



THE NATURAL
HISTORY OF RELIGION
(ANNOTATED)

David Hume



The Natural History of Religion

David Hume

With an introduction by John M. Robertson



First published in 1757.

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INTRODUCTION

In the only cheap edition of Hume's "Essays and Treatises" now in the British market, the essays on "Miracles" and "A Particular Providence and a Future State" have been omitted, while the "Natural History of Religion" has been extensively mutilated, at least thirteen separate passages, some of them lengthy, being suppressed in the interests of the popular religion. This edition, now or lately published by Messrs. Ward, Lock, and Tyler, was first issued by Messrs. A. Murray and Son; and its mutilated character is the more scandalous, seeing that the title-page bears the statement: "A careful reprint of the two vols. octavo edition". If there ever was a two-volume edition of a similarly curtailed kind, it is certainly not generally known; and the effect of the publishers' announcement is simply to deceive the reading public, who are led to suppose that the book offered them corresponds to the various complete two-volume editions of the latter part of last century and the earlier part of this. The facts that for about fifty years there were no fresh issues of the "Essays", widely sold as they had been in Hume's own day and the next generation, and that the only recent edition at a moderate price is thus piously fraudulent, are significant of the nature of our social and intellectual history since the French Revolution.

A cheap and complete edition of Hume will doubtless ere long be forthcoming. Meantime, there being already separate issues of the essay on "Miracles"¹, it has seemed desirable to similarly reprint the "Natural History of Religion", one of Hume's most important treatises; the more so as so many readers have been led to suppose they had perused the whole of it in the mutilated edition above mentioned. It does not save the credit of the pious publisher that his excisions fail to make the treatise innocuous to his faith; and many readers may have found the pruned version very sufficient for its purpose. To every independent student, however, the mutilation of a text in the interests of orthodoxy is an intolerable presumption; and for such students the present issue is intended. Thanks to the careful edition of Hume's works by Messrs. Green and Grose, which has been followed in this matter, it gives the many classical references in full, and according to the standard texts.

“The Natural History of Religion” was published by Hume at the beginning of 1757, after his reputation had been established by his earlier “Essays” and the first two volumes of his “History of England”. It is the one of his works which most explicitly asserts his Deism; but on account of its rationalistic treatment of concrete religion in general, which only nominally spared Christianity, it was that which first brought upon him much theological odium in England. The pugnacious Warburton saw a copy before publication, and wrote to Millar, who was Hume’s publisher as well as his own, urging its suppression. “Sir”, he characteristically begins, “I suppose you would be glad to know what sort of book it is which you are to publish with Hume’s name and yours to it. . . . He is establishing Atheism; and in one single line of a long essay professes to believe Christianity. . . . You have often told me of this man’s moral virtues. He may have many, for aught I know; but let me observe to you there are vices of the *mind* as well as of the *body*; and I think a wickeder mind, and more obstinately bent on public mischief, I never knew.”¹ The “establishing Atheism” was perhaps truer in a way than the Christian critic supposed; though nothing could be more distinct than Hume’s preliminary and repeated profession of Theism, and nothing more unscrupulous than Warburton’s statement.

The publisher being undeterred, other steps were taken. Of the reception of “The Natural History of Religion”, Hume says in “My Own Life”: “Its first entry was rather obscure, except only that Dr. Hurd wrote a pamphlet against it, with all the illiberal petulance, arrogance, and scurrility, which distinguish the Warburtonian school. This pamphlet gave me some consolation for the otherwise indifferent reception of my performance.” On this Hurd, with theological accuracy, writes: “He was much hurt, and no wonder, by so lively an attack upon him, and could not help confessing it in what he calls his ‘Own Life’”. The pamphlet was really in the main the work of Warburton, as we learn from Hurd, who, as Messrs. Green and Grose observe, “tells the narrative of the pious fraud with great simplicity”. Warburton had written certain characteristic observations on the margins of his copy of Hume, which Hurd thought worth printing; and the lion handed the copy over to his jackal, who, after slightly manipulating the material, published it anonymously as “Remarks on Mr. David Hume’s Essay on ‘The Natural History of Religion’:

Addressed to the Rev. Dr. Warburton". Hurd thought the "thin disguise" sufficed to take-in everybody, Hume included; but Hume actually wrote to his publisher soon after the issue: "I am positively assured that Dr. Warburton wrote that letter to himself, which you sent me; and indeed the style discovers him sufficiently".¹ He indicated a readiness to discuss the "principal topics of my philosophy" with Warburton; but thought the "Remarks" not worth answering; as they certainly were not. Warburton, of course, was incapable of efficient controversy with Hume on philosophical questions; and indeed it would be impossible to point to any Englishman of that period who was properly qualified for such a task. Butler had died in 1752; and, in the words of Buckle's note-book, "in ecclesiastical literature the most prominent names were Warburton, the bully, and Hurd, the sneak"; which twain had, in the fashion above-noted, sought as was their wont "to labor together in a joint work to do a little good", as Warburton phrased it. The "Remarks" on Hume's work published in the following year by "S. T." were more courteous than Warburton's, but even less cogent.

To a rationalist reader to-day Hume's "Natural History" is not more remarkable for its lucid analysis and downright criticism of the popular anthropomorphic religion of all ages, than for its singular adoption of a system which is only anthropomorphic with a difference. It is, in effect, a demonstration, on the lines of a now established anthropological theory, that all religion had its rise in the attempts of primeval man to explain natural phenomena by personified causes. Hume here, apparently without seeking to rest his assumption on any distinct theoretical basis, adopted the view of those ancients who, though in the dark as to cosmic history, held alike on traditional and on common-sense grounds that mankind had risen from a state of savagery. Cudworth, writing a hundred years before, brought immense learning to the work of showing that all the non-Christian religions exhibited a degeneration from the monotheistic truth originally revealed to men by the creator; the attempt being motivated, of course, by the belief in creation and revelation with which Cudworth set out. Hume, despite his avowed Deism, must have given up the ordinary doctrine of the creation of man, whatever theory he may have held as to the creation of the world. He offers, however, no hypothesis as to the actual origin of human life; and his notion of the rise of religion would

seem thus to rest on an unfixed conception of human beginnings, of which we cannot now even guess the details. It is now pretty clear that Butler's main fulcrum with the thinkers of his day was the inveterate assumption that there must have been at some point of time a positive creation of men and animals. This habitual belief, as it were, tied men down to Deism; and it doubtless operated in the case of Hume. He, however, could never have been convinced by such an argument as Butler's, which, resting the truth of an admittedly perplexing religion on the perplexity of the theistic system of nature, went as far to prove Mohammedanism as to prove Christianity. To say as does Professor Huxley,¹ that "the solid sense of Butler left the Deism of the Freethinkers not a leg to stand upon", is like arguing that if Darwinism could not be fully proved, Genesis must needs be true. Hume argued less rashly. What he appears to have done was to leave his conception of cosmic history in the vague, figuring men to himself as indeed somehow created, but first emerging in trustworthy history as "barbarous, necessitous animals", who framed religious systems conformable to their poor capacities.

From this point, Hume's argument is a process of acute deduction; that is to say, he sees that ignorant savages *must* have been polytheists, and goes on to show how, even after monotheism has been broached, ignorant minds — "the vulgar", as the phrase then ran — will always reduce the "spiritual" notion to an anthropomorphic form, and monotheism to polytheism. Mr. Leslie Stephen has somewhat strangely argued,² as against Buckle, that Hume's argument is not deductive inasmuch as it asserts at the outset "the observed fact that monotheism is a recent growth". But in point of fact Hume assumes the inevitableness of primeval polytheism, and goes on to make his historic statement, loosely enough, as part of the proof. The historic proposition is indeed so inaccurate as to imply that Hume at this particular point was temporising, since he must have known the facts were not as he said. "It is a matter of fact incontestable", he writes in the second paragraph of his first section, "that about 1,700 years ago all mankind were polytheists.¹ The doubtful and sceptical principles of a few philosophers, or the theism, and that, too, not entirely pure, of one or two nations, form no objection worth regarding." Now, all that can be said as to the "impurity" of the monotheism of the ages B.C. applies to the alleged "monotheism" of Christianity itself, as

Hume later rather broadly hints; and the “about 1,700 years ago” is thus a blind. The esoteric monotheism even of the Egyptian priesthood, not to speak of the Jewish, was theoretically “purer” than the *quasi*-monotheism of orthodox Christianity, which made its Deity’s tri-personality much more obvious than the unthinkable unity predicated of the Three. Hume’s proposition as to the supreme antiquity of polytheism, of course, remained true; but his own argument went to show that the beginning of a widespread and popular but “pure” monotheism might much more reasonably be placed at the date of Mohammed, and still more correctly be assigned to some unknown period in the future. Hume knew very well that in his own country the Deists were not greatly more numerous than the philosophic monotheists of Periclean Greece and Ancient Egypt; and that the reigning faith was polytheistic even in Protestant countries, while in the Catholic it was “idolatrous” as well.

Indeed, the drift of the treatise is only too clearly, for orthodox readers, in the direction of showing that Christianity exemplifies all the laws of religious degeneration seen at work in the faiths of the past. Hume did not write his book merely to show how men constructed foolish creeds in antiquity. The headings of the thirteenth and fourteenth sections originally referred to “most popular religions”; but in later editions the “most” was deleted, leaving no exception in favor of contemporary faith. The passage at the end of section vi, which observes that it is “happily the case with Christianity” to be free from contradiction in its presentment of Deity, is one of Gibbonian irony, the innuendo being a good deal more trenchant than the disclaimer; and several passages explicitly satirise Christian dogma. Thus in the eleventh section the proposition that “all popular theology, especially the scholastic, has a kind of appetite for absurdity and contradiction”, is pointed by a sketch of the course of Christian dogma:

“Ecclesiastical history sufficiently confirms these reflections. When a controversy is started, some people pretend always with certainty to foretell the issue. Whichever opinion, say they, is most contrary to plain sense, is sure to prevail, even where the general interest of the system requires not that decision. Though the reproach of heresy may, for some time, be bandied about among the disputants, it always rests at last on the

side of reason. Anyone, it is pretended, that has but learning enough of this kind to know the definition of Arian, Pelagian, Erastian, Socinian, Sabellian, Eutychian, Nestorian, Monothelite, etc., not to mention Protestant, whose fate is yet uncertain, will be convinced of the truth of this observation. It is thus a system becomes more absurd in the end, merely from its being reasonable and philosophical in the beginning.

“To oppose the torrent of scholastic religion by such feeble maxims as these — that ‘it is impossible for the same to be and not to be’, that ‘the whole is greater than a part’, that ‘two and three make five’— is pretending to stop the ocean with a bull-rush. Will you set up profane reason against sacred mystery? No punishment is great enough for your impiety. And the same fires which were kindled for heretics will serve also for the destruction of philosophers.”

It is not clear why Professor Huxley¹ should speak of this passage as showing “quite unusual acerbity”: it is exactly in the ironical tone in which Hume speaks of the absurdities of paganism, a tone much more humorous than bitter. His allusion to the prevailing religion as “superstition”, in the well-known passage describing his cheerful attitude towards death, expresses the same temper, always with good humor.

If, then, Hume’s “parade of sarcastic respect” to Christianity was certainly ironical, is there any room for surmise that he was glossing his real sentiments in the matter of Deism? After full reflection the answer must be given in a qualified affirmative. The case is well summed up by Professor Huxley:

“Hume appears to have sincerely accepted the two fundamental conclusions of the argument from design: firstly, that a Deity exists; and, secondly, that he possesses attributes more or less allied to those of human intelligence. But at this embryonic stage of theology, Hume’s progress is arrested; and after a survey of the development of dogma, his ‘general corollary’ is that ‘The whole is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgment, appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny concerning this subject. But such is the frailty of human reason, and such the irresistible contagion of opinion, that even this deliberate doubt could scarcely be upheld, did we not enlarge our view, and, opposing one species of superstition to another, set

them a quarrelling; while we ourselves, during their fury and contention, happily make our escape into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy.’

“Thus it may fairly be presumed that Hume expresses his own sentiments in the words of the speech with which Philo concludes the “Dialogues” [*i.e.*, Hume’s “Dialogues concerning Natural Religion”]:

“ ‘If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*: If this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication; if it affords no inference that affects human life or can be the source of any action or forbearance; and if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no further than to the human intelligence, and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind: if this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs, and believe that the arguments on which it is established exceed the objections which lie against it? Some astonishment, indeed, will naturally arise from the greatness of the object; some melancholy from its obscurity; some contempt of human reason, that it can give no solution more satisfactory with regard to so extraordinary and magnificent a question. But believe me, Cleanthes, the most natural sentiment which a well-disposed mind will feel on this occasion, is a longing desire and expectation that Heaven would be pleased to dissipate, or at least alleviate, this profound ignorance, by affording some more particular revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes and operations of the divine object of our faith.’

“Such being the sum total of Hume’s conclusions, it cannot be said that his theological burden is a heavy one. But if we turn from the “Natural History of Religion” to the “Treatise”, the “Inquiry”, and the “Dialogues”, the story of what happened to the ass laden with salt, who took to the water, irresistibly suggests itself. Hume’s theism, such as it is, dissolves

away in the dialectic river, until nothing is left but the verbal sack in which it was contained.”

This view is borne out by the general conduct of the argument in the “Dialogues.” There is there put into the mouth of Philo, the sceptic, the decisive argument that any hypothesis of an “ideal world” such as Berkeley’s, only raises a new problem of causation, since every conceived set of phenomena raise the question of cause just as much as any set which they are put forward to explain; and the orthodox or Deistic disputant, Cleanthes, is made only to reply in vacuous rhetoric, which no competent reader can ever have taken as a logical answer.

“Let us remember”, says Philo, “the story of the Indian philosopher and his elephant. . . . If the material world rests upon a similar ideal world, this ideal world must rest upon some other, and so on without end. It were better, therefore, never to look beyond the present material world. *By supposing it to contain the principle of its order within itself, we really assert it to be God; and the sooner we arrive at that Divine Being, so much the better. When you go one step beyond the mundane system, you only excite an inquisitive humor which it is impossible ever to satisfy.*”¹

To which Cleanthes returns a string of windy commonplaces, first surrendering altogether the doctrine of a first cause, then asserting, in a variety of phrases, that “the whole chorus of nature raises one hymn to the praises of its Creator”; and winding up: “You ask me what is the cause of this cause? I know not: I care not; that concerns not me. I have found a Deity, and here I stop my inquiry. Let those go further who are wiser or more enterprising.”² Hume assuredly did not fancy this amounted to a victory for the idealist. But it is hardly less difficult to suppose, on the other hand, that he did not see that the argument of Philo was as destructive of the doctrine of a personal God as of that of an “ideal world”. The proposition above italicised in Philo’s speech is the thesis of Pantheism, between which and Atheism the difference is one of words only. The Atheist says he knows nothing of the “cause” of the universe, and therefore has nothing to say about Deity except that he perceives the idea to be a human invention: the Pantheist asserts that the “cause” is *within* the universe — an unadventurous truism enough, when we agree that “universe” means “everything”— and then proceeds to label the universe

“God”, without pretending to know anything of the nature of the mystery he has named. “The sooner we arrive at that Divine Being, so much the better.” “And”, one seems to hear Hume comment, *sotto voce*, “Do not you wish you may get there?” He has, once for all, destroyed his own proposition of an “intelligent author”; since “author” and universe are defined to be one. If it be sought to separate them once more, the checkmate to Cleanthes again comes into play: the predication of a “cause” outside the “universe” is on all fours with the theory of an “ideal world”, and simply prompts the questions, (1) What caused that outside cause? (2) And what caused that cause, after an eternity of non-causation, to cause the “universe”? The Theist has no escape from Athanasian self-contradiction; and it is impossible to doubt that Hume saw the collapse of the case when he wrote, in the last section of the “Natural History”: “Even the contrarieties of nature, by discovering themselves everywhere, become proofs of some consistent plan, and establish one single purpose or intention, *however inexplicable and incomprehensible*”. That is to say, the plan is clearly single and consistent, though it is unintelligible. And as against the professedly confident Theism of the “Natural History”, we have in the Dialogues¹ the unanswered dictum of Philo: “There is no view of human life or of the condition of mankind, from which, without the greatest violence, we can infer the moral attributes, or learn that infinite benevolence, conjoined with infinite power and infinite wisdom, which we must discover by the eyes of faith alone”. Thus when Hume makes all his disputants agree that the dispute is not about the *Being* but the *Nature* of Deity, the former being “self-evident”, he is but driving back the Theistic reasoner on the guns of Pantheism = Atheism; for he demonstrates in due course that the *nature* cannot be known. And Being of which we do not know the Nature is simply Existence, which is what the Atheist predicates of the Universe.

The circumstances of the publication of the “Dialogues concerning Natural Religion” go far to prove that, on the one hand, they represent the matured opinions of Hume on religious matters, and that, on the other hand, he knew his arguments went considerably beyond the position taken up in the “Natural History of Religion”. He had written the Dialogues years before the publication of the Natural History, and kept them by him for the rest of his life, retouching them with so much care as to make them the

most finished of all his compositions. It appears to have been more out of consideration for the feelings of his friends than for his own sake that he did not issue the book in his life-time; but, says his biographer, “after having good-naturedly abstained, for nearly thirty years, from the publication of a work which might give pain and umbrage to his dearest friends; at the close of life, and when the lapse of time since it was written might have been supposed to render him indifferent to its fate — because there appeared some danger of its final suppression, he took decided and well-pondered steps to avert from it this fate. Such was the character of the man!”¹ The “danger” was that the cautious and deistic Smith, whom Hume had appointed his literary executor with injunctions to publish the “Dialogues”, would evade the task. Hume’s friend Elliott “was opposed to the publication of this work. Blair pleaded strongly for its suppression; and Smith, who had made up his mind that he would not edit the work, seems to have desired that the testamentary injunction laid on him might be revoked.” In May 1776, Hume sent him, “conformably to his desire”, an “ostensible letter” leaving it to Smith’s discretion as executor to delay or abandon the publication of the “Dialogues”, enclosing this in a private letter in which he deprecated Smith’s fears and said: “If I live a few years longer, I shall publish them myself”. Had this arrangement subsisted, the book might never have been published at all, Smith writing later to Strahan that it had been his intention to “carefully preserve” the MS., and leave it at his death to Hume’s family. But by a codicil to his will in August of the same year, Hume left his MSS. to Strahan, his friend and publisher, desiring that the “Dialogues” should be published within two years of his death, but providing that if this were not done the property should return to Hume’s “nephew David, whose duty in publishing them, as the last request of his uncle, must be approved of by all the world”. Strahan in turn, advised by Smith to “consult some prudent friend about what you ought to do”, declined the responsibility; and the book did not appear until in 1779 the nephew fulfilled his uncle’s wish.¹ It is plain that the work was felt all-round to be something more than a deistic treatise, and Hume’s own delay in issuing it shows that he thought it went further than any of his other writings. Indeed in a letter to his friend Elliott in 1751, while professing to “make Cleanthes the hero of the dialogue” he observes that he would be glad of anything that will “strengthen that side of the

argument”, and that “any propensity you imagine I have to the other side crept in upon me against my will”; going on to tell how in early youth he had begun uneasily to doubt the soundness of the common opinion, and virtually to hint that theism at times seems to him a case of finding “our own figures in the clouds, our faces in the moon, our passions and sentiments even in inanimate matter”.² Elliott of course could not give the help asked; and the “hero of the dialogue” is a heroic failure. Hume never rebutted his own anti-theistic arguments. In the opinion of Professor Huxley, “One can but suspect that . . . his shadowy and inconsistent theism was the expression of his desire to rest in a state of mind which distinctly excluded negation, while it included as little as possible of affirmation, respecting a problem which he felt to be hopelessly impossible”. Here the terms “distinctly excluded negation”, and “as little as possible of affirmation”, seem to me ill-chosen; but the Professor appears to be looking in the right direction for an explanation.

Must we say, then, that when Hume in the “Natural History” professes an unhesitating conventional Theism he was simply dissembling for the sake of his comfort? That would perhaps be a too positive statement of the case; but it seems as if a few qualifications would reduce it to accuracy. The absolute dissimulation may be said to lie in the use of the ordinary Deistic phrases of “intelligent author”, “design”, and so forth, which were irreconcilable alike with Hume’s Pantheistic logic in the Dialogues and with the scepticism of the “Inquiry Concerning the Human Understanding”; and what we may surmise to have taken place in his mind is the argument that since there is *something* mysterious in the universe, since we cannot but assume a Noumenon for the Phænomena, there is no harm in putting the principle into the phraseology of the most rational of the current popular opinions. It is very much as if Mr. Spencer should call the Unknowable by the name God, by way of getting on pleasantly with Mr. Martineau and Mr. Voysey; only Mr. Spencer has not Hume’s reason to apprehend odium for proclaiming Pantheistic or Atheistic principles; and the Theists to-day, as apart from the Trinitarians, have no considerable prestige. In Hume’s day, in Edinburgh, it was bad enough to be a Deist: the clergy would have crushed him for that if they could; and only the goodwill earned by his personal charm of character enabled him to secure such a post as that of the keeper of the Advocate’s Library in

despite of the efforts of the bigots. Had he professed downright Atheism, no personal amiability could have availed to save him from almost general ostracism; the average Deist being commonly found to be only a few degrees less bigoted than the average Christian, when it comes to the handling of professed Atheists. Milton's Arianism never made him diffident on that score. When all is said, however, the fact remains that under grave menace of hardship Hume temporised on religious questions. Not only did he, as we have seen, adopt in the "Natural History" the tone of a Deism which was not his, but in his History of England he inserted for a time a footnote on the "use" and "abuse" of religion, the only effect of which is to suggest an attitude towards supernaturalist tenets which he did not really hold. And, as is well known, he actually prescribed for others a policy of concession to the superstitions of the time, agreeing with Paley in recommending holy orders to a young man who had doubts about the Church's doctrines. As to this, again, we have to remember that in his middle age he had become a commonplace Tory, that is, a Tory by temperament; and that his political bias would of necessity affect his relations to outspoken rationalism in other directions. In fine, he was for his time, intellect apart, a kindly and a conscientious man, being regarded by the thoughtful and rational Adam Smith as "approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit"; and he had probably a great deal more moral courage than certain unclassified critics who to-day accuse him of moral cowardice. But he was certainly not one of the heroes of truth, or of the martyrs of progress. He was a great writer; but the sterner joys of his vocation were not for him.

This said, it remains to do justice to the incomparable insight and lucidity of his philosophical performance. This is not the place to review his system as a whole; but no characterization of Hume can be just which does not take note of the masterliness of his grasp of the fundamental problems of philosophy, and the singular skill of his exposition of every subject on which he laid his hand. In the estimation of a critic of a different school, he is the first master of philosophical English; and it is matter of history that his performance is the turning point of all modern metaphysics. The treatise which follows is a study rather in psychology than in metaphysics, being indeed one of the first successes of positive

philosophy, properly so called, and in effect the foundation of the modern scientific study of religion, having had a large share in priming the French rationalistic work of the Revolutionary period. It has not yet been superseded, because some of its most acute and important suggestions have not yet been systematically applied, as they must one day be, in regard to any one case of religious history. As they stand they are incomplete; and one could wish that Hume had set himself to work out in the concrete the evolution, for instance, of Judaism and Christianity. As a great sociologist has well pointed out,¹ the most luminous exposition of general or abstract truths influences the mass of men much less than an inductive or concrete argument to the same end; and Hume's actual influence, counting by simple numbers, has been small in proportion to his intellectual eminence. He has made far fewer rationalists than Paine. And it would have been very well worth his while to show in detail how far the temper of oriental adulation went to magnify the tribal Yahu into a deity further transformable into the, so to speak, pantheised Spirit of a creed evolved from an older and wider culture.

As it is, however, we have in the "Natural History of Religion" a concise and serviceable account of the origin, growth, and survival of religious notions, which will go further to clear up a beginner's ideas of the nature of past and present religion than any other study of similar length and purpose. That deities are the mere personifications of unknown causes; that untrained minds theologise from particulars and not from generals, and ignore inconsistencies from sheer mental impotence; that ignorance is always tending to turn abstract notions of Deity into concrete, to give its God its own characteristics, and to resort to ignoble propitiations; that religious history is a process of flux and reflux between the refined and the crude conceptions, ignorance now degrading a doctrine, and reason again revolting from the follies of ignorance and seeking to purify its ideas — all this is set forth by Hume with the puissant ease which marks his reflective writing in general. The ostensible drift of the treatise, as we saw, is to make out that whereas ignorant people cannot rightly conceive the power interpenetrating an infinite universe, more cultured people may; but that is a thesis which for any thoughtful reader serves to refute itself. He, at least, who in these days can suppose that the scanty knowledge possible to the wisest of mankind will serve to bridge the

gulf between finity and infinitude, is already past all misleading. It is a drawback, again, that the temporising spirit has withheld a plain application of the argument to the beliefs actually current in Europe. But here again the treatise accomplishes more than it says, the reader having but to apply to the faith of his neighbors the propositions of Hume as to the “impious conceptions of the divine nature” and the “bad influence on morality” of the “popular religions”. In fine, a “Natural History of Religion”, to be worthy of the name, as this is, must be capable of application to the last religion as well as to the first. There is thus secured the gain of a comprehensive and philosophic view.

¹ ... The last edited, with an introduction, by Mr. J. M. Wheeler. Freethought Publishing Company.

¹ Warburton’s Unpublished Papers, p. 309, cited in Messrs. Green and Grose’s ed. of Hume’s Works, iii, 61.

¹ ... Burton’s “Life”, ii, 35.

¹ ... “Hume,” p. 154.

² ... *Fortnightly Review*, May, 1880, p. 693.

¹ ... “Idolaters” was the word in the earlier editions, and was probably used without regard to its precise meaning. But Hume recollected that the Persians, and later the Jews, contemned all “idols”; and later substituted the more accurate term. A man might, of course, be an idolater and a monotheist, or a polytheist without idols.

¹ ... “Hume”, p. 142.

¹ ... Grose and Green’s ed. ii, 408.

² ... *Id.*, p. 410.

¹ ... P. 443.

¹ ... Burton’s “Life”, ii, 491.

¹ ... Burton’s “Life”, ii., 495.

² ... Id. i. 333. See also Huxley’s “Hume”, p. 147.

¹ ... Buckle, “History of Civilisation”, 3 vol. ed., iii, 461-7.



THE NATURAL HISTORY OF RELIGION

As every enquiry which regards religion is of the utmost importance, there are two questions in particular which challenge our principal attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature. Happily, the first question, which is the most important, admits of the most obvious, at least the clearest solution. The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflexion, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion. But the other question, concerning the origin of religion in human nature, is exposed to some more difficulty. The belief of invisible, intelligent power has been very generally diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages; but it has neither perhaps been so universal as to admit of no exceptions, nor has it been, in any degree, uniform in the ideas which it has suggested. Some nations have been discovered, who entertained no sentiments of Religion, if travellers and historians may be credited; and no two nations, and scarce any two men, have ever agreed precisely in the same sentiments. It would appear, therefore, that this preconception springs not from an original instinct or primary impression of nature, such as gives rise to self-love, affection between the sexes, love of progeny, gratitude, resentment; since every instinct of this kind has been found absolutely universal in all nations and ages, and has always a precise determinate object, which it inflexibly pursues. The first religious principles must be secondary; such as may easily be perverted by various accidents and causes, and whose operation too, in some cases, may by an extraordinary concurrence of circumstances be altogether prevented. What those principles are, which give rise to the original belief, and what those accidents and causes are, which direct its operation, is the subject of our present enquiry.



§ I.

**THAT POLYTHEISM WAS THE PRIMARY RELIGION OF
MEN.**

It appears to me, that if we consider the improvement of human society, from rude beginnings to a state of greater perfection, polytheism or idolatry was, and necessarily must have been, the first and most ancient religion of mankind. This opinion I shall endeavor to confirm by the following arguments.

It is a matter of fact incontestable, that about 1,700 years ago all mankind were polytheists. The doubtful and sceptical principles of a few philosophers, or the theism, and that too not entirely pure, of one or two nations, form no objection worth regarding. Behold then the clear testimony of history. The farther we mount up into antiquity, the more do we find mankind plunged into polytheism. No marks, no symptoms of any more perfect religion. The most ancient records of the human race still present us with that system as the popular and established creed. The north, the south, the east, the west, give their unanimous testimony to the same fact. What can be opposed to so full an evidence?

As far as writing or history reaches, mankind, in ancient times, appear universally to have been polytheists. Shall we assert, that in more ancient times, before the knowledge of letters, or the discovery of any art or science, men entertained the principles of pure theism? That is, while they were ignorant and barbarous, they discovered truth; but fell into error, as soon as they acquired learn- and politeness.

But in this assertion you not only contradict all appearance of probability, but also our present experience concerning the principles and opinions of barbarous nations. The savage tribes of America, Africa, and Asia, are all idolaters. Not a single exception to this rule. Insomuch that, were a traveller to transport himself into any unknown region; if he found inhabitants cultivated with arts and sciences, though even upon that supposition there are odds against their being theists, yet could he not safely, till farther inquiry, pronounce any thing on that head: but if he

found them ignorant and barbarous, he might beforehand declare them idolaters; and there scarcely is a possibility of his being mistaken.

It seems certain that, according to the natural progress of human thought, the ignorant multitude must first entertain some grovelling and familiar notion of superior powers, before they stretch their conception to that perfect Being who bestowed order on the whole frame of nature. We may as reasonably imagine that men inhabited palaces before huts and cottages, or studied geometry before agriculture; as assert that the Deity appeared to them a pure spirit, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, before he was apprehended to be a powerful, though limited being, with human passions and appetites, limbs and organs. The mind rises gradually, from inferior to superior: by abstracting from what is imperfect, it forms an idea of perfection: and slowly distinguishing the nobler parts of its own frame from the grosser, it learns to transfer only the former, much elevated and refined, to its divinity. Nothing could disturb this natural progress of thought, but some obvious and invincible argument, which might immediately lead the mind into the pure principles of theism, and make it overleap, at one bound, the vast interval which is interposed between the human and the divine nature. But though I allow that the order and frame of the universe, when accurately examined, affords such an argument; yet I can never think that this consideration could have an influence on mankind, when they formed their first rude notions of religion.

The causes of such objects as are quite familiar to us, never strike our attention or curiosity; and however extraordinary or surprising these objects in themselves, they are passed over, by the raw and ignorant multitude, without much examination or enquiry. Adam, rising at once in Paradise, and in the full perfection of his faculties, would naturally, as represented by Milton, be astonished at the glorious appearances of nature, the heavens, the air, the earth, his own organs and members; and would be led to ask, whence this wonderful scene arose. But a barbarous, necessitous animal (such as man is on the first origin of society), pressed by such numerous wants and passions, has no leisure to admire the regular face of nature, or make enquiries concerning the cause of objects to which, from his infancy, he has been gradually accustomed. On the

contrary, the more regular and uniform, that is, the more perfect nature appears, the more is he familiarised to it, and the less inclined to scrutinise and examine it. A monstrous birth excites his curiosity, and is deemed a prodigy. It alarms him from its novelty; and immediately sets him a-trembling, and sacrificing, and praying. But an animal complete in all its limbs and organs, is to him an ordinary spectacle, and produces no religious opinion or affection. Ask him, whence that animal arose; he will tell you, from the copulation of its parents. And these, whence? From the copulation of theirs. A few removes satisfy his curiosity, and set the objects at such a distance, that he entirely loses sight of them. Imagine not that he will so much as start the question, whence the first animal; much less, whence the whole system or united fabric of the universe arose. Or, if you start such a question to him, expect not that he will employ his mind with any anxiety about a subject so remote, so uninteresting, and which so much exceeds the bounds of his capacity.

But farther, if men were at first led into the belief of one superior Being, by reasoning from the frame of nature, they could never possibly leave that belief, in order to embrace polytheism; but the same principles of reason which at first produced and diffused over mankind so magnificent an opinion, must be able, with greater facility, to preserve it. The first invention and proof of any doctrine is much more difficult than the supporting and retaining of it.

There is a great difference between historical facts and speculative opinions; nor is the knowledge of the one propagated in the same manner with that of the other. An historical fact, while it passes by oral tradition from eye-witnesses and contemporaries, is disguised in every successive narration, and may at last retain but very small, if any, resemblance of the original truth on which it was founded. The frail memories of men, their love of exaggeration, their supine carelessness; these principles, if not corrected by books and writing, soon pervert the account of historical events, where argument or reasoning has little or no place, nor can ever recal the truth which has once escaped those narrations. It is thus the fables of Hercules, Theseus, Bacchus, are supposed to have been originally founded in true history, corrupted by tradition. But with regard to speculative opinions, the case is far otherwise. If these opinions be

founded in arguments so clear and obvious as to carry conviction with the generality of mankind, the same arguments which at first diffused the opinions will still preserve them in their original purity. If the arguments be more abstruse, and more remote from vulgar apprehension, the opinions will always be confined to a few persons; and as soon as men leave the contemplation of the arguments, the opinions will immediately be lost and be buried in oblivion. Whichever side of this dilemma we take, it must appear impossible that theism could, from reasoning, have been the primary religion of human race, and have afterwards, by its corruption, given birth to polytheism and to all the various superstitions of the heathen world. Reason, when obvious, prevents these corruptions: when abstruse, it keeps the principles entirely from the knowledge of the vulgar, who are alone liable to corrupt any principle or opinion.

§ II.

ORIGIN OF POLYTHEISM.

If we would, therefore, indulge our curiosity, in enquiring concerning the origin of religion, we must turn our thoughts towards polytheism, the primitive religion of uninstructed mankind.

Were men led into the apprehension of invisible, intelligent power, by a contemplation of the works of nature, they could never possibly entertain any conception but of one single being, who bestowed existence and order on this vast machine, and adjusted all its parts, according to one regular plan or connected system. For though, to persons of a certain turn of mind, it may not appear altogether absurd that several independent beings, endowed with superior wisdom, might conspire in the contrivance and execution of one regular plan: yet is this a merely arbitrary supposition, which, even if allowed possible, must be confessed neither to be supported by probability nor necessity. All things in the universe are evidently of a piece. Everything is adjusted to everything. One design prevails throughout the whole. And this uniformity leads the mind to acknowledge one author; because the conception of different authors, without any distinction of attributes or operations, serves only to give

perplexity to the imagination, without bestowing any satisfaction on the understanding. The statue of Laocoon, as we learn from Pliny, was the work of three artists: but it is certain that, were we not told so, we should never have imagined that a group of figures, cut from one stone, and united in one plan, was not the work and contrivance of one statuary. To ascribe any single effect to the combination of several causes, is not surely a natural and obvious supposition.

On the other hand, if, leaving the works of nature, we trace the footsteps of invisible power in the various and contrary events of human life, we are necessarily led into polytheism, and to the acknowledgment of several limited and imperfect deities. Storms and tempests ruin what is nourished by the sun. The sun destroys what is fostered by the moisture of dews and rains. War may be favorable to a nation whom the inclemency of the seasons afflicts with famine. Sickness and pestilence may depopulate a kingdom, amidst the most profuse plenty. The same nation is not, at the same time, equally successful by sea and land. And a nation which now triumphs over its enemies, may anon submit to their more prosperous arms. In short, the conduct of events, or what we call the plan of a particular providence, is so full of variety and uncertainty, that, if we suppose it immediately ordered by any intelligent beings, we must acknowledge a contrariety in their designs and intentions, a constant combat of opposite powers, and a repentance or change of intention in the same power, from impotence or levity. Each nation has its tutelar deity. Each element is subto its invisible power or agent. The province of each god is separate from that of another. Nor are the operations of the same god always certain and invariable. To-day he protects: to-morrow he abandons us. Prayers and sacrifices, rites and ceremonies, well or ill performed, are the sources of his favor or enmity, and produce all the good or ill fortune which are to be found amongst mankind.

We may conclude, therefore, that in all nations which have embraced polytheism, the first ideas of religion arose, not from a contemplation of the works of nature, but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears which actuate the human mind. Accordingly we find that all idolaters, having separated the provinces of their deities, have recourse to that invisible agent to whose authority they

are immediately subjected, and whose province it is to superintend that course of actions in which they are at any time engaged. Juno is invoked at marriages; Lucina at births. Neptune receives the prayers of seamen; and Mars of warriors. The husbandman cultivates his field under the protection of Ceres; and the merchant acknowledges the authority of Mercury. Each natural event is supposed to be governed by some intelligent agent; and nothing prosperous or adverse can happen in life, which may not be the subject of peculiar prayers or thanksgivings.¹

¹ "Fragilis et laboriosa mortalitas in partes ista digessit, infirmitatis suæ memor, ut portionibus quisquis coleret, quo maxime indigeret" (Plin. lib. ii. cap. 7). So early as Hesiod's time there were 30,000 deities (Works and Days, lib. i. ver. 250). But the task to be performed by these seems still too great for their number. The provinces of the deities were so subdivided, that there was even a God of *Sneezing* (see Aristotle's Problems, sec. 33, cap. 7). The province of copulation, suitable to the importance and dignity of it, was divided among several deities.

It must necessarily, indeed, be allowed, that in order to carry men's attention beyond the present course of things, or lead them into any inference concerning invisible intelligent power, they must be actuated by some passion which prompts their thought and reflection; some motive which urges their first inquiry. But what passion shall we here have recourse to, for explaining an effect of such mighty consequence? Not speculative curiosity surely, or the pure love of truth. That motive is too refined for such gross apprehensions, and would lead men into inquiries concerning the frame of nature; a subject too large and comprehensive for their narrow capacities. No passions, therefore, can be supposed to work upon such barbarians, but the ordinary affections of human life; the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst of revenge, the appetite for food and other necessaries. Agitated by hopes and fears of this nature, especially the latter, men scrutinise, with a trembling curiosity, the course of future causes, and examine the various and contrary events of human life. And in this disordered scene, with eyes still more disordered and astonished, they see the first obscure traces of divinity.

THE SAME SUBJECT CONTINUED.

We are placed in this world, as in a great theatre, where the true springs and causes of every event are entirely unknown to us; nor have we either sufficient wisdom to foresee, or power to prevent, those ills with which we are continually threatened. We hang in perpetual suspense between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want, which are distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable. These *unknown causes*, then, become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of those powers on which we have so entire a dependence. Could men anatomise nature, according to the most probable, at least the most intelligible philosophy, they would find that these causes are nothing but the particular fabric and structure of the minute parts of their own bodies and of external objects; and that, by a regular and constant machinery, all the events are produced about which they are so much concerned. But this philosophy exceeds the comprehension of the ignorant multitude, who can only conceive the *unknown causes* in a general and confused manner, though their imagination, perpetually employed on the same subject, must labor to form some particular and distinct idea of them. The more they consider these causes themselves, and the uncertainty of their operation, the less satisfaction do they meet with in their research; and, however unwilling, they must at last have abandoned so arduous an attempt, were it not for a propensity in human nature, which leads into a system that gives them some satisfaction.

There is an universal tendency amongst mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object those qualities with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice and good will to everything that hurts or pleases us. Hence the frequency and beauty of the *prosopopœia* in poetry, where trees, mountains, and streams are personified, and the inanimate parts of nature acquire sentiment and passion. And though these poetical figures and

expressions gain not on the belief, they may serve, at least, to prove a certain tendency in the imagination, without which they could neither be beautiful nor natural. Nor is a river-god or hamadryad always taken for a mere poetical or imaginary personage; but may sometimes enter into the real creed of the ignorant vulgar; while each grove or field is represented as possessed of a particular *genius* or invisible power, which inhabits or protects it. Nay, philosophers cannot entirely exempt themselves from this natural frailty; but have oft ascribed to inanimate matter the horror of a *vacuum*, sympathies, antipathies, and other affections of human nature. The absurdity is not less, while we cast our eyes upwards; and transferring, as is too usual, human passions and infirmities to the deity, represent him as jealous and revengeful, capricious and partial, and, in short, a wicked and foolish man, in every respect but his superior power and authority. No wonder, then, that mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance of causes, and being at the same time so anxious concerning their future fortunes, should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers possessed of sentiment and intelligence. The *unknown causes*, which continually employ their thought, appearing always in the same aspect, are all apprehended to be of the same kind or species. Nor is it long before we ascribe to them thought, and reason, and passion, and sometimes even the limbs and figures of men, in order to bring them nearer to a resemblance with ourselves.

In proportion as any man's course of life is governed by accident, we always find that he increases in superstition, as may particularly be observed of gamesters and sailors, who, though of all mankind the least capable of serious consideration, abound most in frivolous and superstitious apprehensions. The Gods, says Coriolanus in Dionysius,¹ have an influence in every affair, but above all in war, where the event is so uncertain. All human life, especially before the institution of order and good government, being subject to fortuitous accidents, it is natural that superstition should prevail everywhere in barbarous ages, and put men on the most earnest inquiry concerning those invisible powers who dispose of their happiness or misery. Ignorant of astronomy and the anatomy of plants and animals, and too little curious to observe the admirable adjustment of final causes, they remain still unacquainted with a first and supreme creator, and with that infinitely perfect spirit who alone by his

almighty will bestowed order on the whole frame of nature. Such a magnificent idea is too big for their narrow conceptions, which can neither observe the beauty of the work, nor comprehend the grandeur of its author. They suppose their deities, however potent and invisible, to be nothing but a species of human creatures, perhaps raised from among mankind, and retaining all human passions and appetites, together with corporeal limbs and organs. Such limited beings, though masters of human fate, being each of them incapable of extending his influence everywhere, must be vastly multiplied, in order to answer that variety of events which happen over the whole face of nature. Thus every place is stored with a crowd of local deities; and thus polytheism has prevailed, and still prevails, among the greatest part of uninstructed mankind.¹

¹ Lib. viii. 33.

¹ The following lines of Euripides are so much to the present purpose, that I cannot forbear quoting them:

Οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲν πιστὸν, οὐτ' εὐδοξία
Οὐτ' αἰ καλῶς πράσσοντα μὴ πράξειν κακῶς,
Φύρουσι δ' αἰθ' οἱ θεοὶ πάλιν τε καὶ πρόσω,
Ταραγμὸν ἐντιθέντες, ὡς ἀγνωσίᾳ
Σέβωμεν αὐτούς.
Hecuba, 956.

"There is nothing secure in the world; no glory, no prosperity. The Gods toss all life into confusion; mix everything with its reverse; that all of us, from our ignorance and uncertainty, may pay them the more worship and reverence."

Any of the human affections may lead us into the notion of invisible, intelligent power, hope as well as fear, gratitude as well as affliction; but if we examine our own hearts, or observe what passes around us, we shall find that men are much oftener thrown on their knees by the melancholy than by the agreeable passions. Prosperity is easily received as our due, and few questions are asked concerning its cause or author. It begets cheerfulness and activity and alacrity and a lively enjoyment of every social and sensual pleasure; and during this state of mind men have little leisure or inclination to think of the unknown invisible regions. On the other hand, every disastrous accident alarms us, and sets us on enquiries concerning the principles whence it arose; apprehensions spring up with regard to futurity; and the mind, sunk into diffidence, terror, and

melancholy, has recourse to every method of appeasing those sacred intelligent powers on whom our fortune is supposed entirely to depend.

No topic is more usual with all popular divines than to display the advantages of affliction in bringing men to a due sense of religion, by subduing their confidence and sensuality, which in times of prosperity make them forgetful of a divine providence. Nor is this topic confined merely to modern religions. The ancients have also employed it. "Fortune has never liberally, without envy," says a Greek historian,¹ "bestowed an unmixed happiness on mankind; but with all her gifts has ever conjoined some disastrous circumstance, in order to chastise men into a reverence for the Gods, whom, in a continued course of prosperity, they are apt to neglect and forget."

¹ Diod. Sic., lib. iii. 47.

What age or period of life is the most addicted to superstition? The weakest and most timid. What sex? The same answer must be given. "The leaders and examples of every kind of superstition", says Strabo,¹ "are the women. These excite the men to devotion and supplications, and the observance of religious days. It is rare to meet with one that lives apart from the females, and yet is addicted to such practices. And nothing can, for this reason, be more improbable than the account given of an order of men amongst the Getes, who practised celibacy, and were notwithstanding the most religious fanatics." A method of reasoning which would lead us to entertain a bad idea of the devotion of monks; did we not know, by an experience not so common, perhaps, in Strabo's days, that one may practice celibacy, and profess chastity, and yet maintain the closest connexions, and most entire sympathy, with that timorous and pious sex.

¹ Lib. vi. 297.

§ IV.

DEITIES NOT CONSIDERED AS CREATORS OR FORMERS OF THE WORLD.

The only point of theology in which we shall find a consent of mankind almost universal, is that there is invisible, intelligent power in the world; but whether this power be supreme or subordinate; whether confined to one being or distributed among several; what attributes, qualities, connexions, or principles of action ought to be ascribed to those beings — concerning all these points there is the widest difference in the popular systems of theology. Our ancestors in Europe, before the revival of letters, believed, as we do at present, that there was one supreme God, the author of nature, whose power, though in itself uncontrollable, was yet often exerted by the interposition of his angels and subordinate ministers, who executed his sacred purposes. But they also believed that all nature was full of other invisible powers — fairies, goblins, elves, sprights, beings stronger and mightier than men, but much inferior to the celestial natures who surround the throne of God. Now, suppose that anyone in those ages had denied the existence of God and his angels, would not his impiety justly have deserved the appellation of Atheism, even though he had still allowed, by some odd capricious reasoning, that the popular stories of elves and fairies were just and well-grounded? The difference, on the one hand, between such a person and a genuine Theist, is infinitely greater than that, on the other, between him and one that absolutely excludes all invisible intelligent power. And it is a fallacy, merely from the casual resemblance of names, without any conformity of meaning, to rank such opposite opinions under the same denomination.

To anyone who considers justly of the matter, it will appear that the Gods of all polytheists are no better than the elves or fairies of our ancestors, and merit as little any pious worship or veneration. These pretended religionists are really a kind of superstitious Atheists, and acknowledge no being that corresponds to our idea of a deity. No first principle of mind or thought: No supreme government and administration: No divine contrivance or intention in the fabric of the world.

The Chinese, when¹ their prayers are not answered, beat their idols. The deities of the Laplanders are any large stone which they meet with of an extraordinary shape.² The Egyptian mythologists, in order to account for animal worship, said that the Gods, pursued by the violence of

earthborn men, who were their enemies, had formerly been obliged to disguise themselves under the semblance of beasts.³ The Caunii, a nation in the Lesser Asia, resolving to admit no strange Gods among them, regularly, at certain seasons, assembled themselves completely armed, beat the air with their lances, and proceeded in that manner to their frontiers, in order, as they said, to expel the foreign deities.⁴ “Not even the immortal Gods”, said some German nations to Cæsar, “are a match for the Suevi”.⁵

¹ Père le Compte.

² Regnard, “Voïage de Laponie”.

³ Diod. Sic., lib. i. 86. Lucian de Sacrificiis, 14. Ovid alludes to the same tradition, *Metam.*, lib. v. l. 321. So also Manilius, lib. iv. 800.

⁴ Herodot., lib. i. 172.

⁵ Cæs. Comment. de bello Gallico, lib. iv. 7.

Many ills, says Dione in Homer to Venus wounded by Diomede, many ills, my daughter, have the Gods inflicted on men, and many ills, in return, have men inflicted on the Gods.⁶ We need but open any classic author to meet with these gross representations of the deities; and Longinus,⁷ with reason, observes that such ideas of the divine nature, if literally taken, contain a true Atheism.

⁶ Lib. v. 382.

⁷ Chap. ix.

Some writers¹ have been surprised, that the impieties of Aristophanes should have been tolerated, nay publicly acted and applauded by the Athenians; a people so superstitious and so jealous of the public religion, that at that very time they put Socrates to death for his imagined incredulity. But these writers consider not that the ludicrous, familiar images, under which the Gods are represented by that comic poet, instead of appearing impious, were the genuine lights in which the ancients conceived their divinities. What conduct can be more criminal or mean, than that of Jupiter in *Amphitruon*? Yet that play, which represented his gallant exploits, was supposed so agreeable to him that it was always acted in Rome by public authority, when the state was threatened with

pestilence, famine, or any general calamity.² The Romans supposed, that, like all old lechers, he would be highly pleased with the rehearsal of his former feats of prowess and vigor, and that no topic was so proper, upon which to flatter his vanity.

¹ Père Brumoy, "Théâtre des Grecs"; and Fontenelle, "Histoire des Oracles".

² Arnob., lib. vii. 507 H.

The Lacedemonians, says Xenophon,³ always during war put up their petitions very early in the morning, in order to be beforehand with their enemies, and, by being the first solicitors, pre-engaged the Gods in their favor. We may gather from Seneca⁴ that it was usual for the votaries in the temple to make interest with the beadle or sexton that they might have a seat near the image of the deity, in order to be the best heard in their prayers and applications to him. The Tyrians, when besieged by Alexander, threw chains on the statue of Hercules to prevent that deity from deserting to the enemy.¹ Augustus, having twice lost his fleet by storms, forbade Neptune to be carried in procession along with the other Gods, and fancied that he had sufficiently revenged himself by that expedient.² After Germanicus's death the people were so enraged at their Gods that they stoned them in their temples, and openly renounced all allegiance to them.³

³ De Laced. Rep. 13.

⁴ Epist. xli.

¹ Quint. Curtius, lib. iv. cap. iii. Diod. Sic., lib. xvii.

² Suet. in Vita Aug., cap. xvi.

³ Id. in Vita Cal., cap. v.

To ascribe the origin and fabric of the universe to these imperfect beings never enters into the imagination of any Polytheist or idolater. Hesiod, whose writings, with those of Homer, contained the canonical system of the heathens⁴ — Hesiod, I say, supposes Gods and men to have sprung equally from the unknown powers of nature.⁵ And throughout the whole theogony of that author Pandora is the only instance of creation or a voluntary production; and she, too, was formed by the Gods merely from

despite to Prometheus, who had furnished men with stolen fire from the celestial regions.⁶ The ancient mythologists, indeed, seem throughout to have rather embraced the idea of generation than that of creation or formation, and to have thence accounted for the origin of this universe.

⁴ Herodot., lib. ii. Lucian, *Jupiter Confutatus, de luctu, Saturn, etc.*

⁵ Ὡς ὁμόθεν γεγάσσι θεοὶ θνητοὶ τ' ἄνθρωποι. Hesiod, *Opera et Dies*, l. 108.

⁶ Theog. l. 570.

Ovid, who lived in a learned age, and had been instructed by philosophers in the principles of a divine creation or formation of the world; finding that such an idea would not agree with the popular mythology which he delivers, leaves it, in a manner, loose and detached from his system. *Quisquis fuit ille Deorum?*¹ Whichever of the Gods it was, says he, that dissipated the chaos, and introduced order into the universe, it could neither be Saturn, he knew, nor Jupiter, nor Neptune, nor any of the received deities of paganism. His theological system had taught him nothing upon that head; and he leaves the matter equally undetermined.

¹ *Metamorph. lib. i. l. 32.*

Diodorus Sculus,² beginning his work with an enumeration of the most reasonable opinions concerning the origin of the world, makes no mention of a deity or intelligent mind; though it is evident from his history, that he had a much greater proneness to superstition than to irreligion. And in another passage,³ talking of the Ichthyophages, a nation in India, he says that, there being so great difficulty in accounting for their descent, we must conclude them to be *aborigines*, without any beginning of their generation, propagating their race from all eternity; as some of the physiologers, in treating of the origin of nature, have justly observed. “But in such subjects as these,” adds the historian, “which exceed all human capacity, it may well happen, that those who discourse the most, know the least; reaching a specious appearance of truth in their reasonings, while extremely wide of the real truth and matter of fact.”

² Lib. i. 6, *et seq.*

³ Id. iii. 20.

A strange sentiment in our eyes, to be embraced by a professed and zealous religionist!⁴ But it was merely by accident that the question concerning the origin of the world did ever in ancient times enter into religious systems, or was treated of by theologers. The philosophers alone made profession of delivering systems of this kind; and it was pretty late too before these bethought themselves of having recourse to a mind or supreme intelligence, as the first cause of all. So far was it from being esteemed profane in those days to account for the origin of things without a deity, that Thales, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, and others, who embraced that system of cosmogony, passed unquestioned; while Anaxagoras, the first undoubted theist among the philosophers, was perhaps the first that ever was accused of Atheism.¹

⁴ The same author, who can thus account for the origin of the world without a Deity, esteems it impious to explain, from physical causes, the common accidents of life, earthquakes, inundations, and tempests; and devoutly ascribes these to the anger of Jupiter or Neptune. A plain proof whence he derived his ideas of religion. See lib. xv. c. 48, p. 364. Ex edit. Rhodomanni.

¹ It will be easy to give a reason why Thales, Anaximander, and those early philosophers, who really were Atheists, might be very orthodox in the pagan creed; and why Anaxagoras and Socrates, though real theists, must naturally, in ancient times, be esteemed impious. The blind, unguided powers of nature, if they could produce men, might also produce such beings as Jupiter and Neptune, who, being the most powerful, intelligent existences in the world, would be proper objects of worship. But where a supreme intelligence, the first cause of all, is admitted, these capricious beings, if they exist at all, must appear very subordinate and dependent, and consequently be excluded from the rank of deities. Plato (de leg., lib. x.) assigns this reason for the imputation thrown on Anaxagoras, viz: his denying the divinity of the stars, planets, and other created objects.

We are told by Sextus Empiricus² that Epicurus, when a boy, reading with his preceptor these verses of Hesiod —

Eldest of beings, *chaos* first arose;
Next *earth*, wide-stretch'd, the *seat* of all —

the young scholar first betrayed his inquisitive genius by asking, “And chaos whence?” But was told by his preceptor, that he must have recourse to the philosophers for a solution of such questions. And from this hint Epicurus left philology and all other studies, in order to betake himself to

that science, whence alone he expected satisfaction with regard to these sublime subjects.

² Adversus Mathem., lib. ix.

The common people were never likely to push their researches so far, or derive from reasoning their systems of religion; when philologists and mythologists, we see, scarcely ever discovered so much penetration. And even the philosophers, who discoursed of such topics, readily assented to the grossest theory, and admitted the joint origin of Gods and men from night and chaos; from fire, water, air, or whatever they established to be the ruling element.

Nor was it only on their first origin that the Gods were supposed dependent on the powers of nature. Throughout the whole period of their existence they were subjected to the dominion of fate or destiny. "Think of the force of necessity," says Agrippa to the Roman people; "that force, to which even the Gods must submit."¹ And the Younger Pliny,² agreeably to this way of reasoning, tells us that, amidst the darkness, horror, and confusion which ensued upon the first eruption of Vesuvius, several concluded that all nature was going to wreck, and that Gods and men were perishing in one common ruin.

¹ Dionys. Halic. lib. vi. 54.

² Epist. lib. vi.

It is great complaisance, indeed, if we dignify with the name of religion such an imperfect system of theology, and put it on a level with latter systems, which are founded on principles more just and more sublime. For my part, I can scarcely allow the principles even of Marcus Aurelius, Plutarch, and some other Stoics and Academics, though much more refined than the Pagan superstition, to be worthy of the honourable denomination of theism. For if the mythology of the heathen resemble the ancient European system of spiritual beings, excluding God and angels, and leaving only fairies and sprites; the creed of these philosophers may justly be said to exclude a deity, and to leave only angels and fairies.

VARIOUS FORMS OF POLYTHEISM: ALLEGORY, HERO-WORSHIP.

But it is chiefly our present business to consider the gross polytheism of the vulgar, and to trace all its various appearances in the principles of human nature, whence they are derived.

Whoever learns, by argument, the existence of invisible intelligent power, must reason from the admirable contrivance of natural objects, and must suppose the world to be the workmanship of that Divine Being, the original cause of all things. But the vulgar polytheist, so far from admitting that idea, deifies every part of the universe, and conceives all the conspicuous productions of nature to be themselves so many real divinities. The sun, moon, and stars are all Gods according to his system: fountains are inhabited by nymphs, and trees by hamadryads: even monkeys, dogs, cats, and other animals often become sacred in his eyes, and strike him with a religious veneration. And thus, however strong men's propensity to believe invisible, intelligent power in nature, their propensity is equally strong to rest their attention on sensible, visible objects; and, in order to reconcile these opposite inclinations, they are led to unite the invisible power with some visible object.

The distribution also of distinct provinces to the several deities is apt to cause some allegory, both physical and moral, to enter into the vulgar systems of polytheism. The God of war will naturally be represented as furious, cruel, and impetuous; the God of poetry as elegant, polite, and amiable; the God of merchandise, especially in early times, as thievish and deceitful. The allegories supposed in Homer and other mythologists, I allow, have been often so strained that men of sense are apt entirely to reject them, and to consider them as the production merely of the fancy and conceit of critics and commentators. But that allegory really has place in the heathen mythology is undeniable even on the least reflexion. Cupid the son of Venus, the Muses the daughters of Memory, Prometheus the wise brother, Epimetheus the foolish; Hygieia, or the Goddess of health, descended from Æsculapius, or the God of physic: who sees not in these, and in many other instances, the plain traces of allegory? When a God is supposed to preside over any passion, event, or system of actions, it is almost unavoidable to give him a genealogy, attributes, and adventures,

suitable to his supposed powers and influence, and to carry on that similitude and comparison which is naturally so agreeable to the mind of man.

Allegories, indeed, entirely perfect, we ought not to expect as the products of ignorance and superstition; there being no work of genius that requires a nicer hand, or has been more rarely executed with success. That *Fear* and *Terror* are the sons of Mars is just, but why by Venus?¹ That *Harmony* is the daughter of Venus is regular, but why by Mars?² That *Sleep* is the brother of *Death* is suitable, but why describe him as enamored of the Graces?³ And since the ancient mythologists fall into mistakes so gross and obvious, we have no reason surely to expect such refined and long-spun allegories, as some have endeavored to deduce from their fictions.

¹ Hesiod, Theog. l. 935.

² Id. *ibid.* and Plut. in vita Pelop. 19.

³ Iliad, xiv. 267.

Lucretius was plainly seduced by the strong appearance of allegory which is observable in the pagan fictions. He first addresses himself to Venus as to that generating power which animates, renews, and beautifies the universe; but is soon betrayed by the mythology into incoherencies, while he prays to that allegorical personage to appease the furies of her lover Mars — an idea not drawn from allegory, but from the popular religion, and which Lucretius, as an Epicurean, could not consistently admit of.

The deities of the vulgar are so little superior to human creatures that, where men are affected with strong sentiments of veneration or gratitude for any hero or public benefactor, nothing can be more natural than to convert him into a God, and fill the heavens, after this manner, with continual recruits from amongst mankind. Most of the divinities of the ancient world are supposed to have once been men, and to have been beholden for their *apotheosis* to the admiration and affection of the people. The real history of their adventures, corrupted by tradition, and elevated by the marvellous, became a plentiful source of fable, especially in passing through the hands of poets, allegorists, and priests, who

successively improved upon the wonder and astonishment of the ignorant multitude.

Painters too, and sculptors, came in for their share of profit in the sacred mysteries, and furnishing men with sensible representations of their divinities, whom they clothed in human figures, gave great increase to the public devotion, and determined its object. It was probably for want of these arts in rude and barbarous ages that men deified plants, animals, and even brute, unorganised matter; and rather than be without a sensible object of worship, affixed divinity to such ungainly forms. Could any statuary of Syria, in early times, have formed a just figure of Apollo, the conic stone, Heliogabalus, had never become the object of such profound adoration, and been received as a representation of the solar deity.¹

¹ Herodian, lib. v. 3, 10. Jupiter Ammon is represented by Curtius as a deity of the same kind, lib. iv., cap. 7. The Arabians and Pessinuntians adored also shapeless unformed stones as their deity. Arnob. lib. vi. 496 A. So much did their folly exceed that of the Egyptians.

Stilpo was banished by the council of Areopagus for affirming that the Minerva in the citadel was no divinity, but the workmanship of Phidias the sculptor.² What degree of reason must we expect in the religious belief of the vulgar in other nations, when Athenians and Areopagites could entertain such gross conceptions?

² Diog. Laert., lib. ii. 116.

These, then, are the general principles of polytheism, founded in human nature, and little or nothing dependent on caprice and accident. As the *causes* which bestow happiness or misery are, in general, very little known and very uncertain, our anxious concern endeavors to attain a determinate idea of them, and finds no better expedient than to represent them as intelligent, voluntary agents, like ourselves; only somewhat superior in power and wisdom. The limited influence of these agents, and their great proximity to human weakness, introduce the various distribution and division of their authority; and thereby give rise to allegory. The same principles naturally deify mortals, superior in power, courage, or understanding, and produce hero-worship, together with fabulous history and mythological tradition, in all its wild and unaccountable forms. And as an invisible spiritual intelligence is an object

too refined for vulgar apprehension, men naturally affix it to some sensible representation; such as either the more conspicuous parts of nature, or the statues, images, and pictures which a more refined age forms of its divinities.

Almost all idolaters, of whatever age or country, concur in these general principles and conceptions; and even the particular characters and provinces which they assign to their deities are not extremely different.¹ The Greek and Roman travellers and conquerors, without much difficulty, found their own deities everywhere; and said, “This is Mercury, that Venus, this Mars, that Neptune,” by whatever title the strange Gods might be denominated. The goddess Hertha, of our Saxon ancestors, seems to be no other, according to Tacitus,² than the *Mater Tellus* of the Romans; and his conjecture was evidently just.

¹ See Cæsar, of the religion of the Gauls, De bello Gallico, lib. vi. 17.

² De moribus Germ. 40.

§ VI.

ORIGIN OF THEISM FROM POLYTHEISM.

The doctrine of one supreme deity, the author of nature, is very ancient, has spread itself over great and populous nations, and among them has been embraced by all ranks and conditions of persons. But whoever thinks that it has owed its success to the prevalent force of those invincible reasons, on which it is undoubtedly founded, would show himself little acquainted with the ignorance and stupidity of the people, and their incurable prejudices in favor of their particular superstitions. Even at this day, and in Europe, ask any of the vulgar why he believes in an Omnipotent Creator of the world: he will never mention the beauty of final causes, of which he is wholly ignorant: he will not hold out his hand, and bid you contemplate the suppleness and variety of joints in his fingers, their bending all one way, the counterpoise which they receive from the thumb, the softness and fleshy parts of the inside of his hand, with all the other circumstances which render that member fit for the use to which it was destined. To these he has been long accustomed, and he beholds them

with listlessness and unconcern. He will tell you of the sudden and unexpected death of such a one; the fall and bruise of such another; the excessive drought of this season; the cold and rains of another. These he ascribes to the immediate operation of Providence. And such events as, with good reasoners, are the chief difficulties in admitting a Supreme Intelligence, are with him the sole arguments for it.

Many theists, even the most zealous and refined, have denied a *particular* providence, and have asserted that the Sovereign mind or first principle of all things, having fixed general laws, by which nature is governed, gives free and uninterrupted course to these laws, and disturbs not, at every turn, the settled order of events by particular volitions. From the beautiful connexion, say they, and rigid observance of established rules, we draw the chief arguments for theism; and from the same principles are enabled to answer the principal objections against it. But so little is this understood by the generality of mankind, that wherever they observe any one to ascribe all events to natural causes, and to remove the particular interposition of a deity, they are apt to suspect him of the grossest infidelity. "A little philosophy," says my Lord Bacon, "makes men Atheists; a great deal reconciles them to religion." For men, being taught by superstitious prejudices to lay the stress on a wrong place, when that fails them, and they discover, by a little reflexion, that this very regularity and uniformity is the strongest proof of design and of a supreme intelligence, they return to that belief which they had deserted; and they are now able to establish it on a firmer and more durable foundation.

Convulsions in nature, disorders, prodigies, miracles, though the most opposite to the plan of a wise superintendent, impress mankind with the strongest sentiments of religion, the causes of events seeming then the most unknown and unaccountable. Madness, fury, rage, and an inflamed imagination, though they sink men nearest the level of beasts, are, for a like reason, often supposed to be the only dispositions in which we can have any immediate communication with the deity.

We must conclude, therefore, on the whole, that since the vulgar, in nations which have embraced the doctrine of theism, still build it upon irrational and superstitious opinions, they are never led into that opinion

by any process of argument, but by a certain train of thinking more suitable to their genius and capacity.

It may readily happen, in an idolatrous nation, that though men admit the existence of several limited deities, yet is there some one God whom, in a particular manner, they make the object of their worship and adoration. They may either suppose that, in the distribution of power and territory among the Gods, their nation was subjected to the jurisdiction of that particular deity; or, reducing heavenly objects to the model of things below, they might represent one God as the prince or supreme magistrate of the rest, who, though of the same nature, rules them with an authority like that which an earthly sovereign exercises over his subjects and vassals. Whether this God, therefore, be considered as their peculiar patron, or as the general sovereign of heaven, his votaries will endeavor by every art to insinuate themselves into his favor; and supposing him to be pleased, like themselves, with praise and flattery, there is no eulogy or exaggeration which will be spared in their addresses to him. In proportion as men's fears or distresses become more urgent, they still invent new strains of adulation; and even he who outdoes his predecessors in swelling up the titles of his divinity, is sure to be outdone by his successors in newer and more pompous epithets of praise. Thus they proceed; till at last they arrive at infinity itself, beyond which there is no farther progress. And it is well if, in striving to get farther, and to represent a magnificent simplicity, they run not into inexplicable mystery, and destroy the intelligent nature of their deity, on which alone any rational worship or adoration can be founded. While they confine themselves to the notion of a perfect being, the creator of the world, they coincide, by chance, with the principles of reason and true philosophy; though they are guided to that notion, not by reason, of which they are in a great measure incapable, but by the adulation and fears of the most vulgar superstition.

We often find, amongst barbarous nations, and even sometimes amongst civilized, that when every strain of flattery has been exhausted towards arbitrary princes, when every human quality has been applauded to the utmost, their servile courtiers represent them at last as real divinities, and point them out to the people as objects of adoration. How much more natural, therefore, is it that a limited deity, who is at first

supposed only the immediate author of the particular goods and ills in life, should in the end be represented as sovereign maker and modifier of the universe?

Even where this notion of a supreme deity is already established, though it ought naturally to lessen every other worship, and abase every object of reverence, yet if a nation has entertained the opinion of a subordinate tutelary divinity, saint, or angel, their addresses to that being gradually rise upon them, and encroach on the adoration due to their supreme deity. The Virgin Mary, ere checked by the Reformation, had proceeded from being merely a good woman, to usurp many attributes of the Almighty. God and St. Nicholas go hand in hand in all the prayers and petitions of the Muscovites.

Thus the deity who, from love, converted himself into a bull, in order to carry off Europa, and who from ambition dethroned his father, Saturn, became the Optimus Maximus of the heathens. Thus the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, became the supreme deity or Jehovah of the Jews.

The Jacobins, who denied the immaculate conception, have ever been very unhappy in their doctrine, even though political reasons have kept the Romish church from condemning it. The Cordeliers have run away with all the popularity. But in the fifteenth century, as we learn from Boulainvilliers,¹ an Italian Cordelier maintained that during the three days when Christ was interred, the hypostatic union was dissolved, and that his human nature was not a proper object of adoration during that period. Without the art of divination, one might foretell that so gross and impious a blasphemy would not fail to be anathematized by the people. It was the occasion of great insults on the part of the Jacobins, who now got some recompense for their misfortunes in the war about the immaculate conception.

¹ Histoire Abrégée, p. 499.

Rather than relinquish this propensity to adulation, religionists in all ages have involved themselves in the greatest absurdities and contradictions.

Homer, in one passage, calls Oceanus and Tethys the original parents of all things, conformably to the established mythology and traditions of

the Greeks. Yet, in other passages, he could not forbear complimenting Jupiter, the reigning deity, with that magnificent appellation; and accordingly denominates him the father of Gods and men. He forgets that every temple, every street, was full of the ancestors, uncles, brothers, and sisters of this Jupiter, who was, in reality, nothing but an upstart parricide and usurper. A like contradiction is observable in Hesiod, and is so much the less excusable as his professed intention was to deliver a true genealogy of the Gods.

Were there a religion (and we may suspect Mahometanism of this inconsistency) which sometimes painted the deity in the most sublime colors, as the creator of heaven and earth; sometimes degraded him nearly to a level with human creatures in his powers and faculties; while at the same time it ascribed to him suitable infirmities, passions, and partialities of the moral kind. That religion, after it was extinct, would also be cited as an instance of those contradictions, which arise from the gross, vulgar, natural conceptions of mankind, opposed to their continual propensity towards flattery and exaggeration. Nothing indeed would prove more strongly the divine origin of any religion than to find (and happily this is the case with Christianity) that it is free from a contradiction so incident to human nature.

§ VII.

CONFIRMATION OF THIS DOCTRINE.

It appears certain that, though the original notions of the vulgar represent the Divinity as a limited being, and consider him only as the particular cause of health or sickness, plenty or want, prosperity or adversity; yet, when more magnificent ideas are urged upon them, they esteem it dangerous to refuse their assent. Will you say that your deity is finite and bounded in his perfections; may be overcome by a greater force; is subject to human passions, pains, and infirmities; has a beginning, and may have an end? This they dare not affirm; but, thinking it safest to comply with the higher encomiums, they endeavor, by an affected ravishment and devotion, to ingratiate themselves with him. As a confirmation of this, we

may observe that the assent of the vulgar is, in this case, merely verbal, and that they are incapable of conceiving those sublime qualities which they seemingly attribute to the deity. Their real idea of him, notwithstanding their pompous language, is still as poor and frivolous as ever.

That original intelligence, say the Magians, who is the first principle of all things, discovers himself *immediately* to the mind and understanding alone; but has placed the sun as his image in the visible universe; and when that bright luminary diffuses its beams over the earth and the firmament, it is a faint copy of the glory which resides in the higher heavens. If you would escape the displeasure of this divine being, you must be careful never to set your bare foot upon the ground, nor spit into a fire, nor throw any water upon it, even though it were consuming a whole city.¹ Who can express the perfections of the Almighty? say the Mahometans. Even the noblest of his works, if compared to him, are but dust and rubbish. How much more must human conception fall short of his infinite perfections? His smile and favor renders men for ever happy; and to obtain it for your children, the best method is to cut off from them, while infants, a little bit of skin, about half the breadth of a farthing. Take two bits of cloth,² say the *Roman Catholics*, about an inch or an inch and a half square, join them by the corners with two strings of pieces of tape about sixteen inches long, throw this over your head, and make one of the bits of cloth lie upon your breast, and the other upon your back, keeping them next your skin; there is not a better secret for recommending yourself to that infinite being, who exists from eternity to eternity.

¹ Hyde de Relig. veterum Persarum.

² Called the Scapulaire.

The Getes, commonly called immortal, from their steady belief of the soul's immortality, were genuine theists and unitarians. They affirmed Zamolxis, their deity, to be the only true God; and asserted the worship of all other nations to be addressed to mere fictions and chimeras. But were their religious principles any more refined, on account of these magnificent pretensions? Every sixth year they sacrificed a human victim, whom they sent as a messenger to their deity, in order to inform him of

their wants and necessities. And when it thundered, they were so provoked, that, in order to return the defiance, they let fly arrows at him, and declined not the combat as unequal. Such at least is the account which Herodotus gives of the theism of the immortal Getes.¹

¹ Lib. iv. c. 94.

§ VIII.

FLUX AND REFLUX OF POLYTHEISM AND THEISM.

It is remarkable that the principles of religion have a kind of flux and reflux in the human mind, and that men have a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism, and to sink again from theism into idolatry. The vulgar, that is, indeed, all mankind, a few excepted, being ignorant and unstructed, never elevate their contemplation to the heavens, or penetrate by their disquisitions into the secret structure of vegetable or animal bodies; so as to discover a supreme mind or original providence, which bestowed order on every part of nature. They consider these admirable works in a more confined and selfish view; and finding their own happiness and misery to depend on the secret influence and unforeseen concurrence of external objects, they regard, with perpetual attention, the *unknown causes* which govern all these natural events, and distribute pleasure and pain, good and ill, by their powerful but silent operation. The unknown causes are still appealed to on every emergency; and in this general appearance or confused image are the perpetual objects of human hopes and fears, wishes and apprehensions. By degrees, the active imagination of men, uneasy in this abstract conception of objects about which it is incessantly employed, begins to render them more particular, and to clothe them in shapes more suitable to its natural comprehension. It represents them to be sensible, intelligent beings, like mankind; actuated by love and hatred, and flexible by gifts and entreaties, by prayers and sacrifices. Hence the origin of religion: And hence the origin of idolatry or polytheism.

But the same anxious concern for happiness which begets the idea of these invisible, intelligent powers, allows not mankind to remain long in

the first simple conception of them as powerful but limited beings, masters of human fate, but slaves to destiny and the course of nature. Men's exaggerated praises and compliments still swell their idea upon them; and elevating their deities to the utmost bounds of perfection, at last beget the attributes of unity and infinity, simplicity and spirituality. Such refined ideas, being somewhat disproportioned to vulgar comprehension, remain not long in their original purity; but require to be supported by the notion of inferior mediators or subordinate agents, which interpose between mankind and their supreme deity. These demi-gods or middle beings, partaking more of human nature and being more familiar to us, become the chief objects of devotion, and gradually recall that idolatry which had been formerly banished by the ardent prayers and panegyrics of timorous and indigent mortals. But as these idolatrous religions fall every day into grosser and more vulgar conceptions, they at last destroy themselves, and, by the vile representations which they form of their deities, make the tide turn again towards theism. But so great is the propensity, in this alternate revolution of human sentiments, to return back to idolatry, that the utmost precaution is not able effectually to prevent it. And of this, some theists, particularly the Jews and Mahometans, have been sensible; as appears by their banishing all the arts of statuary and painting, and not allowing the representations even of human figures to be taken by marble or colors, lest the common infirmity of mankind should thence produce idolatry. The feeble apprehensions of men cannot be satisfied with conceiving their deity as a pure spirit and perfect intelligence; and yet their natural terrors keep them from imputing to him the least shadow of limitation and imperfection. They fluctuate between these opposite sentiments. The same infirmity still drags them downwards, from an omnipotent and spiritual deity, to a limited and corporeal one, and from a corporeal and limited deity to a statue or visible representation. The same endeavor at elevation still pushes them upwards, from the statue or material image to the invisible power; and from the invisible power to an infinitely perfect deity, the creator and sovereign of the universe.

COMPARISON OF THESE RELIGIONS WITH REGARD TO PERSECUTION AND TOLERATION.

Polytheism or idolatrous worship, being founded entirely in vulgar traditions, is liable to this great inconvenience, that any practice or opinion, however barbarous or corrupted, may be authorized by it; and full scope is left for knavery to impose on credulity till morals and humanity be expelled from the religious systems of mankind. At the same time, idolatry is attended with this evident advantage, that, by limiting the powers and functions of its deities, it naturally admits the Gods of other sects and nations to a share of divinity, and renders all the various deities, as well as rites, ceremonies, or traditions, compatible with each other.¹ Theism is opposite both in its advantages and disadvantages. As that system supposes one sole deity, the perfection of reason and goodness, it should, if justly prosecuted, banish everything frivolous, unreasonable, or inhuman from religious worship, and set before men the most illustrious example, as well as the most commanding motives of justice and benevolence. These mighty advantages are not indeed over-balanced (for that is not possible), but somewhat diminished, by inconveniences, which arise from the vices and prejudices of mankind. While one sole object of devotion is acknowledged, the worship of other deities is regarded as absurd and impious. Nay, this unity of object seems naturally to require the unity of faith and ceremonies, and furnishes designing men with a pretence for representing their adversaries as profane, and the objects of divine as well as human vengeance. For as each sect is positive that its own faith and worship are entirely acceptable to the deity, and as no one can conceive that the same being should be pleased with different and opposite rites and principles, the several sects fall naturally into animosity, and mutually discharge on each other that sacred zeal and rancour, the most furious and implacable of all human passions.

¹ Verrius Flaccus, cited by Pliny, lib. xxviii, cap. 2, affirmed that it was usual for the Romans, before they laid siege to any town, to invoke the tutelar deity of the place, and by promising him equal or greater honors than those he at present enjoyed, bribe him to betray his old friends and votaries. The name of the tutelar deity of Rome was for this reason kept a most religious mystery; lest the enemies of the republic should be able, in the same manner, to draw him over to their service. For without the name, they

thought, nothing of that kind could be practised. Pliny says that the common form of invocation was preserved to his time in the ritual of the pontiffs. And Macrobius has transmitted a copy of it from the secret things of Sammonicus Serenus.

The tolerating spirit of idolaters, both in ancient and modern times, is very obvious to anyone who is the least conversant in the writings of historians or travellers. When the oracle of Delphi was asked, what rites or worship was most acceptable to the Gods? "Those legally established in each city," replied the oracle.¹ Even priests, in those ages, could, it seems, allow salvation to those of a different communion. The Romans commonly adopted the Gods of the conquered people; and never disputed the attributes of those local and national deities in whose territories they resided. The religious wars and persecutions of the Egyptian idolaters are indeed an exception to this rule; but are accounted for by ancient authors from reasons singular and remarkable. Different species of animals were the deities of the different sects among the Egyptians; and the deities being in continual war, engaged their votaries in the same contention. The worshippers of dogs could not long remain in peace with the adorers of cats or wolves.¹ But where that reason took not place, the Egyptian superstition was not so incompatible as is commonly imagined; since we learn from Herodotus,² that very large contributions were given by Amasis towards rebuilding the temple of Delphi.

¹ Xenoph. Memor. lib. i, 3, 1.

¹ Plutarch, de Isid. et Osiride. c. 72.

² Lib. ii. c. 180.

The intolerance of almost all religions which have maintained the unity of God is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists. The implacable narrow spirit of the Jews is well known. Mahometanism set out with still more bloody principles; and even to this day, deals out damnation, though not fire and faggot, to all other sects. And if, among Christians, the English and Dutch have embraced the principles of toleration, this singularity has proceeded from the steady resolution of the civil magistrate, in opposition to the continued efforts of priest and bigots.

The disciples of Zoroaster shut the doors of heaven against all but the Magians.³ Nothing could more obstruct the progress of the Persian conquests than the furious zeal of that nation against the temples and images of the Greeks. And after the overthrow of that empire, we find Alexander, as a polytheist, immediately re-establishing the worship of the Babylonians, which their former princes, as monotheists, had carefully abolished.⁴ Even the blind and devoted attachment of that conqueror to the Greek superstition hindered not but he himself sacrificed according to the Babylonish rites and ceremonies.⁵

³ Hyde de Relig. vet. Persarum.

⁴ Arrian, de Exped. lib. iii, 16. Id. lib. vii, 17.

⁵ Id. *ibid.*

So sociable is polytheism, that the utmost fierceness and aversion which it meets with in an opposite religion is scarcely able to disgust it, and keep it at a distance. Augustus praised extremely the reserve of his grandson, Caius Cæsar, when this latter prince, passing by Jerusalem, deigned not to sacrifice according to the Jewish law. But for what reason did Augustus so much approve of this conduct? Only because that religion was by the Pagans esteemed ignoble and barbarous.¹

¹ Sueton. in vita Aug. cap. 93.

I may venture to affirm that few corruptions of idolatry and polytheism are more pernicious to political society than this corruption of theism,² when carried to the utmost height. The human sacrifices of the Carthaginians, Mexicans, and many barbarous nations,³ scarcely exceed the Inquisition and persecutions of Rome and Madrid. For besides that the effusion of blood may not be so great in the former case as in the latter; besides this, I say, the human victims, being chosen by lot, or by some exterior signs, affect not in so considerable a degree the rest of the society. Whereas virtue, knowledge, love of liberty, are the qualities which call down the fatal vengeance of inquisitors; and when expelled, leave the society in the most shameful ignorance, corruption, and bondage. The illegal murder of one man by a tyrant is more pernicious than the death of a thousand by pestilence, famine, or any undistinguishing calamity.

² Corruptio optimi pessima.

³ Most nations have fallen into this guilt of human sacrifices; though, perhaps, that impious superstition has never prevailed very much in any civilised nation, unless we except the Carthaginians. For the Tyrians soon abolished it. A sacrifice is conceived as a present; and any present is delivered to the deity by destroying it and rendering it useless to men; by burning what is solid, pouring out the liquid, and killing the animate. For want of a better way of doing him service, we do ourselves an injury; and fancy that we thereby express, at least, the heartiness of our good-will and adoration. Thus our mercenary devotion deceives ourselves, and imagines it deceives the deity.

In the temple of Diana at Aricia near Rome, whoever murdered the present priest was legally entitled to be installed his successor.¹ A very singular institution! For, however barbarous and bloody the common superstitions often are to the laity, they usually turn to the advantage of the holy order.

¹ Strabo, lib. v, 239. Sueton. in vita Cal. 35.

§ X.

WITH REGARD TO COURAGE OR ABASEMENT.

From the comparison of theism and idolatry, we may form some other observations, which will also confirm the vulgar observation that the corruption of the best things gives rise to the worst.

Where the deity is represented as infinitely superior to mankind, this belief, though altogether just, is apt, when joined with superstitious terrors, to sink the human mind into the lowest submission and abasement, and to represent the monkish virtues of mortification, penance, humility, and passive suffering, as the only qualities which are acceptable to him. But where the Gods are conceived to be only a little superior to mankind, and to have been, many of them, advanced from that inferior rank, we are more at our ease in our addresses to them, and may even, without profaneness, aspire sometimes to a rivalry and emulation of them. Hence activity, spirit, courage, magnanimity, love of liberty, and all the virtues which aggrandise a people.

The heroes in paganism correspond exactly to the saints in popery and holy dervises in Mahometanism. The place of Hercules, Theseus, Hector, Romulus, is now supplied by Dominic, Francis, Anthony, and Benedict. Instead of the destruction of monsters, the subduing of tyrants, the defence of our native country; whippings and fastings, cowardice and humility, abject submission and slavish obedience, are become the means of obtaining celestial honors among mankind.

One great incitement to the pious Alexander in his warlike expeditions was his rivalship of Hercules and Bacchus, whom he justly pretended to have excelled.¹ Brasidas, that generous and noble Spartan, after falling in battle, had heroic honors paid him by the inhabitants of Amphipolis, whose defence he had embraced.² And in general, all founders of states and colonies amongst the Greeks were raised to this inferior rank of divinity, by those who reaped the benefit of their labors.

¹ Arrian, passim.

² Thucyd. lib. v, 11.

This gave rise to the observation of Machiavel,³ that the doctrines of the Christian religion (meaning the Catholic; for he knew no other) which recommend only passive courage and suffering, had subdued the spirit of mankind, and had fitted them for slavery and subjection. An observation which would certainly be just, were there not many other circumstances in human society which control the genius and character of a religion.

³ Discorsi, lib. vi.

Brasidas seized a mouse, and being bit by it, let it go. "There is nothing so contemptible," says he, "but what may be safe, if it has but courage to defend itself."⁴ Bellarmine patiently and humbly allowed the fleas and other odious vermin to prey upon him. "We shall have heaven," said he, "to reward us for our sufferings; but these poor creatures have nothing but the enjoyment of the present life."¹ Such difference is there between the maxims of a Greek hero and a Catholic saint.

⁴ Plut. Apophth.

¹ Bayle, Article Bellarmine.

WITH REGARD TO REASON OR ABSURDITY.

Here is another observation to the same purpose, and a new proof that the corruption of the best things begets the worst. If we examine, without prejudice, the ancient heathen mythology, as contained in the poets, we shall not discover in it any such monstrous absurdity as we may be apt at first to apprehend. Where is the difficulty of conceiving that the same powers or principles, whatever they were, which formed this visible world, men and animals, produced also a species of intelligent creatures, of more refined substance and greater authority than the rest? That these creatures may be capricious, revengeful, passionate, voluptuous, is easily conceived; nor is any circumstance more apt, among ourselves, to engender such vices, than the licence of absolute authority. And in short, the whole mythological system is so natural, that in the vast variety of planets and worlds, contained in this universe, it seems more than probable that, somewhere or other, it is really carried into execution.

The chief objection to it with regard to this planet, is that it is not ascertained by any just reason or authority. The ancient tradition, insisted on by heathen priests and theologers, is but a weak foundation; and transmitted also such a number of contradictory reports, supported, all of them, by equal authority, that it became absolutely impossible to fix a preference amongst them. A few volumes, therefore, must contain all the polemical writings of pagan priests. Their whole theology must consist more of traditional stories and superstitious practices than of philosophical argument and controversy.

But where theism forms the fundamental principle of any popular religion, that tenet is so conformable to sound reason, that philosophy is apt to incorporate itself with such a system of theology. And if the other dogmas of that system be contained in a sacred book, such as the Alcoran, or be determined by any visible authority, like that of the Roman pontif, speculative reasoners naturally carry on their assent, and embrace a theory which has been instilled into them by their earliest education, and which also possesses some degree of consistence and uniformity. But as these appearances are sure, all of them, to prove deceitful, philosophy will soon

find herself very unequally yoked with her new associate; and instead of regulating each principle, as they advance together, she is at every turn perverted to serve the purposes of superstition. For besides the unavoidable incoherences which must be reconciled and adjusted, one may safely affirm that all popular theology, especially the scholastic, has a kind of appetite for absurdity and contradiction. If that theology went not beyond reason and common sense, her doctrines would appear too easy and familiar. Amazement must of necessity be raised; mystery affected; darkness and obscurity sought after; and a foundation of merit afforded the devout votaries, who desire an opportunity of subduing their rebellious reason, by the belief of the most unintelligible sophisms.

Ecclesiastical history sufficiently confirms these reflexions. When a controversy is started, some people pretend always with certainty to foretell the issue. Whichever opinion, say they, is most contrary to plain sense is sure to prevail, even where the general interest of the system requires not that decision. Though the reproach of heresy may for some time be bandied about among the disputants, it always rests at last on the side of reason. Any one, it is pretended, that has but learning enough of this kind to know the definition of Arian, Pelagian, Erastian, Socinian, Sabellian, Eutychian, Nestorian, Monothelite, etc., not to mention Protestant, whose fate is yet uncertain, will be convinced of the truth of this observation. It is thus a system becomes more absurd in the end, merely from its being reasonable and philosophical in the beginning.

To oppose the torrent of scholastic religion by such feeble maxims as these: that “it is impossible for the same to be and not to be”, that “the whole is greater than a part”, that “two and three make five”, is pretending to stop the ocean with a bull-rush. Will you set up profane reason against sacred mystery? No punishment is great enough for your impiety. And the same fires which were kindled for heretics will serve also for the destruction of philosophers.

§ XII.

WITH REGARD TO DOUBT OR CONVICTION.

We meet every day with people so sceptical with regard to history, that they assert it impossible for any nation ever to believe such absurd principles as those of Greek and Egyptian paganism; and at the same time so dogmatical with regard to religion, that they think the same absurdities are to be found in no other communion. Cambyses entertained like prejudices; and very impiously ridiculed, and even wounded, Apis, the great God of the Egyptians, who appeared to his profane senses nothing but a large spotted bull. But Herodotus¹ judiciously ascribes this sally of passion to a real madness or disorder of the brain. Otherwise, says the historian, he never would have openly affronted any established worship. For on that head, continues he, every nation are best satisfied with their own, and think they have the advantage over every other nation.

¹ Lib. iii, cap. 38.

It must be allowed that the Roman Catholics are a very learned sect, and that no one communion but that of the Church of England can dispute their being the most learned of all the Christian Churches. Yet Averroes, the famous Arabian, who, no doubt, has heard of the Egyptian superstitions, declares that of all religions the most absurd and nonsensical is that whose votaries eat, after having created, their deity.

I believe, indeed, that there is no tenet in all paganism which would give so fair a scope to ridicule as this of the *real presence*. For it is so absurd, that it eludes the force of all argument. There are even some pleasant stories of that kind, which, though somewhat profane, are commonly told by the Catholics themselves. One day, a priest, it is said, gave inadvertently, instead of the sacrament, a counter, which had by accident fallen among the holy wafers. The communicant waited patiently for some time, expecting it would dissolve on his tongue; but finding that it still remained entire, he took it off. "I wish," cried he to the priest, "you have not committed some mistake. "I wish you have not given me God the Father: He is so hard and tough there is no swallowing him."

A famous general, at that time in the Muscovite service, having come to Paris for the recovery of his wounds, brought along with him a young Turk, whom he had taken prisoner. Some of the doctors of the Sorbonne (who are altogether as positive as the dervises of Constantinople), thinking it a pity that the poor Turk should be damned for want of instruction,

solicited Mustapha very hard to turn Christian, and promised him, for his encouragement, plenty of good wine in this world, and paradise in the next. These allurements were too powerful to be resisted; and therefore, having been well instructed and catechised, he at last agreed to receive the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper. The priest, however, to make everything sure and solid, still continued his instructions: and began the next day with the usual question, "How many Gods are there?" "None at all," replies Benedict; for that was his new name. "How! None at all!" cries the priest. "To be sure," said the honest proselyte. "You have told me all along that there is but one God: And yesterday I ate him."

Such are the doctrines of our brethren the Catholics. But to these doctrines we are so accustomed, that we never wonder at them, though, in a future age, it will probably become difficult to persuade some nations that any human, two-legged creature could ever embrace such principles. And it is a thousand to one but these nations themselves shall have something full as absurd in their own creed, to which they will give a most implicit and most religious assent.

I lodged once at Paris in the same hotel with an ambassador from Tunis, who, having passed some years at London, was returning home that way. One day I observed his Moorish excellency diverting himself under the porch with surveying the splendid equipages that drove along; when there chanced to pass that way some Capucin friars, who had never seen a Turk; as he, on his part, though accustomed to the European dresses, had never seen the grotesque figure of a Capucin. And there is no expressing the mutual admiration with which they inspired each other. Had the chaplain of the embassy entered into a dispute with these Franciscans, their reciprocal surprise had been of the same nature. Thus all mankind stand staring at one another; and there is no beating it out of their heads, that the turban of the African is not just as good or as bad a fashion as the cowl of the European. "He is a very honest man", said the Prince of Sallee, speaking of de Ruyter: "It is a pity he were a Christian."

"How can you worship leeks and onions?" we shall suppose a Sorbonnist to say to a priest of Sais. "If we worship them", replies the latter, "at least, we do not, at the same time, eat them." "But what strange objects of adoration are cats and monkeys?" says the learned doctor. "They

are at least as good as the relics or rotten bones of martyrs,” answers his no less learned antagonist. “Are you not mad,” insists the Catholic, “to cut one another’s throat about the preference of a cabbage or a cucumber?” “Yes,” says the pagan; “I allow it, if you will confess that those are still madder who fight about the preference among volumes of sophistry, ten thousand of which are not equal in value to one cabbage or cucumber.”¹ ...

¹ It is strange that the Egyptian religion, though so absurd, should yet have borne so great a resemblance to the Jewish, that ancient writers even of the greatest genius were not able to observe any difference between them. For it is remarkable that both Tacitus and Suetonius, when they mention that decree of the senate, under Tiberius, by which the Egyptian and Jewish proselytes were banished from Rome, expressly treat these religions as the same; and it appears that even the decree itself was founded on that supposition. “Actum et de sacris Ægyptiis Judaicisque pellendis; factumque patrum consultum, ut quatuor millia libertini generis *ea superstitione* infecta, quis idonea ætas, in insulam Sardiniam veherentur, coercendis illic latrocinii; et si ob gravitatem cœli interissent, *vile damnum*: Ceteri cederent Italia, nisi certam ante diem profanos ritus exuissent” (Tacit. Ann. lib. ii. cap. 85). “Externas cæremonias, Ægyptios, Judaicosque ritus compescuit; coactus qui *superstitione ea* tenebantur, religiosas vestes cum instrumento omni comburere, etc.” (Sueton. Tiber., cap. 36). These wise heathens, observing something in the general air and genius and spirit of the two religions to be the same, esteemed the differences of their dogmas too frivolous to deserve any attention.

Every bystander will easily judge (but unfortunately the bystanders are few) that if nothing were requisite to establish any popular system but exposing the absurdities of other systems, every votary of every superstition could give a sufficient reason for his blind and bigotted attachment to the principles in which he has been educated. But without so extensive a knowledge on which to ground this assurance (and perhaps better without it) there is not wanting a sufficient stock of religious zeal and faith amongst mankind. Diodorus Siculus² gives a remarkable instance to this purpose, of which he was himself an eyewitness. While Egypt lay under the greatest terror of the Roman name, a legionary soldier having inadvertently been guilty of the sacriligious impiety of killing a cat, the whole people rose upon him with the utmost fury, and all the efforts of the prince were not able to save him. The senate and people of Rome, I am persuaded, would not then have been so delicate with regard to their national deities. They very frankly, a little after that time, voted Augustus a

place in the celestial mansions; and would have dethroned every God in heaven for his sake, had he seemed to desire it. “Presens divus habebitur Augustus,” says Horace. That is a very important point; and in other nations and other ages, the same circumstance has not been esteemed altogether indifferent.¹

² Lib. i, 83.

¹ When Louis XIV. took on himself the protection of the Jesuits’ college of Clermont, the society ordered the king’s arms to be put up over the gate, and took down the cross, in order to make way for it. Which gave occasion to the following epigram:

Sustulit hino Christi, posuitque insignia Regis:
Impia gens, alium nescit habere Deum.

“Notwithstanding the sanctity of our holy religion,” says Tully,² “no crime is more common with us than sacrilege.” But was it ever heard of, that an Egyptian violated the temple of a cat, an ibis, or a crocodile? “There is no torture an Egyptian would not undergo”, says the same author in another place,³ “rather than injure an ibis, an aspic, a cat, a dog, or a crocodile.” Thus it is strictly true what Dryden observes:

“Of whatsoe’er descent their godhead be,
Stock, stone, or other homely pedigree,
In his defence his servants are as bold,
As if he had been born of beaten gold.”
Absalom and Achitophel.

Nay, the baser the materials are of which the divinity is composed, the greater devotion is he likely to excite in the breasts of his deluded votaries. They exult in their shame, and make a merit with their deity, in braving for his sake all the ridicule and contumely of his enemies. Ten thousand Crusaders enlist themselves under the holy banners, and even openly triumph in those parts of their religion which their adversaries regard as the most reproachful.

² De Nat. Deor. i, 29.

³ Tusc. Quæst, lib. v, 27.

There occurs, I own, a difficulty in the Egyptian system of theology, as indeed few systems are entirely free from difficulties. It is evident, from their method of propagation, that a couple of cats, in fifty years, would stock a whole kingdom; and if that religious veneration were still paid them, it would, in twenty more, not only be easier in Egypt to find a God than a man, which Petronius says was the case in some parts of Italy, but the Gods must at last entirely starve the men, and leave themselves neither priests nor votaries remaining. It is probable, therefore, that this wise nation, the most celebrated in antiquity for prudence and sound policy, foreseeing such dangerous consequences, reserved all their worship for the full-grown divinities, and used the freedom to drown the holy spawn or little sucking Gods, without any scruple or remorse. And thus the practice of warping the tenets of religion, in order to serve temporal interests, is not by any means to be regarded as an invention of these latter ages.

The learned, philosophical Varro, discoursing of religion, pretends not to deliver anything beyond probabilities and appearances. Such was his good sense and moderation. But the passionate, the zealous Augustin, insults the noble Roman on his scepticism and reserve, and professes the most thorough belief and assurance.¹ A heathen poet, however, contemporary with the saint, absurdly esteems the religious system of the latter so false, that even the credulity of children, he says, could not engage them to believe it.¹

¹ De Civitate Dei, l. iii., cap. 17.

¹ Claudii Rutilii Numitiani iter, lib. i. 1. 394.

Is it strange, when mistakes are so common, to find everyone positive and dogmatical; and that the zeal often rises in proportion to the error? “*Moverunt,*” says Spartian, “*et ea tempestate Judæi bellum quod vetabantur mutilare genitalia.*”²

² In vita Adriani. 14.

If ever there was a nation or a time in which the public religion lost all authority over mankind, we might expect that infidelity in Rome during the Ciceronian age would openly have erected its throne, and that Cicero himself, in every speech and action, would have been its most declared abettor. But it appears that whatever sceptical liberties that great man

might use in his writings or in philosophical conversation, he yet avoided, in the common conduct of life, the imputation of deism and profaneness. Even in his own family, and to his wife Terentia, whom he highly trusted, he was willing to appear a devout religionist; and there remains a letter, addressed to her, in which he seriously desires her to offer sacrifice to Apollo and Æsculapius, in gratitude for the recovery of his health.³

³ Lib. xiv. epist. 7.

Pompey's devotion was much more sincere. In all his conduct, during the civil wars, he paid a great regard to auguries, dreams, and prophecies.⁴ Augustus was tainted with superstition of every kind. As it is reported of Milton, that his poetical genius never flowed with ease and abundance in the spring; so Augustus observed that his own genius for dreaming never was so perfect during that season, nor was so much to be relied on, as during the rest of the year. That great and able emperor was also extremely uneasy when he happened to change his shoes, and put the right foot shoe on the left foot.¹ In short, it cannot be doubted but the votaries of the established superstition of antiquity were as numerous in every state as those of the modern religion are at present. Its influence was as universal, though it was not so great. As many people gave their assent to it, though that assent was not seemingly so strong, precise, and affirmative.

⁴ Cicero de Divin. lib. ii., cap. 24.

¹ Suston Aug. cap. 90, 91, 92. Plin. lib. ii., cap. 7. (5.)

We may observe that, notwithstanding the dogmatical, imperious style of all superstition, the conviction of the religionists, in all ages, is more affected than real, and scarcely ever approaches in any degree to that solid belief and persuasion which governs us in the common affairs of life. Men dare not avow, even to their own hearts, the doubts which they entertain on such subjects. They make a merit of implicit faith, and disguise to themselves their real infidelity by the strongest asseverations and most positive bigotry. But nature is too hard for all their endeavors, and suffers not the obscure, glimmering light afforded in those shadowy regions, to equal the strong impressions made by common sense and by experience. The usual course of men's conduct belies their words, and shows that the assent in these matters is some unaccountable operation of

the mind between disbelief and conviction, but approaching much nearer the former than the latter.

Since, therefore, the mind of man appears of so loose and unsteady a contexture that, even at present, when so many persons find an interest in continually employing on it the chisel and the hammer, yet are they not able to engrave theological tenets with any lasting impression; how much more must this have been the case in ancient times, when the retainers to the holy function were so much fewer in comparison? No wonder that the appearances were then very inconsistent, and that men, on some occasions, might seem determined infidels, and enemies to the established religion, without being so in reality; or, at least, without knowing their own minds in that particular.

Another cause which rendered the ancient religions much looser than the modern is that the former were *traditional* and the latter are *scriptural*; and the tradition in the former was complex, contradictory, and, on many occasions, doubtful; so that it could not possibly be reduced to any standard and canon, or afford any determinate articles of faith. The stories of the Gods were numberless, like the popish legends; and though everyone, almost, believed a part of these stories, yet no one could believe or know the whole; while, at the same time, all must have acknowledged that no one part stood on a better foundation than the rest. The traditions of different cities and nations were also, on many occasions, directly opposite; and no reason could be assigned for preferring one to the other. And as there was an infinite number of stories, with regard to which tradition was nowise positive, the gradation was insensible, from the most fundamental articles of faith, to those loose and precarious fictions. The pagan religion, therefore, seemed to vanish like a cloud, whenever one approached to it, and examined it piecemeal. It could never be ascertained by any fixed dogmas and principles. And though this did not convert the generality of mankind from so absurd a faith; for when will the people be reasonable? yet it made them falter and hesitate more in maintaining their principles, and was even apt to produce, in certain dispositions of mind, some practices and opinions which had the appearance of determined infidelity.

To which we may add, that the fables of the pagan religion were, of themselves, light, easy, and familiar; without devils, or seas of brimstone, or any object that could much terrify the imagination. Who could forbear smiling, when he thought of the loves of Mars and Venus, or the amorous frolics of Jupiter and Pan? In this respect it was a true poetical religion, if it had not rather too much levity for the graver kinds of poetry. We find that it has been adopted by modern bards; nor have these talked with greater freedom and irreverence of the Gods whom they regarded as fictions, than the ancient did of the real objects of their devotion.

The inference is by no means just, that because a system of religion has made no deep impression on the minds of a people, it must therefore have been positively rejected by all men of common sense, and that opposite principles, in spite of the prejudices of education, were generally established by argument and reasoning. I know not but a contrary inference may be more probable. The less importunate and assuming any species of superstition appears, the less will it provoke men's spleen and indignation, or engage them into enquiries concerning its foundation and origin. This in the mean time is obvious, that the empire of all religious faith over the understanding is wavering and uncertain, subject to every variety of humour, and dependent on the present incidents, which strike the imagination. The difference is only in the degrees. An ancient will place a stroke of impiety and one of superstition alternately, throughout a whole discourse.¹ A modern often thinks in the same way, though he may be more guarded in his expressions.

¹ Witness this remarkable passage of Tacitus: "Præter multiplices rerum humanarum casus, cœlo terraque prodigia, et fulminum monitus, et futurorum præsentia, læta, tristia, ambigua, manifesta. Neo enim unquam atrocioribus populi Romani cladibus, magisque justis indiciis approbatum est, non esse curæ Diis securitatem nostram, esse ultionem" (Hist. lib. i, 3). Augustus's quarrel with Neptune is an instance of the same kind. Had not the emperor believed Neptune to be a real being, and to have dominion over the sea, where had been the foundation of his anger? And if he believed it, what madness to provoke still farther that deity? The same observation may be made upon Quintilian's exclamation on account of the death of his children, lib. vi. Præf.

Lucian tells us expressly,² that whoever believed not the most ridiculous fables of paganism was deemed by the people profane and

impious. To what purpose, indeed, would that agreeable author have employed the whole force of his wit and satire against the national religion, had not that religion been generally believed by his countrymen and contemporaries?

² Philopseudes 3.

Livy³ acknowledges, as frankly as any divine would at present, the common incredulity of his age; but then he condemns it as severely. And who can imagine that a national superstition, which could delude so great a man, would not also impose on the generality of the people?

³ Lib. x. cap. 40.

The Stoics bestowed many magnificent and even impious epithets on their sage; that he alone was rich, free, a king, and equal to the immortal Gods. They forgot to add that he was not superior in prudence and understanding to an old woman. For surely nothing can be more pitiful than the sentiments which that sect entertained with regard to religious matters; while they seriously agree with the common augurs that when a raven croaks from the left it is a good omen, but a bad one when a rook makes a noise from the same quarter. Panætius was the only Stoic among the Greeks who so much as doubted with regard to auguries and divinations.¹ Marcus Antoninus² tells us that he himself had received many admonitions from the Gods in his sleep. It is true, Epictetus³ forbids us to regard the language of rooks and ravens, but it is not that they do not speak truth: it is only because they can foretell nothing but the breaking of our neck or the forfeiture of our estate, which are circumstances, says he, that nowise concern us. Thus the Stoics join a philosophical enthusiasm to a religious superstition. The force of their mind, being all turned to the side of morals, unbent itself in that of religion.⁴

¹ Cicero de Divin. lib i., cap. 3 and 7.

² Lib. i. § 17.

³ Ench. § 17.

⁴ The Stoics, I own, were not quite orthodox in the established religion; but one may see, from these instances, that they went a great way; and the people undoubtedly went every length.

Plato⁵ introduces Socrates affirming that the accusation of impiety raised against him was owing entirely to his rejecting such fables as those of Saturn's castrating his father, Uranus, and Jupiter's dethroning Saturn. Yet, in a subsequent dialogue,⁶ Socrates confesses that the doctrine of the mortality of the soul was the received opinion of the people. Is there here any contradiction? Yes, surely. But the contradiction is not in Plato; it is in the people, whose religious principles in general are always composed of the most discordant parts, especially in an age when superstition sat so easy and light upon them.¹

⁵ Eutyphro. 6.

⁶ Phædo.

¹ Xenophon's conduct, as related by himself, is at once an incontestable proof of the general credulity of mankind in those ages, and the incoherences, in all ages, of men's opinions in religious matters. That great captain and philosopher, the disciple of Socrates, and one who has delivered some of the most refined sentiments with regard to a deity, gave all the following marks of vulgar, pagan superstition. By Socrates' advice, he consulted the oracle of Delphi, before he would engage in the expedition of Cyrus. De Exped. lib. iii. p. 294. ex edit. Leuncl. Sees a dream the night after the generals were seized; which he pays great regard to, but thinks ambiguous. Id. p. 295. He and the whole army regard sneezing as a very lucky omen. Id. p. 300. Has another dream, when he comes to the river Centrites, which his fellow-general, Cherosophus, also pays great regard to. Id. lib. iv., page 323. The Greeks, suffering from a cold north wind, sacrifice to it; and the historian observes that it immediately abated. Id. p. 329. Xenophon consults the sacrifices in secret, before he would form any resolution with himself about settling a colony. Lib. v. p. 359. He was himself a very skilful augur. Id. p. 361. Is determined by the victims to refuse the sole command of the army which was offered him. Lib. vi. p. 273. Cleander, the Spartan, though very desirous of it, refuses it for the same reason. Id. p. 392. Xenophon mentions an old dream with the interpretation given him, when he first joined Cyrus. P. 373. Mentions also the place of Heroules' descent into hell as believing it, and says the marks of it are still remaining. Id. p. 375. Had almost starved the army, rather than lead them to the field against the suspices. Id. p. 382, 383. His friend, Euclides, the augur, would not believe that he had brought no money from the expedition till he (Euclides) sacrificed, and then he saw the matter clearly in the Ext. Lib. vii. p. 425. The same philosopher, proposing a project of mines for the increase of the Athenian revenues, advises them first to consult the oracle. De Rat. Red. p. 392. That all this devotion was not a farce, in order to serve a political purpose, appears both from the facts themselves, and from the genius of that age, when little or nothing could be gained by hypocrisy. Besides, Xenophon, as appears from

his Memorabilia, was a kind of heretic in those times, which no political devotee ever is. It is for the same reason I maintain that Newton, Locke, Clarke, etc., being *Arians* or *Socinians*, were very sincere in the creed they professed. And I always oppose this argument to some libertines, who will needs have it that it was impossible but that these great philosophers must have been hypocrites.

The same Cicero who affected in his own family to appear a devout religionist, makes no scruple, in a public court of judicature, of treating the doctrine of a future state as a ridiculous fable to which nobody could give any attention.¹ Sallust² represents Cæsar as speaking the same language in the open senate.³

¹ Pro Cluentio, cap. 61.

² De bello Catilin. 51.

³ Cicero (Tusc. Quæst. lib. i. cap. 5, 6,) and Seneca (Epist. 24), as also Juvenal (Satyr 2, 149), maintain that there is no boy or old woman so ridiculous as to believe the poets in their accounts of a future state. Why then does Lucretius so highly exalt his master for freeing us from these terrors? Perhaps the generality of mankind were then in the disposition of Cephalus in Plato (de Rep. lib. i 330 D.), who while he was young and healthful could ridicule these stories, but as soon as he became old and infirm began to entertain apprehensions of their truth. This we may observe not to be unusual even at present.

But that all these freedoms implied not a total and universal infidelity and scepticism amongst the people is too apparent to be denied. Though some parts of the national religion hung loose upon the minds of men, other parts adhered more closely to them. And it was the great business of the sceptical philosophers to show that there was no more foundation for one than for the other. This is the artifice of Cotta in the dialogues concerning the *nature of the Gods*. He refutes the whole system of mythology by leading the orthodox, gradually, from the more momentous stories, which were believed, to the more frivolous, which everyone ridiculed. From the gods to the goddesses; from the goddesses to the nymphs; from the nymphs to the fawns and satyrs. His master, Carneades, had employed the same method of reasoning.⁴

⁴ Sext. Empir. advers. Mathem. lib. ix, 429.

Upon the whole, the greatest and most observable differences between a *traditional mythological* religion and a *systematical scholastical* one, are two. The former is often more reasonable, as consisting only of a multitude of stories, which, however groundless, imply no express absurdity and demonstrative contradiction; and sits also so easy and light on men's minds, that, though it may be as universally received, it happily makes no such deep impression on the affections and understanding.

§ XIII.

**IMPIOUS CONCEPTIONS OF THE DIVINE NATURE IN
POPULAR RELIGIONS OF BOTH KINDS.**

The primary religion of mankind arises chiefly from an anxious fear of future events; and what ideas will naturally be entertained of invisible, unknown powers, while men lie under dismal apprehensions of any kind, may easily be conceived. Every image of vengeance, severity, cruelty, and malice must occur, and must augment the ghastliness and horror which oppresses the amazed religionist. A panic having once seized the mind, the active fancy still farther multiplies the objects of terror; while that profound darkness, or, what is worse, that glimmering light, with which we are environed, represents the spectres of divinity under the most dreadful appearances imaginable. And no idea of perverse wickedness can be framed which those terrified devotees do not readily, without scruple, apply to their deity.

This appears the natural state of religion, when surveyed in one light. But if we consider, on the other hand, that spirit of praise and eulogy which necessarily has place in all religions, and which is the consequence of these very terrors, we must expect a quite contrary system of theology to prevail. Every virtue, every excellence, must be ascribed to the divinity, and no exaggeration will be deemed sufficient to reach those perfections with which he is endowed. Whatever strains of panegyric can be invented, are immediately embraced, without consulting any arguments or phænomena. It is esteemed a sufficient confirmation of them that they give

us more magnificent ideas of the divine object of our worship and adoration.

Here, therefore, is a kind of contradiction between the different principles of human nature which enter into religion. Our natural terrors present the notion of a devilish and malicious deity: our propensity to praise leads us to acknowledge an excellent and divine. And the influence of these opposite principles is various, according to the different situation of the human understanding.

In very barbarous and ignorant nations, such as the Africans and Indians, nay, even the Japanese, who can form no extensive ideas of power and knowledge, worship may be paid to a being whom they confess to be wicked and detestable; though they may be cautious, perhaps, of pronouncing this judgment of him in public, or in his temple, where he may be supposed to hear their reproaches.

Such rude, imperfect ideas of the divinity adhere long to all idolaters; and it may safely be affirmed that the Greeks themselves never got entirely rid of them. It is remarked by Xenophon,¹ in praise of Socrates, that this philosopher assented not to the vulgar opinion, which supposed the gods to know some things and be ignorant of others. He maintained that they knew everything; what was done, said, or even thought. But as this was a strain of philosophy² much above the conception of his countrymen, we need not be surprised if very frankly, in their books and conversation, they blamed the deities whom they worshipped in their temples. It is observable that Herodotus in particular scruples not, in many passages, to ascribe *envy* to the Gods; a sentiment of all others the most suitable to a mean and devilish nature. The pagan hymns, however, sung in public worship, contained nothing but epithets of praise, even while the actions ascribed to the Gods were the most barbarous and detestable. When Timotheus, the poet, recited a hymn to Diana, where he enumerated, with the greatest eulogies, all the actions and attributes of that cruel, capricious goddess, "May your daughter," said one present, "become such as the deity whom you celebrate."¹

¹ Mem. lib. i, 19.

² It was considered among the ancients as a very extraordinary philosophical paradox that the presence of the Gods was not confined to the heavens, but

was extended everywhere; as we learn from Lucian, *Hermitimus sive De Sectis* 81.

¹ Plutarch. de Superstit., 10.

But as men farther exalt their idea of their divinity, it is their notion of his power and knowledge only, not of his goodness, which is improved. On the contrary, in proportion to the supposed extent of his science and authority, their terrors naturally augment; while they believe that no secrecy can conceal them from his scrutiny, and that even the inmost recesses of their breast lie open before him. They must then be careful not to form expressly any sentiment of blame and disapprobation. All must be applause, rapture, ecstasy. And while their gloomy apprehensions make them ascribe to him measures of conduct which, in human creatures, would be highly blamed, they must still affect to praise and admire that conduct in the object of their devotional addresses. Thus it may safely be affirmed that popular religions are really, in the conception of their more vulgar votaries, a species of dæmonism; and the higher the deity is exalted in power and knowledge, the lower of course is he depressed in goodness and benevolence, whatever epithets of praise may be bestowed on him by his amazed adorers. Among idolaters, the words may be false, and belie the secret opinion. But among more exalted religionists, the opinion itself often contracts a kind of falsehood, and belies the inward sentiment. The heart secretly detests such measures of cruel and implacable vengeance, but the judgment dares not but pronounce them perfect and adorable. And the additional misery of this inward struggle aggravates all the other terrors by which these unhappy victims to superstition are for ever haunted.

Lucian¹ observes that a young man who reads the history of the gods in Homer or Hesiod, and finds their factions, wars, injustice, incest, adultery, and other immoralities so highly celebrated, is much surprised afterwards, when he comes into the world, to observe that punishments are by law inflicted on the same actions which he had been taught to ascribe to superior beings. The contradiction is still perhaps stronger between the representations given us by some later religions and our natural ideas of generosity, lenity, impartiality, and justice; and in proportion to the multiplied terrors of these religions, the barbarous

conceptions of the divinity are multiplied upon us.² Nothing can preserve untainted the genuine principles of morals in our judgment of human conduct but the absolute necessity of these principles to the existence of society. If common conception can indulge princes in a system of ethics somewhat different from that which should regulate private persons, how much more those superior beings whose attributes, views, and nature are so totally unknown to us? *Sunt superis sua jura.*³ The gods have maxims of justice peculiar to themselves.

¹ Necyomantia 3.

² Bacchus, a divine being, is represented by the heathen mythology as the inventor of dancing and the theatre. Plays were anciently even a part of public worship on the most solemn occasions, and often employed in times of pestilence to appease the offended deities. But they have been zealously proscribed by the godly in later ages; and the playhouse, according to a learned divine, is the porch of hell. But in order to show more evidently that it is possible for a religion to represent the divinity in still a more immoral and unamiable light than he was pictured by the ancients, we shall cite a long passage from an author of taste and imagination, who was surely no enemy to Christianity. It is the Chevalier Ramsay, a writer who had so laudable an inclination to be orthodox, that his reason never found any difficulty even in the doctrines which Freethinkers scruple the most, the trinity, incarnation, and satisfaction. His humanity alone, of which he seems to have had a great stock, rebelled against the doctrines of eternal reprobation and predestination. He expresses himself thus: "What strange ideas," says he, "would an Indian or a Chinese philosopher have of our holy religion, if they judged by the schemes given of it by our modern Freethinkers, and pharisaical doctors of all sects? According to the odious and too *vulgar* system of these incredulous scoffers and credulous scribblers, 'The God of the Jews is a most cruel, unjust, partial, and fantastical being. He created, about 6,000 years ago, a man and a woman, and placed them in a fine garden of Asia, of which there are no remains. This garden was furnished with all sorts of trees, fountains and flowers. He allowed them the use of all the fruits of this beautiful garden, except of one, that was planted in the midst thereof, and that had in it a secret virtue of preserving them in continual health and vigour of body and mind, of exalting their natural powers and making them wise. The devil entered into the body of a serpent, and solicited the first woman to eat of the forbidden fruit; she engaged her husband to do the same. To punish this slight curiosity and natural desire of life and knowledge, God not only threw our first parents out of paradise, but he condemned all their posterity to temporal misery, and the greatest part of them to eternal pains, though the souls of these innocent children have no more relation to that of Adam than to those of Nero and Mahomet; since, according to the scholastic drivellers, fabulists, and mythologists, all souls

are created pure, and infused immediately into mortal bodies, so soon as the foetus is formed. To accomplish the barbarous, partial decree of predestination and reprobation, God abandoned all nations to darkness, idolatry, and superstition, without any saving knowledge or salutary graces; unless it was one particular nation, whom he chose as his peculiar people. This chosen nation was, however, the most stupid, ungrateful, rebellious and perfidious of all nations. After God had thus kept the far greater part of all the human species, during near 4,000 years, in a reprobate state, he changed all of a sudden, and took a fancy for other nations, beside the Jews. Then he sent his only begotten son to the world, under a human form, to appease his wrath, satisfy his vindictive justice, and die for the pardon of sin. Very few nations, however, have heard of this gospel; and all the rest, though left in invincible ignorance, are damned without exception, or any possibility of remission. The greatest part of those who have heard of it have changed only some speculative notions about God, and some external forms in worship. For in other respects the bulk of Christians have continued as corrupt as the rest of mankind in their morals; yea, so much the more perverse and criminal, that their lights were greater. Unless it be a very small, select number, all other Christians, like the pagans, will be for ever damned; the great sacrifice offered up for them will become void and of no effect; God will take delight for ever in their torments and blasphemies; and though he can by one *fiat* change their hearts, yet they will remain for ever unconverted and unconvertible, because he will be for ever unappeasable and irreconcilable. It is true that all this makes God odious; a hater of souls, rather than a lover of them; a cruel, vindictive tyrant; an impotent or a wrathful dæmon, rather than an all-powerful, beneficent father of spirits. Yet all this is a mystery. He has secret reasons for his conduct that are impenetrable; and though he appears unjust and barbarous, yet we must believe the contrary, because what is injustice, crime, cruelty, and the blackest malice in us, is in him justice, mercy, and sovereign goodness.' Thus the incredulous Freethinkers, the judaizing Christians, and the fatalistic doctors have disfigured and dishonored the sublime mysteries of our holy faith; thus they have confounded the nature of good and evil, transformed the most monstrous passions into divine attributes, and surpassed the pagans in blasphemy, by ascribing to the eternal nature, as perfections, what makes the most horrid crimes amongst men. The grosser pagans contented themselves with divinizing lust, incest, and adultery; but the predestinarian doctors have divinized cruelty, wrath, fury, vengeance, and all the blackest vices." (See the Chevalier Ramsay's "Philosophical Principles of Natural and Revealed Religion", part 2, p. 401.) The same author asserts, in other places, that the Arminian and Molinist schemes serve very little to mend the matter. And having thus thrown himself out of all received sects of Christianity, he is obliged to advance a system of his own, which is a kind of Origenism, and supposes the pre-existence of the souls both of men and beasts, and the eternal salvation and conversion of all men, beasts, and devils. But this notion, being quite peculiar to himself, we need not treat of. I thought the

opinions of this ingenious author very curious; but I pretend not to warrant the justness of them.

... Ovid. Metam. lib. ix. 499.

§ XIV.

BAD INFLUENCE OF POPULAR RELIGIONS ON MORALITY.

Here I cannot forbear observing a fact which may be worth the attention of such as make human nature the object of their enquiry. It is certain that in every religion, however sublime the verbal definition which it gives of its divinity, many of the votaries, perhaps the greatest number, will still seek the divine favor, not by virtue and good morals, which alone can be acceptable to a perfect being, but either by frivolous observances, by intemperate zeal, by rapturous ecstasies, or by the belief of mysterious and absurd opinions. The least part of the *Sadder*, as well as of the *Pentateuch*, consists in precepts of morality; and we may be assured also that that part was always the least observed and regarded. When the old Romans were attacked with a pestilence, they never ascribed their sufferings to their vices, or dreamed of repentance and amendment. They never thought that they were the general robbers of the world, whose ambition and avarice made desolate the earth and reduced opulent nations to want and beggary. They only created a dictator,¹ in order to drive a nail into a door, and by that means they thought that they had sufficiently appeased their incensed deity.

¹ Called Dictator clavis figendæ causa. T. Livii, l. vii., cap. 2.

In Ægina, one faction, forming a conspiracy, barbarously and treacherously assassinated seven hundred of their fellow citizens; and carried their fury so far that, one miserable fugitive having fled to the temple, they cut off his hands, by which he clung to the gates, and carrying him out of holy ground, immediately murdered him. “By this impiety”, says Herodotus¹ (not by the other many cruel assassinations), “they offended the gods, and contracted an inexpiable guilt.”

¹ Lib. vi. 91.

Nay, if we should suppose, what seldom happens, that a popular religion were found, in which it was expressly declared that nothing but morality could gain the divine favor; if an order of priests were instituted to inculcate this opinion in daily sermons and with all the arts of persuasion; yet so inveterate are the people's prejudices, that, for want of some other superstition, they would make the very attendance on these sermons the essentials of religion, rather than place them in virtue and good morals. The sublime prologue of Zaleucus's laws² inspired not the Locrians, so far as we can learn, with any sounder notions of the measures of acceptance with the deity than were familiar to the other Greeks.

² To be found in Diod. Sic. lib. xii. 120.

This observation, then, holds universally. But still one may be at some loss to account for it. It is not sufficient to observe that the people everywhere degrade their deities into a similitude with themselves, and consider them merely as a species of human creatures, somewhat more potent and intelligent. This will not remove the difficulty. For there is no *man* so stupid, as that, judging by his natural reason, he would not esteem virtue and honesty the most valuable qualities which any person could possess. Why not ascribe the same sentiment to his deity? Why not make all religion, or the chief part of it, to consist in these attainments?

Nor is it satisfactory to say that the practice of morality is more difficult than that of superstition, and is therefore rejected. For, not to mention the excessive penances of the Brachmans and Talapoins, it is certain that the Rhamadan of the Turks, during which the poor wretches, for many days, often in the hottest months of the year, and in some of the hottest climates of the world, remain without eating or drinking from the rising to the setting sun. This Rhamadan, I say, must be more severe than the practice of any moral duty, even to the most vicious and depraved of mankind. The four lents of the Muscovites, and the austerities of some Roman Catholics, appear more disagreeable than meekness and benevolence. In short, all virtue, when men are reconciled to it by ever so little practice, is agreeable. All superstition is for ever odious and burdensome.

Perhaps the following account may be received as a true solution of the difficulty. The duties which a man performs as a friend or parent seem

merely owing to his benefactor or children; nor can he be wanting to these duties without breaking through all the ties of nature and morality. A strong inclination may prompt him to the performance. A sentiment of order and moral beauty joins its force to these natural ties; and the whole man, if truly virtuous, is drawn to his duty without any effort or endeavour. Even with regard to the virtues which are more austere, and more founded on reflection, such as public spirit, filial duty, temperance, or integrity, the moral obligation, in our apprehension, removes all pretence to religious merit; and the virtuous conduct is deemed no more than what we owe to society and to ourselves. In all this a superstitious man finds nothing which he has properly performed for the sake of his deity, or which can peculiarly recommend him to the divine favor and protection. He considers not that the most genuine method of serving the divinity is by promoting the happiness of his creatures. He still looks out for some more immediate service of the supreme being, in order to allay those terrors with which he is haunted. And any practice recommended to him which either serves to no purpose in life, or offers the strongest violence to his natural inclinations, that practice he will the more readily embrace, on account of those very circumstances which should make him absolutely reject it. It seems the more purely religious because it proceeds from no mixture of any other motive or consideration. And if, for its sake, he sacrifices much of his ease and quiet, his claim of merit appears still to rise upon him in proportion to the zeal and devotion which he discovers. In restoring a loan or paying a debt his divinity is nowise beholden to him; because these acts of justice are what he was bound to perform, and what many would have performed were there no God in the universe. But if he fast a day, or give himself a sound whipping, this has a direct reference, in his opinion, to the service of God. No other motive could engage him to such austerities. By these distinguished marks of devotion he has now acquired the divine favor; and may expect, in recompense, protection and safety in this world and eternal happiness in the next.

Hence the greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion. Hence it is justly regarded as unsafe to draw any certain inference in favor of a man's morals from the fervor or strictness of his religious exercises, even though he himself believe them sincere. Nay, it has been observed that enormities

of the blackest dye have been rather apt to produce superstitious terrors, and increase the religious passion. Bomilcar, having formed a conspiracy for assassinating at once the whole senate of Carthage, and invading the liberties of his country, lost the opportunity, from a continual regard to omens and prophecies. “Those who undertake the most criminal and most dangerous enterprises are commonly the most superstitious;” as an ancient historian¹ remarks on this occasion. Their devotion and spiritual faith rise with their fears. Catiline was not contented with the established deities and received rites of the national religion. His anxious terrors made him seek new inventions of this kind,² which he never probably had dreamed of, had he remained a good citizen, and obedient to the laws of his country.

¹ Diod. Sic. lib. xx. 43.

² Cic. Catil. i. 6. Salust, de Bello Catil, 22.

To which we may add that, even after the commission of crimes, there arise remorse and secret horrors, which give no rest to the mind, but make it have recourse to religious rites and ceremonies, as expiations of its offences. Whatever weakens or disorders the internal frame promotes the interests of superstition; and nothing is more destructive to them than a manly steady virtue, which either preserves us from disastrous, melancholy accidents, or teaches us to bear them. During such calm sunshine of the mind, these spectres of false divinity never make their appearance. On the other hand, while we abandon ourselves to the natural undisciplined suggestions of our timid and anxious hearts, every kind of barbarity is ascribed to the supreme Being, from the terrors with which we are agitated; and every kind of caprice, from the methods which we embrace in order to appease him. Barbarity, caprice; these qualities, however nominally disguised, we may universally observe, form the ruling character of the deity in popular religions. Even priests, instead of correcting these depraved ideas of mankind, have often been found ready to foster and encourage them. The more tremendous the divinity is represented, the more tame and submissive do men become to his ministers; and the more unaccountable the measures of acceptance required by him, the more necessary does it become to abandon our natural reason, and yield to their ghostly guidance and direction. Thus it

may be allowed that the artifices of men aggravate our natural infirmities and follies of this kind, but never originally beget them. Their root strikes deeper into the mind, and springs from the essential and universal properties of human nature.

§ XV.

GENERAL COROLLARY.

Though the stupidity of men, barbarous and uninstructed, be so great that they may not see a sovereign author in the more obvious works of nature, to which they are so much familiarized; yet it scarcely seems possible that any one of good understanding should reject that idea, when once it is suggested to him. A purpose, an intention, a design, is evident in everything; and when our comprehension is so far enlarged as to contemplate the first rise of this visible system, we must adopt, with the strongest conviction, the idea of some intelligent cause or author. The uniform maxims, too, which prevail throughout the whole frame of the universe, naturally, if not necessarily, lead us to conceive this intelligence as single and undivided, where the prejudices of education oppose not so reasonable a theory. Even the contrarieties of nature, by discovering themselves everywhere, become proofs of some consistent plan, and establish one single purpose or intention, however inexplicable and incomprehensible.

Good and ill are universally intermingled and confounded; happiness and misery, wisdom and folly, virtue and vice. Nothing is purely and entirely of a piece. All advantages are attended with disadvantages. An universal compensation prevails in all conditions of being and existence. And it is not possible for us, by our most chimerical wishes, to form the idea of a station or situation altogether desirable. The draughts of life, according to the poet's fiction, are always mixed from the vessels on each hand of Jupiter; or if any cup be presented altogether pure, it is drawn only, as the same poet tells us, from the left-handed vessel.

The more exquisite any good is, of which a small specimen is afforded us, the sharper is the evil allied to it; and few exceptions are found to this

uniform law of nature. The most sprightly wit borders on madness; the highest effusions of joy produce the deepest melancholy; the most ravishing pleasures are attended with the most cruel lassitude and disgust; the most flattering hopes make way for the severest disappointments. And in general, no course of life has such safety (for happiness is not to be dreamed of) as the temperate and moderate, which maintains, as far as possible, a mediocrity and a kind of insensibility in everything.

As the good, the great, the sublime, the ravishing, are found eminently in the genuine principles of theism; it may be expected, from the analogy of nature, that the base, the absurd, the mean, the terrifying, will be discovered equally in religious fictions and chimeras.

The universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power, if not an original instinct, being at least a general attendant of human nature, may be considered as a kind of mark or stamp, which the divine workman has set upon his work; and nothing surely can more dignify mankind than to be thus selected from all the other parts of the creation, and to bear the image or impression of the universal Creator. But consult this image, as it appears in the popular religions of the world. How is the deity disfigured in our representations of him! What caprice, absurdity, and immorality are attributed to him! How much is he degraded even below the character which we should naturally, in common life, ascribe to a man of sense and virtue!

What a noble privilege is it of human reason to attain the knowledge of the supreme Being; and, from the visible works of nature, be enabled to infer so sublime a principle as its supreme Creator? But turn the reverse of the medal. Survey most nations and most ages. Examine the religious principles which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded that they are other than sick men's dreams; or perhaps will regard them more as the playsome whimsies of monkeys in human shape than the serious, positive, dogmatical asseverations of a being who dignifies himself with the name of rational.

Hear the verbal protestations of all men. Nothing they are so certain of as their religious tenets. Examine their lives. You will scarcely think that they repose the smallest confidence in them.

The greatest and truest zeal gives us no security against hypocrisy. The most open impiety is attended with a secret dread and compunction.

No theological absurdities so glaring as have not, sometimes, been embraced by men of the greatest and most cultivated understanding. No religious precepts so rigorous as have not been adopted by the most voluptuous and most abandoned of men.

Ignorance is the mother of Devotion: a maxim that is proverbial, and confirmed by general experience. Look out for a people entirely void of religion: if you find them at all, be assured that they are but few degrees removed from brutes.

What so pure as some of the morals included in some theological systems? What so corrupt as some of the practices to which these systems give rise?

The comfortable views exhibited by the belief of futurity are ravishing and delightful. But how quickly they vanish on the appearance of its terrors, which keep a more firm and durable possession of the human mind!

The whole is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgment, appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny concerning this subject. But such is the frailty of human reason, and such the irresistible contagion of opinion, that even this deliberate doubt could scarcely be upheld, did we not enlarge our view, and, opposing one species of superstition to another, set them a quarrelling; while we ourselves, during their fury and contention, happily make our escape into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy.

