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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LETTER TO THE REVEREND MR. CARY ***

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A

Letter
To the
Reverend Mr. Channing
Relative to
His Two Sermons
On
Infidelity

By George Bethune English, A.M.
Boston
Printed for the Author
1813

LETTER, &c.

Rev. Sir,

Your eloquent and interesting Sermons on Infidelity, I have read with the interest arising from the nature of the subject you have discussed, and the impressive manner in which you have treated it.

As it is understood that the appearance of those Sermons was owing to a Book lately published by me, I request your pardon for a liberty I am about to take, which in any other circumstances I should blush to presume upon—it is sir, with deference, and great respect, to express my sentiments with regard to some of the arguments contained in them, where the reasoning does not appear to me so unexceptionable as the language in which it is enveloped, is eloquent and affecting. There are also some opinions of yours relative to matters of fact, in those discourses, to which I would respectfully solicit your attention.

It afforded me much pleasure, though it caused me no surprise, to perceive you to say in your introductory remarks, that these Sermons were designed to procure for the arguments for Christianity "a serious, and respectful attention" and, that if you should "be so happy as to awaken candid and patient enquiry," your "principal object will be accomplished" you wish, "that Christianity should be thoroughly examined," you do "not wish to screen it from enquiry." It would cease, you observe to be your support were you not "persuaded that it is able to sustain the most deliberate investigation."

In considering Christianity as a fair subject for discussion, you do justice to the cause you so eloquently defend for Christianity itself honestly, and openly professes to offer itself, to the belief of all mankind solely on account of the reasons which support it; and since its learned, and liberal advocates always announce, and recommend it from the Pulpit as reasonable in itself and confirmed by unanswerable arguments; no one who believes them sincere can doubt, that they are perfectly willing

to have its claims openly discussed and think themselves amply able to give valid reasons, "for the faith that is in them," and which they so earnestly invite all men to receive.

You observe, p. 13, that the writings of Infidels, "have been injurious not so much by the strength of their arguments, as by the positive, and contemptuous manner In which they speak of Revelation, they abound in sarcasm, abuse, and sneer, and supply the place of reasoning, by wit and satire." If so sir, it is all in favor of the cause you defend; for the tiny weapons of wit, and ridicule, will assuredly fly to shivers under a few blows from the solid, and massy club of sound logic. The man who attacks any system of Religion merely with wit, and ridicule, can never, I conceive, be a very formidable antagonist.

The mental imbecility of the man who could touch such a subject as religion in any shape with no other arms, would render him a harmless adversary, and the intrinsic weakness of such shining but slender weapons, when encountered with something more solid, would eventually render him a contemptible one, I therefore cannot help doubting, that wit and ridicule alone, and unsupported by reasoning, and good reasoning too, could ever have been very successfully wielded against such a thing as the Christian Religion, by its opposers.

No man it appears to me of common understanding will ever resign his religion on account of a few jokes, and bon mots. The adherence of such men as are weak enough to be subverted by such trifles can do as little honor to Christianity, as their abandoning it for such reasons, can affect it with disgrace. The belief of such men could never have been more than habit, and their Infidelity nothing else than a freak of folly, which is reproachful only to themselves. But after all, this vehement objection to wit and ridicule, appears to me a little imprudent; for a sarcastic opponent might reply, that sceptics, have been not unfrequently attacked with irony most severe, and sometimes sorely wounded by volleys of wit shot from the pulpit, a place too where it can be done without fear of reprisals. You know sir, that the famous Warburton, for instance, used to amuse himself with not only cutting down every unlucky sceptic that came in his way, but he absolutely cut them to pieces with the edge of ridicule, most bitterly envenomed too with something else. It seems therefore a little unreasonable, that what is fair for one party, should not be so for the other too. Besides, the advocates of a cause, which is said not only not to fear examination, but to challenge it, should not, it appears to me, when taken at their words shrink, and draw back, on account of such trifles as wit, and ridicule; because the style of an investigation cannot certainly conceal the immutable distinction between a good argument and a bad one, from such learned and penetrating adversaries as the Clergy; and moreover does it appear clear that an advocate after asserting a proposition, and defying refutation, has any right to insist, that his opponent should put his arguments in just such a form as would be most convenient to him? What would a penetrating Lawyer think of the cause of his opponent, on finding him to insist upon his arranging his objections, and expressing his arguments just so that it might be most easy to him to reply to them?

For my own part, I have no claims to wit, and if I have been sometimes sarcastic it was more than I meant to be, it was the premeditated consequence of bitter feelings arising from considering myself as having been betrayed by my credulity into taking a situation in society, which I had discovered I must quit at no less a hazard than that the destruction of all my plans and prospects for life. At any rate I am satisfied, that no ridicule of mine has been intentionally adduced by me in order to corroborate a false position, or a weak argument; I believe that it seldom appears except in the rear of something more respectable and efficient.

You observe, that Christianity "deserves at least respectful, and serious attention, must be evident to every man who has honesty of mind." Nothing can be more true than this, it is a subject which does deserve a respectful, and serious attention: because every thing claiming to be from God ought to be carefully, coolly, and respectfully examined on these accounts.

1. If it be from God it is of the highest importance to the welfare of mankind that its truth should be investigated thoroughly, and settled firmly.

2. Because if it is not from God it must be the fruit of either of error or fraud, if of the first it ought to be rejected as a delusion; if of the second it ought to be cast off as a deception practiced in the name of the God of truth, and therefore disrespectful to him.

It also merits, you most truly say, a respectful examination on account of the character of its founder, for the character of Jesus you justly consider as too excellent and unexceptionable to be reproached. Whatever may be said concerning the moral excellence of that person's character I will cheerfully assent to, and I could not listen without disgust to language impeaching his moral purity. This I can do without ceasing to suppose him an enthusiast; for there appears to me to be too many marks of it in the New Testament for the idea to be set aside by a few eloquent exclamations, and notes of admiration; if I am wrong in this idea or in others, I will not prove indocile to arguments that shall sufficiently show the contrary.

You observe, p. 16. "another consideration which entitles Christianity to respectful attention is this. That Jesus Christ appeared at a time when there prevailed in the east a universal expectation of a distinguished personage who was to produce a great and happy change in the world. This expectation was built on writings which claimed to be prophetic, which existed long before Jesus was born."

I cannot help thinking the very great stress which has been laid upon this "rumour spread all over the east" a little unreasonable.

For 1. "A rumour" is not as I apprehend an adequate foundation on which to build such a thing as the Christian religion, which claims to be derived from heaven.

2. Those who have brought forward with so much earnestness this popular rumour, have not, I conceive, paid due attention to the causes that might naturally have produced it, which were possibly these. There is in the Jewish prophets frequent mention of a great deliverer, and it is represented that he should appear in the time when the Jewish nation should be suffering under most grievous afflictions, and who should deliver them therefrom, Now was it not perfectly natural for the Jews, dispersed over Asia, to expect, and to circulate the notion of this deliverer when their own sufferings, inflicted by their enemies, were intolerable? If you will open Josephus, you will there read that about and after the time of the crucifixion of Jesus the Jews were dreadfully oppressed by the Romans, and were designedly driven to desperation, by Florus with the express purpose of exciting a rebellion, and thus prevent their accusing him of his crimes before the tribunal of Caesar. Was it at all unnatural therefore for the Jews thus oppressed, and reading in their sacred books, that they should be delivered from their oppressors by the appearance of their great deliverer when their sufferings were at the height; was it extraordinary that the Jews, writhing under the lash of tyrannical conquerors, and considering their then circumstances, to expect this deliverer at that time? And to conclude, does it, after all, appear that this rumour prevailed in the life time of Jesus, or not till about thirty years after his crucifixion?

You add, "now this is a remarkable circumstance which distinguishes Jesus from the founders of all other religions." This was no doubt a slip of the memory, as so learned a man as Mr. Channing, no doubt knows that the Mahometans, who are the most numerous sect of religionists now in the world, affirm, that there was a very general expectation of their victorious prophet Mahomet, about the time of his birth grounded on tradition, and, as they say, originally on very many texts of the Old Testament, which texts, with divers more from the New Testament, are urged by the Mahometan Divines as to the same purpose: these texts, and their irrelevancy are collected and shown by Father Maracci in his first Dissertation prefixed to his edition of the Koran, printed at Padua 1698. Collins, in his answer to the Bishop of Litchfield, and Coventry, states this fact, and refers to "Addison's first state of Mahometanism" p. 35. "Life of Mahomet" before four treatises concerning the doctrine of the Mahometans, p. 9. Maracci's Appendix ad Prodrumum primum.p. 36-46.

In p. 18, you say, that the prophecies with regard to the Messiah, "describe a deliverer of the human race very similar to say the least to the character in which Jesus appeared." I must confess that after reading again the prophecies collected in the third chapter of "The Grounds of Christianity examined" this similarity still remains invisible to me. I hope you will not be offended at my avowing that you appear to me to be sensible of the difficulty of this affair of the Messiahship, for you content yourself with adducing that characteristic of the Christ recorded in the Old Testament, his teaching and enlightening the Gentiles with the knowledge of God, and true religion, as applicable to Jesus, and sufficient to prove him the Messiah. Yet supposing that this characteristic would apply to Jesus, it would not, I think, be sufficient to prove him to be the Messiah or Christ: since this characteristic is merely one among twenty other marks given, and required to be found.

2. It would, it appears to me, prove Mahomet the Messiah sooner than Jesus; since Mahomet in person converted more Gentiles to the knowledge and worship of one God during his life time, than Christianity did in one hundred years.

3. But what is still more to the purpose, it cannot, I conceive, apply to Jesus at all, since he did not fulfill even this solitary characteristic; for he did not preach to the Gentiles, but confined his mission and teaching to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." It was Paul who established Christianity among the Gentiles.

In p. 18, you appear to admit that all the characteristic marks of the Messiah were not manifested in Jesus, but will be manifested at some future period. To which a Jew might answer, by politely asking you, whether then you do not require too much of him for the present, in demanding faith upon credit?

But that when Jesus of Nazareth in this future time shall fulfill the prophecies; will it not be time enough to believe him to be the Messiah?

You ask, p. 19, "was ever character more pacific than that of Jesus? Can any religion breathe a milder temper than his? Into how many ferocious breasts has it already infused the kindest and gentlest spirit? And after all these considerations is Jesus to be rejected because some prophecies which relate to his future triumphs are not yet accomplished?" This argument I can easily conceive must have had great weight with such a man as Mr. Channing, whose heart accords with every thing that is mild and amiable. But after all my dear sir, what are "all these considerations" to the purpose? Show that Jesus was as amiable and as good as the most vivid imagination can paint; nay, prove him to have been an angel from heaven, and it will not, it seems to me, at all tend towards demonstrating him to be the Messiah of the Old Testament, and if his religion was as mild as doves, and as beneficent as the blessed sun of heaven, still I might respectfully insist, that unless he answers to the description of the Messiah given in the Old Testament, it is all irrelevant, and "some prophecies" (or even one) unaccomplished, which it is expressly said should be accomplished at the appearance of the Messiah, are quite sufficient I conceive to nullify his claims.

In the 29th page you say that "the Gospels are something more than loose and idle rumours of events which happened in a distant age, and a distant nation. We have the testimony of men who were the associates of Jesus Christ; who received his instructions from his own lips and saw his works with their own eyes."

I presume that after what I have represented to Mr. Cary upon the subject of the Gospels according to Matthew and John, who know are the only Evangelists supposed to have heard with their ears, and seen with their eyes the doctrines and facts recorded in those books, you will be willing to allow, that this is very strong language. You observe in your note to p. 19, that the other writings of the New Testament, (except Luke, Acts, and Paul's Epistles) "may be all resigned, and our religion and its evidences will be unimpaired." This language too appears to me to be too strong, since if you give up all but the writings you mention we shall by no means have "the testimony of men who were the associates of Jesus Christ, who received his instructions from his own lips, and saw his works with their own eyes," for in giving up so much do you not resign the gospels according to Matthew and John?

2. It requires some softening I think on these accounts; since 1. Luke was not an eyewitness of the facts he records in his gospel, it is only a hearsay story. 2. It contradicts the other gospels.

3. It has been grossly interpolated.

4. The learned Professor Marsh in his dissertation upon the three first gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, (in his notes to Michaelis' Introduction to the N. T.) represents, and gives ingenious reasons to prove, that those gospels are Compilations from pre-existing documents, written by nobody knows who. So that the pieces from which the three first gospels were composed were, according to this Hypothesis, anonymous, and the gospels themselves written by we do not know what authors; and yet, you know sir, that these patch-work narratives of miracles have passed not only for credible, but for inspired!

5. The Book of Acts was rejected by the Jewish Christians, as containing accounts untrue, and contradictory to their Acts of the Apostles. It was rejected also by the Encratites, and the Severians, and I believe by the Marcionites. The Jewish Christians were the oldest Christian Church, and they pronounced that the Book of Acts in our Canon was written by a partizan of Paul's; and it will be recollected that our Book of Acts is in fact, principally taken up in recording the travels and preaching of Paul, and contains little comparatively of the other Apostles. The Jewish Christians had a Book of Acts different from ours. And besides the fact, that the oldest Christian church, the mother church of Judea, with whom we should expect to find the truth if any where, rejected the Acts, Chrysostom Bishop of Constantinople, at the end of the 4th century, in a homily upon this Book says, that "not only the author and collector of the Book, but the Book itself was unknown to many." This mother church had not only a book of Acts of the apostles different from ours, but also a gospel of their own, called the gospel of the twelve apostles, which is supposed by the learned in important particulars to differ from ours. According to Augustine however, this gospel was publicly read in the churches as authentick for 300 years. This gospel in the opinion of Grabe, Mills, and other learned men, was written before the gospels now received as canonical. See Toland's Nazarenus.

6. The Epistle of Paul to the Romans, those to the Ephesians, and Colossians, are nearly proved to be apocryphal by Evanson, and about the rest there are some suspicious circumstances. You refer the reader of your Sermons in that note to Paley's Evidences, 9th chapter, for evidence for the authenticity of the rest of the gospels; but if the reader goes there he will find, that all the testimony Paley quotes for the first 200 years after Christ except that of Papias, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, (the value of whose testimony to the authenticity of the gospels, has been considered in the 16th ch. of my work; and which may further appear from these circumstances, that Irenaeus considered the Book of Hermas an inspired Scripture as much as he did the four gospels, and that Tertullian contended stoutly for the

inspiration of the ridiculous book of Enoch, one of the most stupid forgeries that ever was seen,) the quotations and supposed allusions in the earlier fathers are uncertain, since it is acknowledged by Dodwell, and also by others, that it cannot be shown with any certainty, whether these quotations and allusions belong to ours or to apocryphal gospels. And to conclude, would you not require as much evidence for the authenticity of the gospels, which relate supernatural events, as we have for most of the classics, and yet if you examine the subject closely, you will be satisfied to your astonishment that we have not so much as we have for the works of Virgil or Cicero; and that we have not by a great deal so much testimony for the miracles of Jesus, which were supernatural events which require at least as great proof as natural ones as we have for the deaths of Pompey and of Julius Caesar, though you seem from your note to think otherwise. As to Celsus, Porphyry, and Julian, if they allowed the gospels to be genuine, they might have done so, and taken advantage of such an allowance to show that they could not, from their contradictions, have been written by men having a mission from the God of Truth. But Sir, is it certain that they did acknowledge it? Since the only fragments of their works upon Christianity we have remaining, are just such parts as their Christian answerers have picked out, and selected; the works themselves were carefully burned. And that these answerers have not acted fairly may be more than suspected, I think from a hint given us by Jerom, (which you will find in Dr. Middleton's Free Enquiry) that Origen in his answer to Celsus, sometimes fought the devil at his own weapons, i.e. lied for the sake of the truth; and it is notorious, that the Fathers of the church allowed this to be lawful, and practiced it abundantly. See the note at the end.

You allow in the 20th page that the sincerity of the propagators of opinions is no proof of their truth; and yet you seem to think, that the twelve apostles must have been correct, because the opinions they propagated were, you think, contrary to their prejudices as Jews. This argument cannot, I conceive, support the consequences you lay upon it, were it true that the apostles had abandoned their opinions as Jews about the nature of the Messiah's Kingdom. But I believe you will not be a little surprized, when I shall show you, that in preaching Jesus as the Messiah they did by no means adopt the very spiritual ideas you ascribe to them, but in fact believed that Jesus would soon return and "restore the Kingdom to Israel" in good earnest, and in a sense by no means spiritual. This argument, if I can establish it, you observe, sir, no doubt, must consequently subvert a very considerable part of your system, by which you endeavour to account for the discrepancies which you do allow as yet to subsist between the prophecies of the Messiah, and Jesus of Nazareth. I beseech you therefore to heed me carefully.

In Luke i. verse 32. The angel tells Mary that her son Jesus should be great, and be called: the son of the Highest and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David, and he shall reign over the house of Israel forever and to his kingdom there shall be no end, and in verse 67, &c. Zachariah, by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost too, thus praises God concerning Jesus "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, because he hath visited and redeemed his people, and he hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; as he spake by the month of his holy prophets which have been since the world began, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all that hate us, &c. that we being delivered from the hand of our enemies should serve him with holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our lives." [See the Original.] You see, sir the notion that these words allude to, they certainly appear to me to mean something else than deliverance from spiritual foes. See also in the 2d ch. 25 verse, where Simeon a man who was "looking for the consolation of Israel" and was full of the Holy Ghost, expresses similar sentiments. And Anna the prophetess also spake concerning Jesus to all who "were expecting deliverance in Jerusalem," i.e. undoubtedly deliverance from the Romans. The carnal ideas of the Apostles with regard to the nature of their Master's Kingdom, and their consequent expectations with regard to Jesus, before his crucifixion, are acknowledged; and in the 24th chapt. of Luke 21st v. they say in despair, "But we trusted that it had been he who should have redeemed Israel." And after the resurrection, and just before the ascension of Jesus, after they had been for forty days "instructed in the things pertaining to the kingdom of God," which was the same as that of the Messiah, by Jesus himself, they do not seem to have had the least idea of the metaphysical kingdom of modern Christians, for they ask him, "Lord wilt thou now (or at this time) restore the kingdom to Israel?" And his answer is, not that it should never be restored, but that "it was not for them to know the times, and the seasons," see Acts 1. And even after the day of Pentecost, ch. iii. verse 19, Peter tells the Jews to repent, that their sins may be blotted out "when the times of refreshing [i.e. of deliverance] shall come from the face of the Lord, and he shall send Jesus Christ [i.e. the Messiah] before preached, (or promised) unto you, whom the heavens must receive until the times of the restoration of all things which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began." From this we see, that the Apostles thought that Jesus was gone to heaven for a time, and was to return again [there is no mention whatever in the Prophets of a double coming of the Messiah] and fulfill the prophecies with regard to "the restoration of all things" to a paradisiacal state, and the temporal kingdom of the Messiah sitting upon the throne of David in Jerusalem, all which is contained in the words of "the holy prophets" which have been since the world began. And what sort of a kingdom it was to be will appear from the not very spiritual description of the reign of Jesus upon earth during the Millennium, described in the 20th chapter of Revelations, and not only so, but the

author of that book represents the final, and permanent state of the blessed as fixed, not in heaven, as modern Christians suppose, but on a new earth, or the earth renewed, and in a superb city, called "the new Jerusalem."

In fact, the ideas of the twelve Apostles upon the subject of the kingdom of the Messiah were precisely as carnal as those of their unbelieving brethren of the Jewish nation. They believed, as has been shown abundantly in the 15th chapter of "The Grounds of Christianity Examined," that their Master Jesus would come again, as he had told them he would, in that generation, and perform for Israel all the glorious things promised; that he would come in a cloud with power and great glory, and all the holy angels with him; that many from the east, and from the west should sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in that kingdom; and that the disciples were to eat and drink at Jesus' table in his kingdom, and were to sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. The author of the book of Revelations, after describing the magnificence and felicity of Jesus' kingdom upon earth, represents him as saying that he should come quickly: and in the first chapters, that they who had pierced him should see him coming in the clouds. The Apostles, as appears from the epistles, were on tiptoe with expectation, and frequently assured their converts that "the Lord is at hand, the judge stood before the door, &c." And to conclude, Can you not now, sir, conceive, and guess the cause of the gradual disappearance of the Jewish Christians after "that generation had passed away?" The fact was, that the Jewish Christians never dreamed of that figment a spiritual Messiah. They expected that Jesus would come again in "that generation" as he had told them he would; he did not come; in consequence the Jewish Church, after waiting, and waiting a great while, dwindled into annihilation.

You conclude your most eloquent sermons by an appeal to the feelings in behalf of opinions which ought I think to be defended by reason and proof rather than by sentiment. You complain of ridicule in an examination of this kind. I hope you will excuse my expressing some doubts whether eloquent sentiment, and appeals to the feelings are less exceptionable in a discussion of the causes why we ought to give Christianity a respectful and dispassionate examination. If I were so happy as to be so eloquent as you, and in a manner which such power of persuasion as you possess would give me ability to do, had described the burnings, the tortures, the murders, and the plundering of the Jew's during the last thousand years, in order to cause my readers to wish to find reason to hate Christianity; would you not have said it was unfair? It cannot be necessary to inform so finished a scholar as Mr. Channing, that in a discussion about the truth of a system the consideration of the consequences of the system's being proved to be false, is irrelevant and contrary to rule. You will say that you were not discussing the truth of a system, but the reasons why we should give it a respectful examination. This is true-The question you advised your auditors to examine was, whether the Christian religion was true or otherwise. Be it so. I appeal then to your candour, whether it was the way to send them to the important enquiry unprejudiced and unbiased, to impress them by authority, and by arguments which are good only when used as subsidiary to proof or demonstration and by terrifying them with what you imagine would be the consequences of finding that Christianity is unfounded? Ah sir, does the advocate of a cause "founded on adamant" wish to dazzle the judges and fascinate the jury before he ventures to bring the merits of his cause to trial? Must they be made to shed tears, must their hearts be made to feel that you are right, in order that their understandings may be able to perceive it? Should the learned and able champion of a system, who offers it as true, and to be received only because it is true, when its claims are threatened with a scrutiny, lay so much stress upon its supposed utility when the question is its truth? Is it an argument that Christianity is true, because if false, you think we should have no religion left? This argument no doubt looks ludicrous to you, and yet I am told that it has been gravely offered by some well meaning men after reading your sermons, who thought it of no small weight. You may see from this, my dear sir, how easily simplicity is satisfied.

You lay great stress upon the comforts derived from believing Christianity true. But ought men to be encouraged to lean and build their hopes on what may perhaps when examined turn out to be a broken reed? The expiring Indian dies in peace-holding a cow's tail in his hand. If he was in his full health, and vigour of understanding, would you think it charitable to let that man remain uninformed of his delusion in trusting to such a staff of comfort? Would you not endeavour to enlighten him, and make him ashamed of his superstition? I know you would, and you would do him a kindness deserving his gratitude. To conclude, the Christian religion is either a divine and solid foundation of morals, hope, and consolation, or it is not. If it is, there is no reason in the world to fear, that it can be undermined, or hurt in the least. To believe so would be I conceive to doubt the Providence of God. For it cannot be supposed, that a religion really given by the Almighty and All wise can be undermined by a wretched mortal, a child of dust and infirmity; the supposition is monstrous, and therefore no examination of its claims ought to be deprecated, or frowned at by those who think it "founded on adamant," for no man shrinks at having that examined which he is positively confident of being able to prove.

2. If this foundation be not divine and solid it ought I conceive to be undermined, and abandoned. For willfully, and knowingly to suffer confiding men to be duped, or allured into building their hopes and

consolation upon a delusion, is in my opinion to maltreat, and to despise them. And to suffer them to be imposed upon is both unbrotherly and dishonest. And to advocate, or to insinuate a defense of an unsound foundation upon the principle of pious frauds, viz. because it is supposed by its defenders to be useful, you will no doubt agree with me is both absurd, and immoral. For in the long run truth is more useful than error, "nothing (says Lord Bacon) is so pernicious as deified error." And it must not be supposed, or insinuated, that the good God has made it necessary, that the morals, comfort, and consolation of his rational creatures should be founded on, or be supported by a mistake and a delusion; for it would be virtually to deny his Providence. In fine, Christianity come to us as from God, and says to us, "He that believeth shall be saved, and he that believeth not, shall be damned." Therefore, he that receives such extraordinary claims without examination, is "in my opinion, a wittol; and he who suffers himself to be compelled to swallow such pretensions without the severest scrutiny, according to my notions of things, has no claims to be considered as a man of common sense.

Before I close my letter, it occurs to me to observe, that you appear to me to have misconceived the state of the case, in representing in your sermons, that if you give up Christianity you will have no religion left. Christianity, if I understand it, is properly contained and taught in the New Testament alone. I am not aware, my dear sir, that if you were to give up the New Testament you would be without a religion, or even what you acknowledge as divine revelation. It appears to me, that a Christian might, if he chose, give up the New Testament and place himself on the footing of the devout Gentiles mentioned in the Acts, who worshipped the one God, and kept the moral law of the Old Testament. You will recollect, that I have not attempted to affect the authority of the Old Testament which you acknowledge to contain a Divine revelation. I never shall because, I would never quarrel with any thing merely for the sake of disputing. Whether the Old Testament contains a revelation from God, or not, its moral precepts are, as far as I know unexceptionable; there is not, I believe, any thing extravagant or impracticable in them, they are such as promote the good order of society. Its religion in fact is merely Theism garnished, and guarded by a splendid ritual, and gorgeous ceremonies; the belief of it can produce no oppression and wretchedness to any portion of mankind, and for these reasons I for one will never attempt to weaken its credit, whatever may be my own opinion with regard to its supernatural claims.

In fact, to speak correctly, the Old Testament is at this moment the sole true canon of Scripture, acknowledged as such by genuine Christianity; it was the only canon which was acknowledged by Christ, and his immediate Apostles. The books of the New Testament are all occasional books, and not a code or system of religion; nor were they all collected into one body, nor declared by any even human authority to be all canonical till several hundred years after Jesus Christ. They are books written by Christians, and contain proofs of Christianity alleged from the Old Testament, but contain Christianity itself no otherwise, it appears to me, than as explaining, illustrating, and confirming Christianity supposed to be taught in the Old Testament. They are mostly, where they inculcate doctrines, Commentaries on the Old Testament deriving from thence, and giving what the writers imagined to be contained in and hidden under the letter of it. And upon the same principle that the books of the New Testament were received as canonical, so was the Pastor of Hermas, the Book of Enoch, and others, just as highly venerated by the early Christians. But they did not at first, as I apprehend their expressions, rank them with the Old Testament, which was called "the Scriptures," by way of excellence. The Old Testament was in fact supposed by the writers of the New, to contain Christianity under the bark of the letter; and they represent Christianity as having been preached to the ancient Jews under the figure of types, and allegories. See Gal. iii. 8. Heb. xi. and the first Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, ch. x. In a word, the Apostles professed to "say none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say." Acts xxvi. 22,

Jesus and his Apostles do frequently, and emphatically style the books of the Old Testament "The Scriptures," and refer men to them as their rule, and canon. And Paul says, Acts xxiv. 14, "After the [Christian] way, which ye call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers; believing all things that are written in the law, and the prophets." But it does not appear, that any new books were declared by them to have that character. Nor was there any new canon of Scripture, or any collection of books as Scripture made whether of Gospels or Epistles during the lives of the Apostles; as is well known to you. —And if neither Jesus nor his apostles declared any other books to be canonical besides those of the Old Testament, I would ask the Christian who did? Or who had a right and authority to declare or make any books canonical? If Christianity required a new canon, or new digest of laws, it should seem that it ought to have been done by Jesus and his apostles, and not left to be executed by any after them: especially not left to be settled long after their deaths by weak, enthusiastic, ignorant, silly and factious men, such as the fathers, who were so badly informed of the genuine writings of the founders of their religion, that they were, when they came to collect and make a new canon, greatly divided: about the genuineness of all books bearing the names of the apostles, and contended with one another bitterly about their authority; and after all decree to be genuine some which are palpably forgeries.

But the truth is, that the present New Testament Canon, was collected and established by the Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians received none of them, but acknowledged nothing for Scripture but the books of the Old Testament which was the sole Canon left them by the twelve apostles. Their Gospel and Acts, if my memory does not deceive me, they regarded as histories only. They were merely a small body of Jews who thought that Jesus was the Messiah of the Old Testament. This article was the only one which made them Heretical: In all other respects they were as other Jews after the way which their countrymen called heresy, so worshipped they the God of their Fathers at the National Temple; believing and preaching "no other things than what [they imagined] Moses and the Prophets did say."

I have made this statement and representation, sir, on two accounts.

1. In order to repel the shocking and groundless imputation which I understand that some pains have been taken to fix upon me, I do not mean by you, sir, for you know the contrary that the object of my late publication was to aim at destroying all religion, and the annihilation of the publick worship of God, a charge which I reject with horror, and also with bitter indignation, that it should ever have been attributed to me. God forbid! that the publick worship and stated reverence which all ought to pay to the Great and Tremendous Being from whom we receive life and its every blessing; and to whose Providence we are subject; and by whose goodness we are sustained, should ever be caused to be neglected, or forgotten, by any man, or by the subversion of any opinions whatever. The propriety of the publick worship of God stands independent and without need of support from the peculiar doctrines of any sect. And the idea that this great duty would be superceded by the dismissal of the New Testament is so utterly groundless and absurd: that to make it appear so, any man has only to recollect that the public worship of the Supreme existed before the New Testament was written or thought of; and to look round the world and see millions of men worshipping God in houses of prayer, who know nothing about the New Testament except by report. I regard, sir, the imputation I have spoken of, as either a gross mistake of the simple, or a cunning and deliberate calumny of the crafty. I have made this statement and representation to show, that it does not follow, that in giving up the New Testament Christians will be deprived of all religion. For in retaining the Old Testament they would adopt nothing new, and would retain nothing but what they now acknowledge as containing a divine revelation; and in giving up the New Testament they would not, as I think has been shown, give up a jot of what had ever any right to the name of Scripture.

Whether however, people give up both, or retain one, or both, is their concern. I have stated what I have merely to show, that in giving up the New Testament they would not necessarily give up more than a part of their bibles, or any part of their bible, except that whose authenticity cannot be proved; nor any more of their faith, than that part of it which for almost eighteen hundred years has produced interminable disputes among themselves and misfortunes, and causeless reproach to others.

"With great regard, and the most respectful esteem, I subscribe myself,
Reverend Sir, Your obliged and humble servant

GEO. BETHUNE ENGLISH.

NOTE

Jerom speaking of the different manner which writers found themselves obliged to use, in their controversial, and dogmatical writings, intimates, that in controversy whose end was victory, rather than truth, it was allowable to employ every artifice which would best serve to conquer an adversary; in proof of which "Origen, says he, Methodius, Eusebius, Apollinaris, have written many thousands of lines against Celsus, and Porphyry: consider with what arguments and what slippery problems they baffle what was contrived against them by the spirit of the devil: and because they are sometimes forced to speak, they speak not what they think, but what is necessary against those who are called Gentiles. I do not mention the Latin writers, Tertullian, Cyprian, Minutius, Victorinus, Lactantius, Hilarius, lest I be thought not so much defending myself, as accusing others, &c." Op. Tom. 4. p. 2. p.:256. Middleton's Free Enquiry, p. 158. It is remarkable that the names mentioned by Jerom are the names of the early apologists for Christianity. When the Church got the upper hand however, they found a better way to confute those wicked men, Celsus and Porphyry, than by "slippery problems" and by speaking "not what they thought (to be true) but what was necessary against those who are called Gentiles," viz. by seeking after, and burning carefully their troublesome works. Of the fathers of the Church who were its pillars, leaders, and great men. Dr. Middleton observes in his Preface to his Enquiry, &c, p. 31, as follows: "I have shown by many indisputable facts, that the ancient Fathers were extremely credulous and superstitious, possessed with strong prejudices, and an enthusiastic zeal in favor not only of Christianity in general, but of every particular doctrine, which a wild imagination could engraft upon it, and scrupling no art or means by which they might propagate the same principles. In short they were

of a character front which nothing could be expected that was candid and impartial; nothing but what a weak or crafty understanding could supply towards confirming those prejudices with which they happened to be possessed, especially where religion was the subject, which above all other motives strengthens every bias, and inflames every passion of the human mind. And that this was actually the case, I have shown also, by many instances in which we find them roundly affirming as true things evidently false and fictitious; in order to strengthen as they fancied the evidences of the Gospel or to serve a present turn of confuting an adversary: or of enforcing a particular point which they were labouring to establish."

In p. 81 of the Introductory Discourse, he says, "Let us consider then in the next place what light these same forgeries [those of the Fathers of the fourth century] will afford us in looking backwards also into the earlier ages up to the times of the Apostles. And first, when we reflect on that surprising confidence and security with which the principal fathers of this fourth age have affirmed as true what they themselves had either forged, or what they knew at least to be forged; it is natural to suspect, that so bold a defiance of sacred truth could not be acquired, or become general at once, but must have been carried gradually to that height, by custom and the example of former times, and a long experience of what the credulity and superstition, of the multitude (i.e. of Christians) would bear."

"Secondly, this suspicion will be strengthened by considering, that this age [the 4th century] in which Christianity was established by the civil power, had no real occasion for any miracles. For which reason, the learned among the Protestants have generally supposed it to have been the very era of their cessation and for the same reason the fathers also themselves when they were disposed to speak the truth, have not scrupled to confess, that the miraculous shifts were then actually withdrawn, because the church stood no longer in need of them. So that it must have been a rash and dangerous experiment, to begin to forge miracles, at a time when there was no particular temptation to it; if the use of such fictions had not long been tried, and the benefit of them approved; and recommended by their ancestors; who wanted every help towards supporting themselves under the pressures and persecutions with which the powers on earth were afflicting them."

"Thirdly, if we compare the principal fathers of the fourth with those of the earlier ages. We shall observe the same characters of zeal and piety in them all, but more learning, more judgment, and less credulity in the later fathers. If these then be found either to have forced miracles themselves, or to have propagated what they knew to be forged, or to have been deluded so far by other people's forgeries as to take them for real miracles; (of the one or the other of which they were all unquestionably guilty) it will naturally excite in us the same suspicion of their predecessors, who in the same cause, and with the same zeal were less learned and more credulous, and in greater need of such arts for their defence and security.

"Fourthly. As the personal characters of the earlier fathers give them no advantage over their successors, so neither does the character of the earlier ages afford any real cause of preference as to the point of integrity above the latter. The first indeed are generally called and held to be the purest: but when they had once acquired that title from the authority of a few leading men; it is not strange to find it ascribed to them by every body else; without knowing or inquiring into the grounds of it. But whatever advantage of purity those first ages may claim in some particular respects, it is certain that they were defective in some others, above all which have since succeeded them. For there never was any period of time in all ecclesiastical history, in which so many rank heresies were publicly professed, nor in which so many spurious books were forged and published by the Christians, under the name of Christ, and the apostles, and the apostolic writers, as in those primitive ages; several of which forged hooks are frequently cited and applied to the defence of Christianity by the most eminent fathers of the same ages, as true and genuine pieces, and of equal authority with the scriptures themselves. And no man surely can doubt but that those who would either forge or make use of forged books, would in the same cause and for the same ends, make use of forged miracles." Let the reader remember that the Gospels according to Matthew and John are forgeries, and then apply this reasoning of Dr. Middleton's to the miracles contained in those Gospels. With regard to all the miracles of the New Testament, we know them only by report, and it is an acknowledged, because a demonstrable fact, that the age in which the accounts of these miracles were published, was an age overflowing with imposture and credulity. "Such," says Bishop Fell, "was the license of fiction in the first ages, and so easy the credulity, that testimony of the facts of that time is to be received with great caution, as not only the pagan world, but the church of God, has just reason to complain of its fabulous age." Stillingfleet says, "that antiquity is defective most where it is most important, In the awe immediately succeeding that of the apostles." Now be it recollected, that the Gospels first appeared in this age of fraud and credulity; and be it further remembered, that the authenticity of the Gospels, according to Matthew and John can be subverted, if marks of imposture, which would cause the rejection of any other books, are sufficient to affect the authenticity of those received as sacred. It is to be remarked farther, that the church in its first ages was full of forged hooks, giving accounts of the same events, different from those of the

books of the New Testament. The different sects, and the church itself, was torn by as many schisms then as it ever has been since, who mutually accuse each other of corrupting the Christians scriptures, and of lying, and cheating most abominably.

All reasoning therefore from books published at this time, and whose authenticity is supported only by the testimony of acknowledged liars; and which have been tampered with too as these certainly were, is exceedingly unsatisfactory. And yet such is the basis on which rests the credibility of the miracles of the New Testament. Dr. Middleton, after having shown, beginning at the earliest of the fathers immediately after the apostles, that they were all most amazingly credulous and superstitious: and having demonstrated from their own words, that from Justin Martyr downwards they were all liars, observes as follows, p. 157, *Free Inquiry*: "Now it is agreed by all, that these fathers, whose testimonies I have been just reciting were the most eminent lights of the fourth century; all of them sainted by the catholic church, and highly revered at this day in all churches, for their piety, probity, and learning. Yet from the specimens of them above given, it is evident, that they would not scruple to propagate any fiction, how gross so ever, which served to promote the interest either of Christianity in general, or of any particular rite or doctrine which they were desirous to recommend. St. Jerom in effect confesses it, for after the mention of a silly story, concerning the Christians of Jerusalem, who used to shew in the ruins of the temple, certain stones of a reddish color, which they pretended to have been stained by the blood of Zacharias the son of Barachias, who was slain between the temple and the altar, he adds, but I do not find fault with an error which flows from a hatred of the Jews, and a pious zeal for the Christian faith. If the miracles then of the fourth century, so solemnly attested by the most celebrated and revered fathers of the church, are to be rejected after all as fabulous, it must needs give a fatal blow to the credit of all the miracles even of the preceding centuries; since there is not a single father whom I have mentioned in this fourth age, who for zeal and piety may not be compared with the best of the more ancient, and for knowledge, and for learning be preferred to them all. For instance, there was not a person in all the primitive church more highly respected in his own days than St. Epiphanius, for the purity of his life as well as the extent of his leaning. He was master of five languages, and has left behind him one of the most useful works which remain to us from antiquity. St. Jerom, who personally knew him, calls him the father of all bishops, and a shining star among them; the man of God of blessed memory; to whom the people used to flock in crowds, offering their little children to his benediction, kissing his feet, and catching the hem of his garment. This holy man and light of the church, the great man of his day, asserts upon his own knowledge, "that in imitation of our Saviour's miracle at Cana in Galilee several fountains and rivers in his days were annually turned into wine. A fountain at Cibyra, a city of Caria, and another at Gerasa in Arabia, prove the truth of this. I myself have drunk out of the fountain at Cibyra, and my brethren out of the other at Gerasa; and many testify the same thing of the river Nile in Egypt." *Advers. Haeres*, 1. 2, c. 130. Middleton's *Inquiry*, p. 151, 152] "All the rest (Dr. Middleton goes on to say) were men of the same character, who spent their lives and studies in propagating the faith, and in combating the vices and the heresies of their times. Yet none of them have scrupled, we see, to pledge their faith for the truth, of facts which no man of sense can believe, and which their warmest admirers are forced to give up as fabulous. If such persons then could willfully attempt to deceive; and if the sanctity of their characters cannot assure us of their fidelity, what better security can we have from those who lived before them? Or what cure for our scepticism with regard, to any of the miracles above mentioned? Was the first asserter of them, Justin Martyr more pious, cautious, learned, judicious, or less credulous than Epiphanius? Or were those virtues more conspicuous in Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, and Lactantius, than in Athanasius, Gregory, Chrysostom, Jerom, Austin? Nobody, I dare say, will venture to affirm it. If these later fathers, then, biased by a false zeal or interest, could be tempted to propagate a known lie, or with all their learning and knowledge could be so weakly credulous as to believe the absurd stories which they themselves attest, there must be always reason to suspect, that the same prejudices would operate even more strongly in the earlier fathers, prompted by the same zeal and the same interests, yet endued with less learning, less judgment, and more credulity.

Such Christian reader, were the fathers, the leaders, and the great men of the church, and the apologists for your religion. And it is upon the credibility of these convicted knaves that ultimately, and substantially depends your belief. For it is upon their testimony and tradition that you receive and believe in the authenticity of the N.T., its doctrines and miracles.

I hope that if you choose to build your faith upon the testimony of such witnesses, that you will not think it unreasonable in me to presume to doubt the truth of opinions and miracles supported by the testimony of men like the fathers. I am willing, because I think it reasonable, to let every man follow his own judgment, and do I ask too much to be permitted without offence to enjoy the same liberty with regard to these things; which I conceive no fair man will now say, (if what has been brought forward be true) are positively provable as true, and worthy of unhesitating assent.

For the case is thus. The gospels are accused of being written by credulous and superstitious authors

whose names are not certainly known; as containing too inconsistent and contradictory accounts of prodigies and miracles; and also palpable marks of forgery. Now to convince a thinking man, that histories of such suspected character, containing relations of miracles, are divine or even really written, by the persons to whom they are ascribed, and not either some of the many spurious productions, with which it is notorious and acknowledged, the age in which they appeared abounded, calculated to astonish the credulous and superstitious! or else writings of authors who were themselves infected with the grossest superstitious credulity, what is the testimony?

For the first hundred years after the lives of the supposed authors, none at all. And the earliest fathers who speak of them are all convicted of gross credulity, and incapacity to distinguish genuine from, fictitious writings, (for they admitted as genuine scripture many books confessedly nonsensical forgeries,) but what is worse, are manifestly guilty by the evidence of their own words of having been palpable liars, cheats, and forgers. But, "it is an obvious rule in the admission of evidence in any cause whatsoever, that the more important the matter to be determined by it is, the more unsullied, and unexceptionable ought to be the characters of the witnesses to be. And when no court of justice among us in determining a question of fraud to the value of sixpence will admit the testimony of witnesses who are themselves notoriously convicted of the same offence of which the defendant is accused;" how can it be expected that any reasonable unprejudiced person should reasonably be required to admit similar evidence, i.e. the testimony of such men as the fathers in favor of the divine authority of books which are accused of being the offspring of fraud and credulity; and which relate too to a case of the greatest importance possible, not to himself only, but to the whole human race?!

For my own part, I cannot; and I think I could not without renouncing all those rules and principles of evidence, and of good sense, which in all other cases are universally respected. And when we consider the character of those by whom these histories were first received and believed, the unreasonableness of insisting upon the belief of these accounts will appear aggravated. What was the character of the early Gentile Christians? This we can ascertain from only two sources—the writings of their leaders, and those of their heathen contemporaries. According to the latter they were very weak and credulous. The primitive Christians were perpetually reproached for their gross credulity by all their enemies. Celsus says that they cared neither to receive nor to give any reason of their faith, and that it was an usual saying with them, do not examine, but believe only, and thy faith will save thee. Julian affirms, that the sum, of all their wisdom was comprised in this single precept, believe. The Gentiles, says Arnobius, make it their constant business to laugh at our faith, and to lash our credulity with their facetious jokes.

"The fathers on the other hand, defend themselves by saying, that they did nothing more: on this occasion than what the philosophers had always done; that Pythagoras' precepts were inculcated by an ipse dixit, and that they had found the same method useful with the vulgar, who were not at leisure to examine things; whom they taught therefore to believe, even without reasons: and that the heathens themselves, though they did not confess it in words, yet practiced the same in their acts." Middleton's Free Enquiry. Introd. Disc. p. 92. Lucian says, "that whenever any crafty juggler expert in his trade, and who knew how to make a right use of things, went over to the Christians, he was sure to grow rich immediately, by making a prey of their simplicity." [De Morte Peregr.]

If we turn to the writings of the earliest fathers; from these writings of the great men of the Church at that time we shall form but a very mean idea of the understandings of the little ones, since their writings are not one whit superior to the "godly Epistles" of the lowest orders of fanatics in the last, and present century, they are remarkable for nothing more than manifesting the extreme simplicity, and credulity, together with the sincere piety of the writers. The fathers who succeeded them were better informed, but not at all behind them in credulity, and enthusiasm. Tertullian, the most powerful mind among them during the first two hundred years, reasons as follows.

"The Son of God was crucified: it is no shame to own it, because it is a thing to be ashamed of. The Son of God died: it is wholly credible, because it is absurd. When buried he rose again to life: it is certain, because it is impossible." De Carne Christi, Section 5.

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