument to which I recur is, that the benefit of religion, being felt chiefly in the obscurity of private stations, necessarily escapes the observation of history. From the first general notification of Christianity to the present day, there have been in every age many millions, whose names were never heard of, made better by it, not only in their conduct, but in their disposition; and happier, not so much in their external circumstances, as in that which is inter praecordia, in that which alone deserves the name of happiness, the tranquillity and consolation of their thoughts. It has been since its commencement the author of happiness and virtue to millions and millions of the human race. Who is there that would not wish his son to be a Christian?

Christianity also, in every country in which it is professed, hath obtained a sensible, although not a complete influence upon the public judgment of morals. And this is very important. For without the occasional correction which public opinion receives, by referring to some fixed standard of morality, no man can foretel into what extravagances it might wander. Assassination might become as honourable as duelling: unnatural crimes be accounted as venal as fornication is wont to be accounted. In this way it is possible that many may be kept in order by Christianity who are not themselves Christians. They may be guided by the rectitude which it communicates to public opinion. Their consciences may suggest their duty truly, and they may ascribe these suggestions to a moral sense, or to the native capacity of the human intellect, when in fact they are nothing more than the public opinion, reflected from their own minds; and opinion, in a considerable degree, modified by the lessons of Christianity. "Certain it is, and this is a great deal to say, that the generality, even of the meanest and most vulgar and ignorant people, have truer and worthier notions of God more just and right apprehensions concerning his attributes and perfections, a deeper sense of the difference of good and evil, a greater regard to moral obligations, and to the plain and most necessary duties of life, and a more firm and universal expectation of a future state of rewards and punishments, than in any heathen country any considerable number of men were have had." (Clarke, Ev. Nat. Rel. p. 208. ed. v.)

After all, the value of Christianity is not to be appreciated by its temporal effects. The object of revelation is to influence human conduct in this life; but what is gained to happiness by that influence can only be estimated by taking in the whole of human existence. Then, as hath already been observed, there may be also great consequences of Christianity which do not belong to it as a revelation. The effects upon human, salvation of the mission, of the death, of the present, of the future agency of Christ, may be universal, though the religion be not universally known.

Secondly, I assert that Christianity is charged with many consequences for which it is not responsible. I believe that religious motives have had no more to do in the formation of nine tenths of the intolerant and persecuting laws which in different countries have been established upon the subject of religion, than they have had to do in England with the making of the game-laws. These measures, although they have the Christian religion for their subject, are resolvable into a principle which Christianity certainly did not plant (and which Christianity could not universally condemn, because it is not universally wrong), which principle is no other than this, that they who are in possession of power do what they can to keep it. Christianity is answerable for no part of the mischief which has been brought upon the world by persecution, except that which has arisen from conscientious persecutors. Now these perhaps have never been either numerous or powerful. Nor is it to Christianity that even their mistake can fairly be imputed. They have been misled by an error not properly Christian or religious, but by an error in their moral philosophy. They pursued the particular, without adverting to the general consequence. Believing certain articles of faith, or a certain mode of worship, to be highly conducive, or perhaps essential, to salvation, they thought themselves bound to bring all they could, by every means, into them, and this they thought, without considering what would be the effect of such a conclusion when adopted amongst mankind as a general rule of conduct. Had there been in the New Testament, what there are in the Koran, precepts authorising coercion in the propagation of the religion, and the use of violence towards unbelievers, the case would have been different. This distinction could not have been taken, nor this defence made.

I apologise for no species nor degree of persecution, but I think that even the fact has been exaggerated. The slave-trade destroys more in a year than the Inquisition does in a hundred or perhaps hath done since its foundation.

If it be objected, as I apprehend it will be, that Christianity is chargeable with every mischief of which it has been the occasion, though not the motive; I answer that, if the malevolent passions be there, the world will never want occasions. The noxious element will always find a conductor. Any point will produce an explosion. Did the applauded intercommunity of the pagan theology preserve the peace of the Roman world? did it prevent oppressions, proscriptions, massacres, devastation? Was it bigotry that carded Alexander into the East, or brought Csesar into Gaul? Are the nations of the world into which Christianity hath not found its way, or from which it hath been banished, free from contentions? Are their contentions less ruinous and sanguinary? Is it owing to Christianity, or to the want of it, that the regions of the East, the countries inter quatuor maria, peninsula of Greece, together with a great part of the Mediterranean coast, are at this day a desert? or that the banks of the Nile, whose constantly renewed fertility is not to be impaired by neglect, or destroyed by the ravages of war, serve only for the scene of a ferocious anarchy, or the supply of unceasing hostilities? Europe itself has known no religious wars for some centuries, yet has hardly ever been without war. Are the calamities which at this day afflict it to be imputed to Christianity? Hath

Poland fallen by a Christian crusade? Hath the overthrow in France of civil order and security been effected by the votaries of our religion, or by the foes? Amongst the awful lessons which the crimes and the miseries of that country afford to mankind this is one; that in order to be a persecutor it is not necessary to be a bigot: that in rage and cruelty, in mischief and destruction, fanaticism itself can be outdone by infidelity.

Finally, If war, as it is now carried on between nations produce less misery and ruin than formerly, we are indebted perhaps to Christianity for the change more than to any other cause. Viewed therefore even in its relation to this subject, it appears to have been of advantage to the world. It hath humanised the conduct of wars; it hath ceased to excite them.

The differences of opinion that have in all ages prevailed amongst Christians fall very much within the alternative which has been stated. If we possessed the disposition which Christianity labours, above all other qualities, to inculcate, these differences would do little harm. If that disposition be wanting, other causes, even were these absent, would continually rise up to call forth the malevolent passions into action. Differences of opinion, when accompanied with mutual charity, which Christianity forbids them to violate, are for the most part innocent, and for some purposes useful. They promote inquiry, discussion, and knowledge. They help to keep up an attention to religious subjects, and a concern about them, which might be apt to die away in the calm and silence of universal agreement I do not know that it is in any degree true that the influence of religion is the greatest where there are the fewest dissenters.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CONCLUSION,

IN religion, as in every other subject of human reasoning, much depends upon the order in which we dispose our inquiries. A man who takes up a system of divinity with a previous opinion that either every part must be true or the whole false, approaches the discussion with great disadvantage. No other system, which is rounded upon moral evidence, would bear to be treated in the same manner. Nevertheless, in a certain degree, we are all introduced to our religious studies under this prejudication. And it cannot be avoided. The weakness of the human judgment in the early part of youth, yet its extreme susceptibility of impression, renders it necessary to furnish it with some opinions, and with some principles or other. Or indeed, without much express care, or much endeavour for this purpose, the tendency of the mind of man to assimilate itself to the habits of thinking and speaking which prevail around him, produces the same effect. That indifferency and suspense, that waiting and equilibrium of the judgment, which some require in religious matters, and which some would wish to be aimed at in the conduct of education, are impossible to be preserved. They are not given to the condition of human life.

It is a consequence of this institution that the doctrines of religion come to us before the proofs; and come to us with that mixture of explications and inferences from which no public creed is, or can be, free. And the effect which too frequently follows, from Christianity being presented to the understanding in this form, is, that when any articles, which appear as parts of it, contradict the

apprehension of the persons to whom it is proposed, men of rash and confident tempers hastily and indiscriminately reject the whole. But is this to do justice, either to themselves or to the religion? The rational way of treating a subject of such acknowledged importance is, to attend, in the first place, to the general and substantial truth of its principles, and to that alone. When we once feel a foundation; when we once perceive a Foundation of credibility in its history; we shall proceed with safety to inquire into the interpretation of its records, and into the doctrines which have been deduced from them. Nor will it either endanger our faith, or diminish or alter our motives for obedience, if we should discover that these conclusions are formed with very different degrees of probability, and possess very different degrees of importance.

This conduct of the understanding, dictated by every rule of right reasoning, will uphold personal Christianity, even in those countries in which it is established under forms the most liable to difficulty and objection. It will also have the further effect of guarding us against the prejudices which are wont to arise in our minds to the disadvantage of religion, from observing the numerous controversies which are carried on amongst its professors; and likewise of inducing a spirit of lenity and moderation in our judgment, as well as in our treatment of those who stand, in such controversies, upon sides opposite to ours. What is clear in Christianity we shall find to be sufficient, and to be infinitely valuable; what is dubious, unnecessary to be decided, or of very subordinate importance, and what is most obscure, will teach us to bear with the opinions which others may have formed upon the same subject. We shall say to those who the most widely dissent from us, what Augustine said to the worst heretics of his age; "*Illi in vos saeviant, qui nasciunt, cum quo labore verum inveniatur, et quam difficile caveantur errores;---qui nesciunt, cure quanta difficultate sanetur oculus interioris hominis;--qui nesciunt, quibus suspiriis et gemitibus fiat ut ex quantulacumque parte possit intelligi Deus.*" (Aug. contra. Ep. Fund. Cap. ii. n. 2,3.)

A judgment, moreover, which is once pretty well satisfied of the general truth of the religion will not only thus discriminate in its doctrines, but will possess sufficient strength to overcome the reluctance of the imagination to admit articles of faith which are attended with difficulty of apprehension, if such articles of faith appear to be truly parts of the revelation. It was to be expected beforehand, that what related to the economy and to the persons of the invisible world, which revelation profess to do, and which, if true, it actually does, should contain some points remote from our analogies, and from the comprehension of a mind which hath acquired all its ideas from sense and from experience.

It hath been my care in the preceding work to preserve the separation between evidences and doctrines as inviolable as I could; to remove from the primary question all considerations which have been unnecessarily joined with it; and to offer a defence to Christianity which every Christian might read without seeing the tenets in which he had been brought up attacked or decried: and it always afforded a satisfaction to my mind to observe that this was practicable; that few or none of our many controversies with one another affect or relate to the proofs of our religion; that the rent never descends to the foundation.

The truth of Christianity depends upon its leading facts, and upon them alone. Now of these we have evidence which ought to satisfy us, at least until it appear that mankind have ever been deceived by the same. We have some uncontested and incontestable points, to which the history of the human species hath nothing similar to offer. A Jewish peasant changed the religion of the

world, and that without force, without power, without support; without one natural source or circumstance of attraction, influence, or success. Such a thing hath not happened in any other instance. The companions of this Person, after he himself had been put to death for his attempt, asserted his supernatural character, rounded upon his supernatural operations: and, in testimony of the truth of their assertions, i.e. in consequence of their own belief of that truth, and in order to communicate the knowledge of it to others, voluntarily entered upon lives of toil and hardship, and, with a full experience of their danger, committed themselves to the last extremities of persecution. This hath not a parallel. More particularly, a very few days after this Person had been publicly executed, and in the very city in which he was buried, these his companions declared with one voice that his body was restored to life: that they had seen him, handled him, ate with him, conversed with him; and, in pursuance of their persuasion of the truth of what they told, preached his religion, with this strange fact as the foundation of it, in the face of those who had killed him, who were armed with the power of the country, and necessarily and naturally disposed to treat his followers as they had treated himself; and having done this upon the spot where the event took place, carried the intelligence of it .abroad, in despite of difficulties and opposition, and where the nature of their errand gave them nothing to expect but derision, insult, and outrage.--This is without example. These three facts, I think, are certain, and would have been nearly so, if the Gospels had never been written. The Christian story, as to these points, hath never varied. No other hath been set up against it. Every letter, every discourse, every controversy, amongst the followers of the religion; every book written by them from the age of its commencement to the present time, in every part of the world in which it hath been professed, and with every sect into which it hath been divided (and we have letters and discourses written by contemporaries, by witnesses of the transaction, by persons themselves bearing a share in it, and other writings following that again regular succession), concur in representing these facts in this manner. A religion which now possesses the greatest part of the civilised world unquestionably sprang up at Jerusalem at this time. Some account must be given of its origin; some cause assigned for its rise. All the accounts of this origin, all the explications of this cause, whether taken from the writings of the early followers of the religion (in which, and in which perhaps alone, it could be expected that they should be distinctly unfolded), or from occasional notices in other writings of that or the adjoining age, tither expressly allege the facts above stated as the means by which the religion was set up, or advert to its commencement in a manner which agrees with the supposition of these facts being true, and which testifies their operation and effects.

These prepositions alone lay a foundation for our faith; for they prove the existence of a transaction which cannot even, in its most general parts, be accounted for upon any reasonable supposition, except that of the truth of the mission. But the particulars, the detail of the miracles or miraculous pretences (for such there necessarily must have been) upon which this unexampled transaction rested, and for which these men acted and suffered as they did act and suffer, it is undoubtedly of great importance to us to know. We have this detail from the fountain-head, from the persons themselves; in accounts written by eye-witnesses of the scene, by contemporaries and companions of those who were so; not in one book but four, each containing enough for the verification of the religion, all agreeing in the fundamental parts of the history. We have the authenticity of these books established by more and stronger proofs than belong to almost any other ancient book whatever, and by proofs which widely distinguish them from any others claiming a similar authority to theirs. If there were any good reason for doubt concerning the names to which these books are ascribed (which there is not, for they were never ascribed to any other, and we have

evidence not long after their publication of their bearing the names which they now bear); their antiquity, of which there is no question, their reputation and authority amongst the early disciples of the religion, of which there is as little, form a valid proof that they must, in the main at least, have agreed with what the first teachers of the religion delivered.

When we open these ancient volumes, we discover in them marks of truth, whether we consider each in itself, or collate them with one another. The writers certainly knew something of what they were writing about, for they manifest an acquaintance with local circumstances, with the history and usages of the times, which could belong only to an inhabitant of that country, living in that age. In every narrative we perceive simplicity and undesignedness; the air and the language of reality. When we compare the different narratives together, we find them so varying as to repel all suspicion of confederacy; so agreeing under this variety as to show that the accounts had one real transaction for their common foundation; often attributing different actions and discourses to the Person whose history, or rather memoirs of whose history, they profess to relate, yet actions and discourses so similar as very much to bespeak the same character: which is a coincidence that, in such writers as they were, could only be the consequence of their writing from fact, and not from imagination.

These four narratives are confined to the history of the Founder of the religion, and end with his ministry. Since, however, it is certain that the affair went on, we cannot help being anxious to know how it proceeded. This intelligence hath come down to us in a work purporting to be written by a person, himself connected with the business during the first stages of its progress, taking up the story where the former histories had left it, carrying on the narrative, oftentimes with great particularity, and throughout with the appearance of good sense,* information and candour; stating all along the origin, and the only probable origin, of effects which unquestionably were produced, together with the natural consequences of situations which unquestionably did exist; and confirmed, in the substance at least of the account, by the strongest possible accession of testimony which a history can receive, original letters, written by the person who is the principal subject of the history, written upon the business to which the history relates, and during the period, or soon after the period, which the history comprises. No man can say that this all together is not a body of strong historical evidence.

* See Peter's speech upon curing the cripple (Acts iii. 18), the council of the apostles (xv.), Paul's discourse at Athens (xvii. 22), before Agrippa (xxvi.). I notice these passages, both as fraught with good sense and as free from the smallest tincture of enthusiasm.

When we reflect that some of those from whom the books proceeded are related to have themselves wrought miracles, to bare been the subject of miracles, or of supernatural assistance in propagating the religion, we may perhaps be led to think that more credit, or a different kind of credit, is due to these accounts, than what can be claimed by merely human testimony. But this is an argument which cannot be addressed to sceptics or unbelievers. A man must be a Christian before he can receive it. The inspiration of the historical Scriptures, the nature, degree, and extent of that inspiration, are questions undoubtedly of serious discussion; but they are questions amongst Christians themselves, and not between them and others. The doctrine itself is by no means

necessary to the belief of Christianity, which must, in the first instance at least, depend upon the ordinary maxim of historical credibility. (See Powell's Discourse, disc. xv. P. 245.)

In viewing the detail of miracles recorded in these books, we find every supposition negated by which they can be resolved into fraud or delusion. They were not secret, nor momentary, nor tentative, nor ambiguous; nor performed under the sanction of authority, with the spectators on their side, or in affirmance of tenets and practices already established. We find also the evidence alleged for them, and which evidence was by great numbers received, different from that upon which other miraculous accounts rest. It was contemporary, it was published upon the spot, it continued; it involved interests and questions of the greatest magnitude; it contradicted the most fixed persuasions and prejudices of the persons to whom it was addressed; it required from those who accepted it, not a simple, indolent assent, but a change, from thenceforward, of principles and conduct, a submission to consequences the most serious and the most deterring, to loss and danger, to insult, outrage, and persecution. How such a story should be false, or, if false, how under such circumstances it should make its way, I think impossible to be explained; yet such the Christian story was, such were the circumstances under which it came forth, and in opposition to such difficulties did it prevail.

An event so connected with the religion, and with the fortunes, of the Jewish people, as one of their race, one horn amongst them, establishing his authority and his law throughout a great portion of the civilised world, it was perhaps to be expected should be noticed in the prophetic writings of that nation; especially when this Person, together with his own mission, caused also to be acknowledged the Divine original of their institution, and by those who before had altogether rejected it. Accordingly, we perceive in these writings various intimations concurring in the person and history of Jesus, in a manner and in a degree in which passages taken from these books could not be made to concur in any person arbitrarily assumed, or in any person except him who has been the author of great changes in the affairs and opinions of mankind. Of some of these predictions the weight depends a good deal upon the concurrence. Others possess great Separate strength: one in particular does this in an eminent degree. It is an entire description, manifestly directed to one character and to one scene of things; it is extant in a writing, or collection of writings, declaredly prophetic; and it applies to Christ's character, and to the circumstances of his life and death, with considerable precision, and in a way which no diversity of interpretation hath, in my opinion, been able to confound. That the advent of Christ, and the consequences of it, should not have been more distinctly revealed in the Jewish sacred books, is I think in some measure accounted for by the consideration, that for the Jews to have foreseen the fall of their institution, and that it was to merge at length into a more perfect and comprehensive dispensation, would have cooled too much, and relaxed, their zeal for it, and their adherence to it, upon which zeal and adherence the preservation in the world of any remains, for many ages, of religious truth might in a great measure depend.

Of what a revelation discloses to mankind, one, and only one, question can properly be asked--Was it of importance to mankind to know, or to be better assured of? In this question, when we turn our thoughts to the great Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, and of a future judgment, no doubt can possibly be entertained. He who gives me riches or honours, does nothing; he who even gives me health, does little, in comparison with that which lays before me just grounds for expecting a restoration to life, and a day of account and retribution; which thing Christianity hath done for millions.

Other articles of the Christian faith, although of infinite importance when placed beside any other topic of human inquiry, are only the adjuncts and circumstances of this. They are, however, such as appear worthy of the original to which we ascribe them. The morality of the religion, whether taken from the precepts or the example of its Founder, or from the lessons of its primitive teachers, derived, as it should seem, from what had been inculcated by their Master, is, in all its parts, wise and pure; neither adapted to vulgar prejudices, nor flattering popular notions, nor excusing established practices, but calculated, in the matter of its instruction, truly to promote human happiness; and in the form in which it was conveyed, to produce impression and effect: a morality which, let it have proceeded from any person whatever, would have been satisfactory evidence of his good sense and integrity, of the soundness of his understanding and the probity of his designs: a morality, in every dew of it, much more perfect than could have been expected from the natural circumstances and character of the person who delivered it; a morality, in a word, which is, and hath been, most beneficial to mankind.

Upon the greatest, therefore, of all Possible occasions, and for a purpose of inestimable value, it pleased the Deity to vouchsafe a miraculous attestation. Having done this for the institution, when this alone could fix its authority, or give to it a beginning, he committed its future progress to the natural means of human communication, and to the influence of those causes by which human conduct and human affairs are governed. The seed, being sown, was left to vegetate; the leaven, being inserted, was left to ferment; and both according to the laws of nature: laws, nevertheless, disposed and controlled by that Providence which conducts the affairs of the universe, though by an influence inscrutable, and generally undistinguishable by us. And in this, Christianity is analogous to most other provisions for happiness. The provision is made; and, being made, is left to act according to laws which, forming a part of a more general system, regulate this particular subject in common with many others.

Let the constant recurrence to our observation of contrivance, design, and wisdom, in the works of nature, once fix upon our minds the belief of a God, and after that all is easy. In the counsels of a being possessed of the power and disposition which the Creator of the universe must possess, it is not improbable that there should be a future state; it is not improbable that we should be acquainted with it. A future state rectifies everything; because, if moral agents be made, in the last event, happy or miserable, according to their conduct in the station and under the circumstances in which they are placed, it seems not very material by the operation of. what causes, according to what rules, or even, if you please to call it so, by what chance or caprice these stations are assigned, or these circumstances determined. This hypothesis, therefore, solves all that objection to the divine care and goodness which the promiscuous distribution of good and evil (I do not mean in the doubtful advantages of riches and grandeur, but in the unquestionably important distinctions of health and sickness, strength and infirmity, bodily ease and pain, mental alacrity and depression) is apt on so many occasions to create. This one truth changes the nature of things; gives order to confusion; makes the moral world of a piece with the natural.

Nevertheless, a higher degree of assurance than that to which it is possible to advance this, or any argument drawn from the light of nature, was necessary, especially to overcome the shock which the imagination and the senses received from the effects and the appearances of death, and the obstruction which thence arises to the expectation of either a continued or a future existence. This

difficulty, although of a nature no doubt to act very forcibly, will be found, I think, upon reflection to reside more in our habits of apprehension than in the subject: and that the giving way to it, when we have any reasonable grounds or the contrary, is rather an indulging of the imagination than anything else. Abstractedly considered, that is, considered without relation to the difference which habit, and merely habit, produces in our faculties and modes of apprehension, I do not see anything more in the resurrection of a dead man than in the conception of a child; except it be this, that the one comes into his world with a system of prior consciousness about him, which the other does not: and no person will say that he knows enough of either subject to perceive that this circumstance makes such a difference in the two cases that the one should be easy, and the other impossible; the one natural, the other not so. To the first man the succession of the species would be as incomprehensible as the resurrection of the dead is to us.

Thought is different from motion, perception from impact: the individuality of a mind is hardly consistent with the divisibility of an extended substance; or its volition, that is, its power of originating motion, with the inertness which cleaves to every portion of matter which our observation or our experiments can reach. These distinctions lead us to an immaterial principle: at least, they do this: they so negative the mechanical properties of matter, in the constitution of a sentient, still more of a rational, being, that no argument drawn from the properties can be of any great weight in opposition to other reasons, when the question respects the changes of which such a nature is capable, or the manner in which these changes are effected. Whatever thought be, or whatever it depend upon the regular experience of sleep makes one thing concerning it certain, that it can be completely suspended, and completely restored.

If any one find it too great a strain upon his thoughts to admit the notion of a substance strictly immaterial, that is, from which extension and solidity are excluded, he can find no difficulty in allowing, that a particle as small as a particle of light, minuter than all conceivable dimensions, may just as easily be the depositary, the organ, and the vehicle of consciousness as the congeries of animal substance which forms a human body, or the human brain; that, being so, it may transfer a proper identity to whatever shall hereafter be united to it; may be safe amidst the destruction of its integuments; may connect the natural with the spiritual, the corruptible with the glorified body. If it be said that the mode and means of all this is imperceptible by our senses, it is only what is true of the most important agencies and operations. The great powers of nature are all invisible. Gravitation, electricity, magnetism, though constantly present, and constantly exerting their influence; though within us, near us, and about us; though diffused throughout all space, overspreading the surface, or penetrating the contexture, of all bodies with which we are acquainted, depend upon substances and actions which are totally concealed from our senses. The Supreme Intelligence is so himself.

But whether these or any other attempts to satisfy the imagination bear any resemblance to the truth; or whether the imagination, which, as I have said before, is the mere slave of habit, can be satisfied or not; when a future state, and the revelation of a future state is not only perfectly consistent with the attributes of the Being who governs the universe; but when it is more; when it alone removes the appearance of contrariety which attends the operations of his will towards creatures capable of comparative merit and demerit, of reward and punishment; when a strong body of historical evidence, confirmed by many internal tokens of truth and authenticity, gives us just reason to believe that such a revelation hath actually been made; we ought to set our minds at

rest with the assurance, that in the resources of Creative Wisdom expedients cannot be wanted to carry into effect what the Deity hath purposed: that either a new and mighty influence will descend upon the human world to resuscitate extinguished consciousness; or that, amidst the other wonderful contrivances with which the universe abounds, and by some of which we see animal life, in many instances, assuming improved forms of existence, acquiring new organs, new perceptions, and new sources of enjoyment, provision is also made, though by methods secret to us (as all the great processes of nature are), for conducting the objects of God's moral government, through the necessary changes of their frame, to those final distinctions of happiness and misery which he hath declared to be reserved for obedience and transgression, for virtue and vice, for the use and the neglect, the right and the wrong employment of the faculties and opportunities with which he hath been pleased, severally, to intrust and to try us.

THE END.

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