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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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XXVI.

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of the world, by the publication of it, are frequently magnified. But when we consider the means of reforming mankind, which the heathen philosophers, and the christian divines, have had in their turns, and compare the progress made in this great work by both, it will appear that the former had not sufficient means, (so far their complaints were well founded) nor the latter a success proportionable to the means they had. In short, if CLARKE'S way of reasoning be good, some extraordinary and supernatural assistance to reform the world, is still wanting; for it would be impious to say, that a further revelation is just as necessary now as it was before the coming of CHRIST.

XXVI.

TO speak of the want of sufficient means to propagate natural religion, distinctly from the want of a sufficient knowledge of it, which are often purposely confounded together, that the first which is true, may cover the last which is false, must be our next task.

THERE was no creed, nor any act of uniformity imposed on the heathen philosophers. But still it is not true, that the system of moral obligations, or natural religion, was to them a wide sea wherein they wandered without knowing their way, or having any guide. It is not true, that they were unable to make out upon what principles originally, and for what end ultimately, the choice of virtue was to be made*. They had better guides than CLARKE, whom it was in their power to follow, nature and reason; one pointed out their way with a

* Vid. Evid. p. 176. 191.

steady

steady hand, and the other was sufficient to lead them in it, the very purpose for which it was given. The original principles of this choice were strongly laid in the constitution of things, and these philosophers must have been stupid, as well as blind, if they had not felt, as well as seen, that the ultimate end of this choice was the happiness of mankind. They felt it, they saw it, they proved it to others. Virtue was not only recommended as wise, and reasonable, and fit to be chosen, but surely it was established by them to be of plain necessity, and indispensable obligation; since it was taught to be the perfection of our nature, as well as the positive will of God, and since the greatest part of them did their utmost to establish a belief of rewards and punishments in a future life, that they might allure to virtue, and deter from vice, the more effectually. But the generality of mankind continued in their evil habits, notwithstanding all these doctrines, and all the institutions contrived to enforce them. What promised to be effectual in speculation, proved ineffectual in practice. Vice was checked, but virtue did not prevail. The conquest was never complete.

SHALL we say that the reason of this was because the missionaries of natural religion, who set themselves in earnest about this excellent work, were few*? But this reason will not hold, for how few soever they might be in general, they were numerous enough at particular times, in particular places, and yet even then and there we do not find, that they made any proportionable progress, altho they could not fail to do some good by their exhortations, instructions, and examples. SOCRATES, his scholars, and all the great men whom the academy produced, may be reckoned a number of missionaries

* Evid. p. 173.

sufficient

sufficient to preach the duties of natural religion, with full effect in such a city as Athens. SOCRATES set himself in good earnest, surely, about this excellent work. He went from street to street, and from one public place to another, as the apostles did some centuries afterwards in their dispersions. If he preached with the same simplicity, he preached with the same zeal. If he had not all the gifts of the spirit, he had some of them, no doubt; for tho he could not work miracles to prove the divinity of his mission, he died to prove the truth of his doctrine. What was the effect of all this? He made a great, he could not make a good, man of his favorite disciple ALCIBIADES; and tho he rendered, or contributed to render, the schools of philosophy nurseries of religion, as well as of learning, which were always open, and always crowded, yet how small a progress was made in the Athenian commonwealth towards the reformation of mankind? Missionaries were not wanting in this instance, and a greater number would not have had a greater effect.

SHALL we say that the reason of this was, because many of the philosophers were so vicious themselves, that they contradicted their precepts by their examples, “*ut cum eorum vitâ mirabiliter pugnet oratio?*” This reason will not hold neither, and I might be surpris'd at CLARKE, for bringing it, if I did not consider him, like other polemical writers, accustomed to vend his arguments by tale rather than by weight, and ready to employ such as have a specious appearance, how weak soever they really are, in hopes that some of his readers may be caught by them. TULLY boasts in his second Tusculan, as he does in all his writings, the wonderful effects of philosophy, and those which he mentions, are such as natural theology and moral philosophy can alone produce, “*medetur animis, inanes solitudines detrahit, cupiditatibus liberat, pellit timores.*”

But philosophy cannot produce these, he says*, in all men alike, nor be of any great efficacy unless she works on a suitable and proper nature; for which reason philosophers themselves, they who have taught, disputed, and writ on all these subjects, have been seldom influenced by them. Scarce here and there one is to be found who lives up to his own doctrines and rules of life. TULLY pursues his invective against the levity, vanity, inconsistency, avarice, and other vices of these men; and CLARKE imagined that this sketch of their characters would furnish an excellent reason the more, whereby to account for the little progress they made in reforming the world. But he should have been restrained from insisting on this argument, both by the reason of the thing, and by a regard to the order of which he was. If the vices of many, among those who were missionaries of morality in the heathen world, disappointed the common endeavours of all; how came it to pass, that christianity made so great a progress afterwards? How can the clergy of your church, or of ours, pretend that they contribute now, or ever did contribute, to the reformation of mankind? No age, whereof we have any certain anecdotes, can be pointed out, wherein all the vices that TULLY imputes to most of the heathen philosophers, did not prevail among most of the christian divines, with great circumstances of aggravation. They have had not only all the vices incident to human nature in common with other men, but they have had the particular vices of their order, for such there are, and such I shall have occasion to shew that there are. Read the entire passage, consult your memory, look round you, and then you shall tell me what you think of CLARKE's argument. You shall tell it in my ear. I expect no more; for I know

* Non idem potest apud omnes. Tum valet multum cum est idoneam complexa naturam.

how

how desirous you are to keep fair with orders, whatever liberties you take with particular men. For my own part, who have not the same discretion, I will say boldly that the clergy both of your church and of mine are, in general, the most negligent of missionaries, and fitter much to hinder by their example, than to promote by their doctrine, the advancement of religion, natural or revealed.

SHALL we say that the sublime doctrines, and abstract arguments of PLATO, and other philosophers, were by no means fitted for the bulk and common sort of mankind? Or shall we fix the reason of the little progress they made, in their ignorance of the whole scheme, order, and state of things? Should we do both like the author of the Evidences, we should, like him, contradict ourselves; because, if the doctrines of PLATO, for instance, were too sublime, and his arguments too abstract, they must have been much more so had he known, and gone about to explain all that is called the whole scheme, order, and state of things. It is marvellous to consider, how many of the most refined precepts of christian morality were taught by him, several centuries before CHRIST and his apostles taught them. Such were those about imitating God, and others that have been mentioned above. It is still more marvellous to consider, that some of the most profound mysteries of christianity were taught by this philosopher, several centuries before they were revealed. Such was the doctrine of the Trinity, in explaining which if he advanced some errors, he did no more than many christian divines have done from the most early ages of the church, no more than we are bound to believe that WHISTON and CLARKE himself have done, unless we renounce that orthodox profession of faith which all the fathers of the church have held from those of the nicæan council down to Dr. WATERLAND, and my good uncle the earl of

NOTTINGHAM. How this may be accounted for, I do not presume to determine, tho I have somewhere or other presumed to guefs. But this we may affirm*, that if PLATO had known the method of God's governing the world, his design in creating mankind, the original dignity of human nature, the ground and circumstances of men's present corrupt condition, the manner of the divine interposition, necessary to their recovery, and the glorious end to which God intended finally to conduct them, as well as he knew the system of a Trinity, of a future judgment, of an heaven, an hell, and a purgatory; he who is so often unintelligible now, would have been vastly more so. He would have been, therefore, less fitted than he was for the bulk and common sort of mankind, and for the great work of reformation.

SHALL we say, finally, that the heathen philosophers were unequal to this great work, because their doctrines were not enforced by a divine authority? Even this reason will prove nothing; for the philosophers and lawgivers did enforce their doctrines and laws by a divine authority, and call an higher principle to the assistance of philosophy, and bare reason. ZOROASTER, HOSTANES, the magi, the prophets and seers of Egypt, MINOS, PYTHAGORAS, NUMA, in short, all the fathers of heathen theology, all those who founded or reformed religions and commonwealths, made these pretensions, and their pretensions were admitted. They were impostors, but they passed in vulgar opinion for persons divinely inspired and commissioned. Some good they did, but little that was permanent, not because they wanted the opinion of a divine authority for them, but because they employed it absurdly, or because even this opinion was not sufficient.

* Evid. p. 176.

To what now are we reduced? Since the precepts and motives, offered by the best philosophers, have been never able to reform mankind effectually*, without the assistance of some higher principle, and some divine authority, nor even when both of these have been assumed, may we not be led to think, that such a reformation is impracticable? May we not conclude, from the experience of all ages, that no means can bring it about, and those which have been employed less than any? There is a perpetual conflict in the breast of every man, who endeavours to restrain his appetites, to govern his passions, and to make reason, as TULLY expresses it, the law of his life †. Just such a conflict there is between virtue and vice, in the great commonwealth of mankind. If the conflict was not maintained by religious and civil institutions, the human state would be intolerable; and tho it be maintained, as the success is various, the state is very imperfect. The method taken to fix this success on the right side, by calling in artificial theology, has contributed more to subdue reason than vice and immorality. Reason has been laid aside, natural religion has been no longer solely, nor so much as directly, concerned in the contest. Authority has usurped the place of one, superstition of the other; and these two have been opposed almost alone to the torrent of human passions, and to the disorders of mankind in all the countries of the world; so that, wherever philosophy and reason could lift up their heads, they have had the remedy to combat as well as the disease.

* Evid. p. 198.

† Tusc. Quaest. ib.