

Reason: The Only Oracle of Man

A Compendious System of Natural Religion

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Morality derives not from books, but from the natural fitness of things. The clergy seek to turn us away from nature toward incomprehensible mysteries. They attribute gross injustices to God. Reason guides us to virtue, which inheres in the soul and passes with us into life after death. Reason is likewise the test of the respective claims of revelation. If all revealed religions are false, we are left with the religion of nature.

Chapter XIII.1 Morality Derived from Natural Fitness and Not from Tradition

SUCH parts or passages of the Scriptures as inculcate morality, have a tendency to subserve mankind, the same as all other public investigations or teachings of it, may be supposed to have; but are neither better or worse for having a place in the volume of

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those writings denominated canonical; for morality does not derive its nature from books, but from the fitness of things; and though it may be more or less, interspersed through the pages of the Alcoran, its purity and rectitude would remain the same; for it is founded in eternal right; and whatever writings, books or oral speculations, best illustrate or teach this moral science, should have the preference. The knowledge of this as well as all other sciences, is acquired from reason and experience, and (as it is progressively obtained) may with propriety be called, the revelation of God, which he has revealed to us in the constitution of our rational natures; and as it is congenial with reason and truth, cannot (like other revelations) partake of imposture.

This is natural religion, and could be derived from none other but God. I have endeavored, in this treatise, to prune this religion from those excrescences, with which craft on the one hand, and ignorance on the other, have loaded it; and to hold it up to view in its native simplicity, free from alloy; and have throughout the contents of the volume, addressed the reason of mankind, and not their passions, traditions or prejudices; for which cause, it is no ways probable that it will meet with any considerable approbation.

Most of the human race, by one means or other are prepossessed with principles opposed to the religion of reason. In these parts of America, they are most generally taught, that they are born into the world in a state of enmity to God and moral good, and are under his wrath and curse, that the way to

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heaven and future blessedness is, out of their power to pursue, and that it is incumbered with mysteries which none but the priests can unfold, that we must “be born again,” have a special kind of faith, and be regenerated; or in fine, that human nature, which they call “the old man,” must be destroyed, perverted, or changed by them, and by them new modelled, before it can be admitted into the heavenly kingdom.

Such a plan of superstition, as far as it obtains credit in the world, subjects mankind to sacerdotal empire; which is erected on the imbecility of human nature. Such of mankind, as break the fetters of their education, remove such other obstacles as are in their way, and have the confidence publicly to talk rational, exalt reason to its just supremacy, and vindicate truth and the ways of God’s providence to men, are sure to be stamped with the epithet of irreligious, infidel, profane, and the like. But it is often observed of such a man, that he is morally honest, and as often replied, “what of that? Morality will carry no man to heaven.” So that all the satisfaction the honest man can have while the superstitious are squabbling hell fire at him, is to retort back upon them that they are priest ridden.

The manner of the existence, and intercourse of human souls, after the dissolution of their bodies by death, being inconceivable to us in this life, and all manner of intelligence between us and departed souls impracticable, the priests have it in their power to amuse us with a great variety of visionary apprehensions of things in the world to come, which, while

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in this life, we cannot contradict from experience, the test of great part of our certainty (especially to those of ordinary understandings) and having introduced mysteries into their religion, make it as incomprehensible to us, (in this natural state) as the manner of our future existence; and from Scripture authority, having invalidated reason as being carnal and depraved, they proceed further to teach us from the same authority, that, “the natural man knoweth not the things of the spirit, for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them for they are spiritually discerned.”

A spiritualizing teacher is nearly as well acquainted with the kingdom of heaven, as a man can be with his home lot. He knows the road to heaven and eternal blessedness, to which happy regions, with the greatest assurance, he presumes to pilot his dear disciples and unfold to them the mysteries of the canonical writings, and of the world to come; they catch the enthusiasm and see with the same sort of spiritual eyes, with which they can pierce religion through and through, and understand the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures, which before had been “a dead letter” to them, particularly the revelations of St. John the divine, and the allusion of the horns therein mentioned.

The most obscure and unintelligible passages of the Bible, come within the compass of their spiritual discerning as apparently as figures do to a mathematician: then they can sing songs out of the Canticles, saying, “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine;”

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and being at a loose from the government of reason, please themselves with any fanaticism they like best, as that of their being “snatched as brands out of the burning, to enjoy the special and eternal favor of God, not from any worthiness or merit in them, but merely from the sovereign will and pleasure of God, while millions of millions, as good by nature and practice as they, were left to welter eternally, under the scalding drops of divine vengeance;” not considering that if it was consistent with the perfections of God to save them, his salvation could not fail to have been uniformly extended to all others, whose circumstances may be supposed to be similar to, or more deserving than theirs, for equal justice cannot fail to apply in all cases in which equal justice demands it.

But these deluded people resolve the divine government altogether into sovereignty: “even so Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight,” And as they exclude reason and justice from their imaginary notions of religion, they also exclude it from the providence or moral government of God. Nothing is more common, in the part of the country where I was educated, than to hear those infatuated people, in their public and private addresses, acknowledge to their creator, from the desk and elsewhere, “hadst thou, O Lord, laid judgment to the line and righteousness to the plummet, we had been in the grave with the dead and in hell with the damned, long before this time.” Such expressions from the creature to the creator are profane, and utterly incompatible with the divine character. Undoubtedly (all things completely considered), the providence of God to man is just,

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inasmuch as it has the divine approbation.

The superstitious thus set up a spiritual discerning, independent of, and in opposition to reason, and their mere imaginations pass with each other, and with themselves, for infallible truth. Hence it is, that they despise the progressive and wearisome reasonings of philosophers (which must be admitted to be a painful method of arriving at truth) but as it is the only way in which we can acquire it, I have pursued the old natural road of ratiocination, concluding, that as this spiritual discerning is altogether inadequate to the management of any of the concerns of life, or of contributing any assistance or knowledge towards the perfecting of the arts and sciences, it is equally unintelligible and insignificant in matters of religion: and therefore conclude, that if the human race in general, could be prevailed upon to exercise common sense in religions concerns, those spiritual fictions would cease, and be succeeded by reason and truth.

Chapter XIII.2

Of the Importance of the Exercise of Reason and the Practice of Morality in Order to the Happiness of Mankind

THE period of life is very uncertain, and at the longest is but short; a few years bring us from infancy to manhood, a few more, to a dissolution; pain, sickness and death are the necessary consequences of animal life. Through life we struggle with physical evils, which eventually are certain to destroy our earthly composition; and well would it be for us did

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evils end here; but alas moral evil has been more or less predominant in our agency, and though natural evil is unavoidable, yet moral evil may be prevented or remedied by the exercise of virtue.

Morality is therefore of more importance to us than any or all other attainments; as it is a habit of mind, which, from a retrospective consciousness of our agency in this life, we should carry with us into our succeeding state of existence, as an acquired appendage of our rational nature, and as the necessary means of our mental happiness. Virtue and vice are the only things in this world, which, with our souls, are capable of surviving death; the former is the rational and only procuring cause of all intellectual happiness, and the latter of conscious guilt and misery; and therefore, our indispensable duty and ultimate interest is, to love, cultivate and improve the one, as the means of our greatest good, and to hate and abstain from the other, as productive of our greatest evil. And in order thereto, we should so far divest ourselves of the encumbrances of this world, (which are too apt to engross our attention) as to inquire a consistent system of the knowledge of religious duty, and make it our constant endeavor in life to act conformably to it.

The knowledge of the being, perfections, creation and providence of God, and of the immortality of our souls, is the foundation of religion; which has been particularly illustrated in the four first chapters of this discourse. And as the Pagan, Jewish, Christian and Mahometan countries of the world have been overwhelmed with a multiplicity of revelations di-

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verse from each other, and which, by their respective promulgators, are said to have been immediately inspired into their souls by the spirit of God, or immediately communicated to them by the intervening agency of angels (as in the instance of the invisible Gabriel to Mahomet) and as those revelations have been received and credited, by afar the greater part of the inhabitants of the several countries of the world (on whom they have been obtruded) as supernaturally revealed by God or angels, and which, in doctrine and discipline, are in most respects repugnant to each other, it fully evinces their imposture, and authorizes us, without a lengthy course of arguing, to determine with certainty, that not one of them had their original from God; as they clash with each other, which is ground of high probability against the authenticity of each of them.

A revelation, that may be supposed to be really of the institution of God, must also be supposed to be perfectly consistent or uniform, and to be able to stand the test of truth; therefore such pretended revelations, as are tendered to us as the contrivance of heaven, which do not bear that test, we may be morally certain, was either originally a deception, or has since, by adulteration become spurious.

Reason therefore must be the standard by which we determine the respective claims of revelation; for otherwise we may as well subscribe to the divinity of the one as of the other, or to the whole of them, or to none at all. So likewise on this thesis, if reason rejects the whole of those revelations, we ought to return to the religion of nature and reason.

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Undoubtedly it is our duty, and for our best good, that we occupy and improve the faculties, with which our creator has endowed us, but so far as prejudice, or prepossession of opinion prevails over our minds, in the same proportion, reason is excluded from our theory or practice. Therefore if we would acquire useful knowledge, we must first divest ourselves of those impediments and sincerely endeavor to search out the truth: and draw our conclusions from reason and just argument, which will never conform to our inclination, interest or fancy but we must conform to that if we would judge rightly.

As certain as we determine contrary to reason, we make a wrong conclusion; therefore, our wisdom is, to conform to the nature and reason of things, as well in religious matters, as in other sciences. Preposterously absurd would it be, to negative the exercise of reason in religious concerns, and yet, be actuated by it in all other and less occurrences of life. All our knowledge of things is derived from God, in and by the order of nature, out of which we cannot perceive, reflect or understand any thing whatsoever; our external senses are natural; and those objects are also natural; so that ourselves, and all things about us, and our knowledge collected therefrom, is natural, and not supernatural; as argued in the fifth chapter.

An unjust composition never fails to contain error and falsehood. Therefore an unjust connection of ideas is not derived from nature, but from the imperfect composition of man. Misconnection of ideas is the same as misjudging, and has no positive ex-

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istence, being merely a creature of the imagination; but nature and truth are real and uniform; and the rational mind by reasoning, discerns the uniformity, and is thereby enabled to make a just composition of ideas, which will stand the test of truth. But the fantastical illuminations of the credulous and superstitious part of mankind, proceed from weakness, and as far as they take place in the world subvert the religion of REASON, NATURE, AND TRUTH.