

Reason: The Only Oracle of Man

A Compendious System of Natural Religion

Ethan Allen
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The doctrine that reason is depraved is false and dehumanizing. How could reason know if it was depraved? The claim is contradictory. Reason is instead a likeness of the Divinity. Conscience follows from reflection on nature. Natural religion is sufficient for the purposes of society, for it give us laws coincident with reason, and these are binding on all human beings as such. Later revelations were not as universal, but constrained by time and place. On analysis, faith is but another word for the rational assent of the mind.

Chapter IV.1 Speculation on the Doctrine of the Depravity of Human Reason

IN the course of our speculation on Divine Providence we proceed next to the consideration of the doctrine of the depravity of human reason: a doctrine

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derogatory to the nature of man, and the rank and character of being which he holds in the universe, and which, if admitted to be true overturns knowledge and science and renders learning, instruction and books useless and in pertinent; inasmuch as reason, depraved or spoiled, would cease to be reason; as much as the mind of a raving madman would of course cease to be rational: admitting the depravity of reason, the consequence would unavoidably follow, that as far as it may be supposed to have taken place in the midst of mankind, there could be no judges of it, in consequence of their supposed depravity; for without the exercise of reason, we could not understand what reason is, which would be necessary for us previously to understand, in order to understand what it is not; or to distinguish it from that which is its reverse. But for us to have the knowledge of what reason is, and the ability to distinguish it from that which is depraved, or is irrational, is incompatible with the doctrine of the depravity of our reason. Inasmuch as to understand what reason is, and to distinguish it from that which is marred or spoiled, is the same to all intents and purposes, as to have, exercise and enjoy, the principle of reason itself, which precludes its supposed depravity: so that it is impossible for us to understand what reason is, and at the same time determine that our reason is depraved; for this would be the same as when we know that we are in possession and exercise of reason, to determine that we are not in possession or exercise of it.

It may be, that some who embrace the doctrine of the depravity of human reason, will not admit that it

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is wholly and totally depraved, but that “it is in a great measure marred or spoiled.” But the foregoing arguments are equally applicable to a supposed depravity in parts, as in the whole; for in order to judge whether reason be depraved in part or not, it would be requisite to have an understanding of what reason may be supposed to have been, previous to its premised depravity; and to have such a knowledge of it, would be the same as to exercise and enjoy it in its lustre and purity, which would preclude the notion of a depravity in part, as well as in the whole; for it would be utterly impossible for us to judge of reason undepraved and depraved, but by comparing them together. But for depraved reason to make such a comparison, is contradictory and impossible; so that, if our reason had been depraved, we could not have had any conception of it any more than a beast. Men of small faculties in reasoning cannot comprehend the extensive reasonings of their superiors, how then can a supposed depraved reason comprehend that reason which is uncorrupted and pure? To suppose that it could, is the same as to suppose that depraved and undepraved reason is alike, and if so, there needs no farther dispute about it.

There is a manifest contradiction in applying the term ‘depraved’ to that of reason, the ideas contained in their respective definitions will not admit of their association together, as the terms convey heterogeneous ideas; for reason spoiled, marred, or robbed of its perfection, ceaseth to be rational, and should not be called reason; inasmuch as it is premised to be depraved, or degenerated from a rational nature; and in consequence of the deprivation of its nature, should

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also be deprived of its name, and called subterfuge, or some such like name, which might better define its real character.

Those who invalidate reason, ought seriously to consider, “whether they argue against reason, with or without reason; if with reason, then they establish the principle, that they are laboring to dethrone;” but if they argue without reason (which, in order to be consistent with themselves, they must do), they are out of the reach of rational conviction, nor do they deserve a rational argument.

We are told that the knowledge of the depravity of reason, was first communicated to mankind by the immediate inspiration of God. But inasmuch as reason is supposed to be depraved, what principle could there be in the human irrational soul, which could receive or understand the inspiration, or on which it could operate so as to represent to those whom it may be supposed were inspired, the knowledge of the depravity of (their own and mankind’s) reason (in general): for a rational inspiration must consist of rational ideas, which pre-supposes that the minds of those who were inspired, were rational previous to such inspiration, which would be a downright contradiction to the inspiration itself; the import of which was to teach the knowledge of the depravity of human reason, which without reason could not be understood, and with reason it would be understood, that the inspiration was false.

Will any advocates for the depravity of reason suppose, that inspiration ingrafts or superadds the

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essence of reason itself to the human mind? Admitting it to be so, yet such inspired persons could not understand any thing of reason, before the reception of such supposed inspiration; nor would such a premised inspiration prove to its possessors or receivers, that their reason had ever been depraved. All that such premised inspired persons could understand, or be conscious of, respecting reason, would be after the inspiration may be supposed to have taken effect, and made them rational beings, and then instead of being taught by inspiration, that their reason had been previously depraved, they could have had no manner of consciousness of the existence or exercise of it, until the impairing the principle of it by the supposed energy of inspiration; nor could such supposed inspired persons communicate the knowledge of such a premised revelation to others of the species, who for want of a rational nature, could not be supposed, on this position, to be able to receive the impressions of reason.

That there are degrees in the knowledge of rational beings, and also in their capacities to acquire it, cannot be disputed, as it is so very obvious among mankind. But in all the retrospect gradations from the exalted reasonings of a Locke or a Newton, down to the lowest exercise of it among the species, still it is reason, and not depraved; for a less decree of reason by no means implies a depravity of it. nor does the imparting of reason argue its depravity, for what remains of reason, or rather of the exercise of it, is reason still. But there is not, and cannot be such a thing as depraved reason, for that which is rational is

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so, and for that reason cannot be depraved, whatever its degree of exercise may be supposed to be.

A blow on the head, or fracture of the cranium, as also palsies and many other casualties that await our sensorium, retard, and in some cases wholly prevent the exercise of reason for a longer or shorter period; and sometimes through the stage of human life; but in such instances as these, reason is not depraved, but ceases in a greater or less degree, or perhaps wholly ceases its rational exertions or operations; by reason of the breaches or disorders of the organs of sense, but in such instances, wherein the organs become rectified, and the senses recover their usefulness, the exercise of reason returns, free from any blemish or depravity. For the cessation of the exercise of reason, by no means depraves it.

From what has been argued on this subject, in this and the preceding chapters, it appears that reason is not and cannot be depraved, but that it bears a likeness to divine reason, is of the same kind, and in its own nature as uniform as truth, which is the test of it; though in the divine essence, it is eternal and infinite, but in man it is eternal only as it respects their immortality, and finite as it respects capaciousness.

Such people as can be prevailed upon to believe, that their reason is depraved, may easily be led by the nose, and duped into superstition at the pleasure of those in whom they confide, and there remain from generation to generation: for when they throw by the law of reason the only one which God gave them to direct them in their speculations and duty, they are

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exposed to ignorant or insidious teachers, and also to their own irregular passions, and to the folly and enthusiasm of those about them, which nothing but reason can prevent or restrain: nor is it a rational supposition that the commonality of mankind would ever have mistrusted that their reason was depraved, had they not been told so, and it is whispered about, that the first insinuation of it was from the Priests; (though the Armenian Clergymen in the circle of my acquaintance have exploded the doctrine.) Should we admit the depravity of reason, it would equally affect the priesthood, or any other teachers of that doctrine, with the rest of mankind; but for depraved creatures to receive and give credit to a depraved doctrine, started and taught by depraved creatures, is the greatest weakness and folly imaginable, and comes nearer a proof of the doctrine of total depravity, than any arguments which may have been advanced in support of it.

Chapter IV.2

Containing a Disquisition of the Law of Nature
as it Respects the Moral System
Interspersed with Observations
on Subsequent Religions

THAT mankind are by nature endowed with sensation and reflection, from which results the power of reason and understanding, will not be disputed. The senses are well calculated to make discoveries of external objects and to communicate those notices, or simple images of things to the mind, with all the

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magnificent simplicity of nature, which opens an extensive field of contemplation to the understanding, enabling the mind to examine into the natural causes and consequences of things, and to investigate the knowledge of moral good and evil, from which, together with the power of agency, results the human conscience. This is the original of moral obligation and accountability, which is called natural religion; for without the understanding of truth from falsehood, and right from wrong, which is the same as justice from injustice, and a liberty of agency, which is the same as a power of proficiency in either moral good or evil: mankind would not be rational or accountable creatures.

Undoubtedly it was the ultimate design of our Creator, in giving us being, and furnishing us with those noble compositions of mental powers and sensitive aptitudes, that we should, in, by, and with that nature, serve and honor him; and with those united capacities, search out and understand our duty to him, and to one another, with the ability of practicing the same as far as may be necessary for us in this life. To object against the sufficiency of natural religion, to effect the best ultimate good of mankind, would be derogating from the wisdom, goodness, and justice of God, who in the course of his providence to us, has adopted it: besides, if natural religion may be supposed to be deficient, what security can we have that any subsequently revealed religion should not be so also? For why might not a second religion from God be as insufficient or defective as a first religion may be supposed to be?

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From hence we infer that if natural religion be insufficient to dictate mankind in the way of their duty and make them ultimately happy, there is an end to religion in general. But as certain as God is perfect in wisdom and goodness, natural religion is sufficient and complete; and having had the divine approbation, and naturally resulting from a rational nature, is as universally promulgated to mankind as reason itself. But to the disadvantage of the claim of all subsequent religions, called revelations, whether denominated inspired, external, supernatural, or what not, they came too late into the world to be essential to the well being of mankind, or to point out to heaven and ever-lasting blessedness: inasmuch as for the greatest part of mankind who have ever lived in this world, have departed this life previous to the eras and promulgations of such revelations.

Besides, those subsequent revelations to the law of nature, began as human traditions have ever done in very small circumferences, in the respective parts of the world where they have been inculcated, and made their progress, as time, chance, and opportunity presented. Does this look like the contrivance of heaven, and the only way of salvation? Or is it not more like this world and the contrivance of man? Undoubtedly the great parent of mankind laid a just and sufficient foundation of salvation for every one of them; for otherwise such of them, who may be supposed not to be thus provided for would not have whereof to glorify God for their being, but on the contrary would have just matter of complaint against his providence or moral government for involuntari-

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ly necessitating them into a wretched and miserable existence, and that without end or remedy: which would be ascribing to God a more extensive injustice than is possible to be charged on the most barbarous despots that ever were among mankind.

But to return to our speculations on the law of nature. That this divine Law surpasses all positive institutions, that have ever been ushered into the world since its creation as much as the wisdom and goodness of God exceeds that of man, is beautifully illustrated in the following quotation: "But it may be said what is virtue? It is the faithful discharge of those obligations which reason dictates. And what is wisdom itself, but a portion of intelligence? with which the creator has furnished us, in order to direct us in our duty? It may be further asked, what is this duty? whence does it result? and by what law is it prescribed? I answer that the law which prescribed it is the immutable will of God; to which right reason obliges us to conform ourselves, and in this conformity virtue consists.

No law which has commenced since the creation, or which may ever cease to be in force, can constitute virtue; for before the existence of such a law mankind could not be bound to observe it; but they were certainly under an obligation to be virtuous from the beginning. Princes may make laws and repeal them, but they can neither make nor destroy virtue, and how indeed should they be able to do what is impossible to the Deity himself? Virtue being as immutable in its nature as the divine will which is the ground of it.

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[NOTE: Virtue did not derive its nature merely from the omnipotent will of God, but also from the eternal truth and moral fitness of things; which was the eternal reason why they were eternally approved of by God, and immutably established by him, to be what they are; and so far as our duty is connected with those eternal measures of moral fitness, or we are able to act on them, we give such actions or habits the name of virtue or morality. But when we, in writing or conversation, say that virtue is grounded on the divine will, we should at the same time include in the complex idea of it, that the divine will which constituted virtue, was eternally and infinitely reasonable.]

A Prince may command his Subjects to pay taxes or besides, may forbid them to export certain commodities, or to introduce those of a foreign country. The faithful observance of these laws make obedient subjects, but does not make virtuous men; and would any one seriously think himself possessed of a virtue the more for not having dealt in painted calico; or if the Prince should by his authority abrogate these laws, would any one say he had abrogated virtue? It is thus with all positive laws; they all had a beginning — are all liable to exceptions, and may be dispensed with and even abolished.

That law alone which is engraven on our hearts by the hand of our creator, is unchangeable and of universal and eternal obligation. The law, says Cicero, is not a human invention, nor an arbitrary political institution, it is in its nature eternal and of univer-

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sal obligation. The violence Tarquin offered to Lucretia, was a breach of that eternal law, and though the Romans at that time might have no written law which condemned such kind of crimes, his offence was not the less heinous; for this law of reason did not then begin, when it was first committed to writing; its original is as ancient as the divine mind. For the true, primitive and supreme law, is no other than the unerring reason of the great Jupiter. And in another place he says, this law is founded in nature, it is universal, immutable, and eternal, it is subject to no change from any difference of place, or time, it extends invariably to all ages and nations, like the sovereign dominion of that Being, who is author of it.”

The promulgation of this supreme law to creatures, is co- extensive and coexistent with reason, and binding on all intelligent beings in the universe; and is that eternal rule of fitness, as applicable to God, by which the creator of all things conducts his infinitude of providence, and by which he governs the moral system of being, according to the absolute perfection of his nature. From hence we infer, that admitting those subsequent revelations, which have more or less obtained credit in the world, as the inspired laws of God, to be consonant to the laws of nature, yet they could be considered as none other but mere transcripts therefrom, promulgated to certain favorite nations, when at the same time all mankind was favored with the original.

The moral precepts contained in Moses’ decalogue to the people of Israel, was previously known

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to every nation under heaven, and in all probability by them as much practiced as by the tribes of Israel. Their keeping the seventh day of the week as a sabbath was an arbitrary imposition of Moses (as many other of his edicts were), and not included in the law of nature. But as to such laws of his, or those of any other legislator, which are morally fit, agree with, and are a part of the natural law, as for instance; "Thou shalt not covet" or "kill." These positive injunctions cannot add anything to the law of nature, inasmuch as it contains an entire and perfect system of morality; nor can any positive injunctions or commands enforce the authority of it, or confer any additional moral obligation on those to whom they are given to obey; the previous obligation of natural religion, having ever been as binding as reason can possibly conceive of, or the order and constitution of the moral rectitude of things, as resulting from God, can make it to be.

To illustrate the argument of the obligatory nature of the natural law let us reverse the commandments of the decalogue, by premising that Moses had said thou shalt covet; thou shalt steal and murder; would any one conclude, that the injunctions would have been obligatory? Surely they would not, for a positive command to violate the law of nature could not be binding on any rational being. How then came the injunctions of Moses, or any others, to be binding in such cases, in which they coincide with the law of nature? We answer, merely in consequence of the obligatory sanctions of the natural law, which does not at all depend on the authority of Moses or of any

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other legislator, short of him who is eternal and infinite; nor is it possible that the Jews, who adhere to the law of Moses, should be under greater obligation to the moral law, than the Japanese; or the Christians than the Chinese; for the same God extends the same moral government over universal rational nature, independent of Popes, Priests and Levities.

But with respect to all mere positive institutions, injunctions, rites and ceremonies, that do not come within the jurisdiction of the law of nature, they are political matters, and may be enacted, perpetuated, dispensed with, abolished, re-enacted, compounded or diversified, as convenience, power, opportunity, inclination, or interest, or all together may dictate; inasmuch as they are not founded on any stable or universal principle of reason, but change with the customs, fashions, traditions and revolutions of the world; having no center of attraction, but interest, power and advantages of a temporary nature.

Was the creator and governor of the universe to erect a particular academy of arts and sciences in this world, under his immediate inspection, with tutors rightly organized, and intellectually qualified to carry on the business of teaching, it might like other colleges (and possibly in a superior manner), instruct its scholars. But that God should have given a revelation of his will to mankind, as his law, and to be continued to the latest posterity as such, which is premised to be above the capacity of their understanding, is contradictory and in its own nature impossible. Nor could a revelation to mankind, which comes within

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the circle of their knowledge, be edifying or instructing to them, for it is a contradiction to call that which is above my comprehension, or that which I already, (from natural sagacity) understand, a revelation to me: to tell me, or inspire me, with the knowledge of that which I knew before, would reveal nothing to me, and to reveal that to me which is supernatural or above my comprehension, is contradictory and impossible.

But the truth of the matter is, that mankind are restricted by the law of nature to acquire knowledge or science progressively, as before argued. From which we infer the impropriety, and consequently the impossibility of God's having ever given us any manuscript copy of his eternal law: for that to reveal it at first would bring it on a level with the infancy of knowledge then in the world, or (fishermen, shepherds, and illiterate people could not have understood it), which would have brought it so low that it could not be instructive or beneficial to after generations in their progressive advances in science and wisdom.

Chapter VIII.1 Of the Nature of Faith and Wherein It Consists

FAITH in Jesus Christ and in his Gospel throughout the New Testament, is represented to be an essential condition of the eternal salvation of mankind. "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ that we might be justified by

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the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law, for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.” Again, “If thou shalt confess the Lord Jesus Christ, and believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou mayst be saved.” And again, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned.”

Faith is the last result of the understanding, or the same which we call the conclusion, it is the consequence of a greater or less deduction of reasoning from certain premises previously laid down; it is the same as believing or judging of any matter of fact, or assenting to or dissenting from the truth of any doctrine, system or position; so that to form a judgment, or to come to a determination in one’s own mind, or to believe, or to have faith, is in reality the same thing, and is synonymously applied both in writing and speaking, for example, “Abraham believed in God.” Again, “for he,” speaking of Abraham, “judged him faithful who had promised,” and again “his faith was counted unto him for righteousness”

It is not only in scripture that we meet with examples of the these words, to wit, belief, judgment, and faith, to stand for the marks of our ideas for the same thing, but also all intelligible writers and speakers apply these phrases synonymously, and it would be good grammar and sense, for us to say that we have faith in a universal providence, or that we judge that there is a universal providence. These three different phrases, in communicating our ideas of providence, do every one of them exhibit the same idea,

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to all persons of common understanding, who are acquainted with the English language. In fine, every one's experience may convince them that they cannot assent to, or dissent from the truth of any matter of fact, doctrine or proposition whatever, contrary to their judgment; for the act of the mind in assenting to or dissenting from any position, or in having faith or belief in favor of, or against any doctrine, system, or proposition, could not amount to anything more or less, than the act of the judgment, or last dictate of the understanding, whether the understanding be supposed to be rightly informed or not: so that our faith in all cases is as liable to err, as our reason is to misjudge of the truth; and our minds act faith in disbelieving any doctrine or system of religion to be true, as much as in believing it to be so.

From hence it appears, that the mind cannot act faith in opposition to its judgment, but that it is the resolution of the understanding itself committed to memory or writing, and can never be considered distinct from it. And inasmuch as faith necessarily results from reasoning, forcing itself upon our minds by the evidence of truth, or the mistaken apprehension of it, without any act of choice of ours, there cannot be any thing, which pertains to, or partakes of the nature of moral good or evil in it. For us to believe such doctrines, or systems of religion, as appears to be credibly recommended to our reason, can no more partake of the nature of goodness or morality, than our natural eyes may be supposed to partake of it in their perception of colors; for the faith of the mind, and the sight of the eye are both of them neces-

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sary consequences, the one results from the reasonings of the mind, and the other from the perception of the eye.

To suppose a rational mind without the exercise of faith would be as absurd as to suppose a proper and complete eye without sight, or the perception of the common objects of that sense. The short of the matter is this that without reason we could not have faith, and without the eye or eyes we could not see, but once admitting that we are rational, faith follows of course, naturally resulting from the dictates of reason.

Chapter VIII.2

Of the Traditions of Our Forefathers

It may be objected, that the far greater part of mankind believe according to the tradition of their forefathers, without examining into the grounds of it, and that argumentative deductions from the reason and nature of things, have, with the bulk of them, but little or no influence on their faith. Admitting this to have been too much the case, and that many of them have been blameable for the omission of cultivating or improving their reason, and for not forming a better judgment concerning their respective traditions, or a juster and more exalted faith yet this does not at all invalidate the foregoing arguments respecting the nature of faith: for though it be admitted that most of the human race do not, or will not reason, with any considerable degree of propriety, on the traditions of their forefathers, but receive them implicitly, they

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nevertheless establish this one proposition in their minds, right or wrong, that their respective traditions are right, for none could believe in them were they possessed of the knowledge that they were wrong.

And as we have a natural bias in favor of our progenitors, to whose memory a tribute of regard is justly due, and whose care in handing down from father to son such notions of religion and manners, as they supposed would be for the well being and happiness of their posterity in this and the coming world, naturally endears tradition to us, and prompts us to receive and venerate it. Add to this, that the priests of every denomination are “instant in season and out of season,” in inculcating and instilling the same tenets, which, with the foregoing considerations, induces mankind in general to give at least a tacit consent to their respective traditions, and without a thorough investigation thereof, believe them to be right and very commonly infallible, although their examinations are not attended with a mediative reasoning, from the nature of things; and in the same proportion as they may be supposed to fall short of conclusive arguing on their respective traditions they cannot fail to be deceived in the rationality of their faith.

But after all it may be that some of the human race may have been traditionally or accidentally right, in many or most respects. Admitting it to be so, yet they cannot have any rational enjoyment of it, or understand wherein the truth of the premised right tradition consists, or deduce any more satisfaction from it, than others whose traditions may be supposed to

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be wrong; for it is the knowledge of the discovery of truth alone, which is gratifying to that mind who contemplates its superlative beauty.

That tradition has had a powerful influence on the human mind is universally admitted, even by those who are governed by it in the articles or discipline of their faith; for though they are blind with respect to their own superstition, yet they can perceive and despise it in others.

Protestants very readily discern and expose the weak side of Popery, and Papists are as ready and acute in discovering the errors of heretics. With equal facility do Christians and Mahometans spy out each others inconsistencies and both have an admirable sagacity to descry the superstition of the heathen nations. Nor are the Jews wholly silent in this matter; "O God the heathen are come into thine inheritance, thy holy temple have they defiled." What abomination must this have been in the opinion of a nation who had monopolized all religion to themselves! Monstrous vile heathen, that they should presume to approach the sanctum sanctorum! The Christians call the Mahometans by the odious name of infidels, but the Musslemen, in their opinion, cannot call the Christians by a worse name than that which they have given themselves, they therefore call them Christians.

What has been already observed upon tradition, is sufficient to admonish us of its errors and superstitions, and the prejudices to which a bigoted attachment thereto exposes us, which is abundantly sufficient to excite us to a careful examination of our

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respective traditions, and not to rest satisfied until we have regulated our faith by reason.

Chapter VIII.3

Our Faith Is Governed by our Reasoning Whether They are Supposed to Be Conclusive or Inconclusive and Not Merely by Our Own Choice

It is written that "Faith is the gift of God." Be it so, but is faith any more the gift of God than reflection, memory or reason are his gifts? Was it not for memory, we could not retain in our minds the judgment which we have passed upon things; and was it not for reasoning, in either a regular or irregular manner, or partly both, there could be no such thing as judging or believing so that God could not bestow the gift of faith separate from the gift of reason, faith being the mere consequence of reasoning, either right or wrong, or in a greater or less degree, as has been previously argued.

Still there is a knotty text of scripture to surmount, viz: "He that believeth shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned." This text is considered as crowding hard upon unbelievers in christianity; but when it is critically examined, it will be found not to militate at all against them, but is merely a Jesuitical fetch to overawe some and make others wonder. We will premise, that an unbeliever is destitute of faith, which is the cause of his being thus denominated. The Christian believes the gospel to be

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true and of divine authority, the Deist believes that it is not true and not of divine authority; so that the Christian and Deist are both of them believers, and according to the express words of the text, "shall be saved," and a Deist may as well retort upon a Christian and call him an infidel, because he differs in faith from him, as a Christian may upon the Deist; for there is the same impropriety in applying the cant of infidelity to either, as both are believers; and it is impossible for us to believe contrary to our judgments or the dictates of understanding, whether it be rightly informed or not.

Why then may there not in both denominations be honest men, who are seeking after the truth, and who may have an equal right to expect the favor and salvation of God?