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**The Works Of the late Right Honorable Henry St. John,
Lord Viscount Bolingbroke**

In Five Volumes, complete.

Bolingbroke, Henry St. John

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XXIII.

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have not been more effectual to good purposes, nor that the state of mankind is such as we feel, and as we are apt to complain that it is.

XXIII.

WE may assure, from fact, that this has been the divine oeconomy, and leave those men to assume from imagination what this oeconomy has, or should have been, who have so much theological presumption. But whilst we leave them to imagine without fact, we must not suffer them to imagine against it. Nothing can be, I think, more true than what has been advanced concerning the unnatural religions, laws, and customs established in the several societies of men, and yet it is not less true, that the tables of natural religion and law are hung up in the sight of all men. All may read them, and tho error has prevailed, and will ever prevail in the bulk of mankind against knowledge, more or less, and to some degree, because it is agreeable to the private interests of those who lead, and to the prejudices of those who are led, that it should, I do not believe that there ever was a time, when it could be said with truth that the law of nature was imperfectly known, or that it was an incomplete system of morality before the christian revelation, both of which propositions are roundly advanced by divines, tho manifestly false.

Dr. CLARKE says, in his evidences of natural and revealed religion, which are often dim, and often weak, that the heathen philosophers were never able to prove and explain clearly and distinctly enough to persons of all capacities those things which they were the most fully certain of, and did in good measure understand, such as the obligations of virtue,
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and the will of God, in matters of morality. Now if it could be reconciled to common sense that they understood not fully, but in good measure only, such doctrines as they are said in the same sentence to have been fully certain of, there would be no occasion to wonder that they were unable to prove and explain them. But to pass this over, the reasons alledged to shew their inability in this respect, or that they understood these things in good measure only, are such as give, indeed, great occasion to wonder when they fall from the pen of so able a writer. Their discourses, he says, were rather speculative and learned, nice and subtle disputes, than practical and useful instructions; the bulk of mankind could not profit by the sublime doctrine of PLATO, for instance. Agreed. The difficulty then of discovering, and explaining the will of God, in matters of morality, and the whole system of natural religion arose merely from the method they took of discovering it to themselves, and of explaining it to others. That is, they did by this system the very thing which divines have done by that of christianity. Philosophers departed from the simplicity of nature, divines from that of the gospel. Had the former been content to collect the will of God, as far as it concerns the duty of man, from what they knew of themselves, of their fellow creatures, and of the constitution, physical and moral, of the world, they had neither bewildered themselves, nor grown unintelligible to others. But they could not be so content. Many of these antient, like their mimics, the modern reasoners, "à priori," undertook to deduce the religion of human nature and of human reason, from principles that exist infinitely beyond them. They knew human nature, and from thence they might, by the help of human reason, have taught very clearly what they understood very fully. They did both when they kept within these bounds, but when they went beyond them, they did neither. When they pre-

tended to contemplate the nature and moral attributes of the Supreme Being, they were, indeed, as unqualified for it as bats are to behold the light of the sun. They puzzled the clearest, and confounded the most distinct ideas, sometimes by metaphysical enthusiasm, and sometimes by political design; for when such mists are conjured up in the most serene parts of our intellectual system, it cannot be intended by men who are in their senses, one would think, to make us see better, and, therefore, I could never read the proposition, that we may easily know God, if we be not ignorant of ourselves, so absolutely advanced, nor that strange parallel between God and the soul of man, wherein Dr. BARROW confesses that he indulged his thoughts somewhat freely*, without being sorry to find them in the works of so respectable an author.

ANOTHER reason, brought by CLARKE, to shew how unable these philosophers were to prove and explain the obligations of natural religion is this. They were never able to frame to themselves any complete, and regular, and consistent system or scheme of things. If by these words be meant, as it must be in this place, such a system or scheme of morality, the fact asserted is untrue, how excellently soever the eloquent LACTANTIUS may have set this matter forth, or the judicious JUSTIN may have supported our modern doctor. In contradiction to all three, we may affirm boldly, because truly, that there is no one moral virtue which has not been taught, explained, and proved, by the heathen philosophers, both occasionally and purposely. It is, therefore, particularly absurd, in christian writers to say as the author of the evidences says, after his two guides, that these philosophers did, indeed, discover all the particular doctrines of true religion, but that no one of

* Vol. II. Serm. vii.

them

them made a scheme true in all it's parts, nor did any one collect the several truths scattered up and down in their writings. For, I ask, are all the truths of natural and revealed religion collected into one regular and complete system in any of the gospels, or even of the epistles? did any one of the fathers of the church make an entire scheme of religion or morality true in all it's parts? will any man have the front to deny that they all mingled some truth and some error? did not this very LACTANTIUS, did not JUSTIN do so? did any one of the fathers collect the truths that concern all our moral obligations, separate them from the errors, and make a regular complete system of the whole? will it be said that St. AMBROSE did? but St. AMBROSE was a poor imitator of TULLY. In short, all the heathen philosophers agreed, that the practice of virtue was of necessary and indispensable obligation, and that the happiness of mankind depended on it in general and in particular. They all agreed likewise what was virtue, and what was vice, and if they had any disputes about the great principles of natural, Christians had the same about the great principles of revealed religion. They had such in the days of JUSTIN and of LACTANTIUS, and that they continued to have them in our days, CLARKE himself has been a signal example.

It was neither natural theology, nor ethics, that perplexed natural religion. It was metaphysical theology. Antient, like modern, heathen, like christian philosophers, had indeed many trifling disputes about words, the stoics particularly, or about things so very plain that nothing less than grecian acuteness could make them appear at all intricate. Such were those about the "summum bonum*" in which it is said,

* VARRO, St. AUSTIN.

there

there were two hundred and fourscore different opinions. That there were so many may be doubted, but that they must have been extremely various is certain. The "summum bonum", or the supreme good of man, as it was understood and taught by the heathen philosophers, and which Dr. CLARKE calls, not without a designed ambiguity, the final happiness of man, was a subject whereon every man had a right to pronounce for himself, and no man had a right to pronounce for another. These disputes were, therefore, very trifling. But they should not be so strongly objected, since it is easy to shew that christian divines, the schoolmen especially, have trifled as much on points relative to natural and revealed religion both, as ever the heathen did on points relative to the former. Of the christian trifles too, we may say, what could not be said of the others, that they became serious: "hae nugae ad seria ducunt." They have divided the schools, and the schools have divided the world, with circumstances of rage and cruelty to be found among no other parties.

XXIV.

IF such disputes, as that which has been mentioned, were easy, or might be thought unnecessary to be determined, disputes of another kind arose when the heathen philosophers attempted, for they did attempt, to make a complete, regular, and consistent system or scheme of things, the want of which is objected to them. These attempts were pushed very far by pagan theists, but it must be confessed, that they served only to shew that men are fitted to know a little of some few things, and the whole of nothing. These men found soon, that no sufficient materials for such a system or scheme lay within the bounds of natural law, and natural theology. They had recourse