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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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XXVII.

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XXVII.

THERE is a country, into the antiquities of which we look further back than into those of any other, and where we may find examples to confirm and illustrate what is here said, by comparing the effects of natural religion, unmixed and uncorrupted, with those of artificial theology and superstition. The country, I mean, is China, whose traditions and histories deserve, at least, as much credit as those of antient nations that have been known to us longer, and which our scholars quote with so much assurance. Now natural religion seems to have been preserved more pure and unmixed in this country than in any other, and for a longer time from that when it was first inhabited, and government was first established in it*. The antient Chinese held it unlawful to dispute about the divine nature, about the attributes of God, the exercise of his power, or the conduct of his providence; and it seems very plain that the concise manner in which their sages expressed themselves, whenever they spoke of the Supreme Being, and upon which their refining successors have endeavoured to found, in part at least, their atheism, proceeded from this modest, this reasonable, and this pious principle. They observed the order of nature, and from thence they deduced all the rules of private morality and public policy. To compare his conduct with the law of heaven and earth, † is the character of a perfect prince, in the works of CONFUCIUS. That reason should preside over passion, was the great rule of life, and to walk according to it, was to walk in the great high way of life †. Thus they were led by simple and plain rea-

* Scient. Sinica.

† Confert res à se gestas cum coeli terraeque lege.

‡ Orbis universalis regula, regia humani generis via.

sonings,

fonings, from the works to the will of God, and to three kinds of moral obligations, to those of an individual, of the member of a family, and of the member of a political society. Bare reason enforced so well the practice of natural religion, by the laws and constitutions of this empire, and the duties of it became so habitual by education and custom, that this people enjoyed under their two first imperial families, which continued eleven hundred years, all the blessings of public and private virtue that humanity is capable of enjoying. So we must understand the descriptions of this golden age; for tho the Chinese lived in a state of innocence and simplicity whilst it lasted, yet as they were subject, like other nations, to physical evils, so may we assure ourselves that they were neither infallible nor impeccable, nor therefore entirely exempt from moral evil. It is enough for the honor of reason, and of natural religion, that these principles, enforced by civil authority, appear in this instance to have answered the purposes of true religion much better by themselves, than these purposes have been ever answered by all the expedients, and all the adventitious helps, that philosophers, legislators, and priests have devised.

WHETHER any other nation afforded an example of the same kind, we know not. But this we know, that when other nations begin to appear, they appear already under the influence of absurd theology and gross superstition, and that the Chinese began in the same remote antiquity to fall into the same errors, and all the consequences of them. Under their third imperial family, the affectation of imagining and unfolding mysteries, and of explaining the first principle of all things, grew into fashion amongst them, and the Table of FONGI, or the book Yekim, which is nothing more than a draught of sixty four figures, composed of three hundred and eighty
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four lines, some broken, and some entire, furnished to the studious labors of VENVAM and CHEUCUM, and other commentators, as much sublime knowledge as ever the first chapter of Genesis furnished to a profound cabalist or whimsical divine. From the various changes, and different combinations of these lines, they proceeded, as PYTHAGORAS did from numbers, and PLATO from immaterial forms and incorporeal essences, to erect systems of natural and moral philosophy. When they had once departed from simplicity and truth, in the search of mystery, they soon imagined themselves capable of attaining unattainable knowledge; the most chimerical past for real, and they boasted of nothing less than to explain the whole scheme, order, and state of things. Thus reason was abused by pretended science, and natural religion was deformed by metaphysical speculations, and superstitious devotions.

LI LAO KIUM was a philosopher of the same age with CONFUCIUS, and both of them of the same with PYTHAGORAS. Whether the Chinese and the Samian had the same masters, I know not. But if they had, these masters were rather indian gymnosophists than hebrew prophets. Several circumstances incline to think so. The dogma, particularly, in the Taofu, where it is said that the first reason produced one, one two, two three, and three all things, is a jargon very like to that of PYTHAGORAS which DIOGENES LAERTIUS has preserved, which he and LI LAO KIUM might have learned in India, but which there is no pretence to suspect that the latter could have learned in Palestine. The Chinese taught the same moral philosophy that had been always taught in China, but he took advantage of the metaphysical folly which prevailed at that time, and which even CONFUCIUS had countenanced, to broach a new and a most extravagant theology. He founded
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it, perhaps, on some interpretations of the book Yekim; but however he founded it, he established it with so much success that he himself was worshipped at last: temples and statues were erected to many of his sect, all that imposture could impose on credulity was imposed, natural theology was abominably corrupted, and a ridiculous external service took the place, in great measure, of real virtue and true devotion.

THIS sect prepared the way for another, which had prevailed in India near a thousand years before our christian aera, but was not introduced into China till sixty five years after it. This sect was that of FOË, who raised a spiritual empire in the East, that has equalled, if not exceeded, all others, under different forms and appellations, in extent and duration. FOË lived in a desert, under the care of four jogues, or gymnosophists, till he was thirty years old. Then he appeared in the world, assumed divinity, and declared himself to be the saviour of men, for whose sakes he had condescended to be born, that he might recover them from their errors, expiate their sins, and lead them into the way of being happy hereafter; for he threatened future punishments to those who did not believe in him, nor submit to his doctrines. Voluminous legends of miracles wrought at his birth, and in the course of his life, were published by ten of his disciples. Well might they be voluminous, since his pretended mission lasted nine and forty years, and we may assure ourselves that attestations of them were not wanting, since the number of proselytes he made in that time was immense. They were divided in different classes. To believe implicitly, and to observe the rules of morality were required from all, and the least credible austerities were practised by some, as they continue to be at this day.

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BOTH these religions are still subsisting in China. What has been the effect of them? The antient laws and customs of the empire are inviolably kept, and good government is maintained by them, independently of these. But are the Chinese grown better men? No. They build monasteries for bonzes, they endow them richly, they adorn their pagods or temples, they prostrate themselves, they pray, they make their offerings, and they burn gilded paper in them, after which they rob or cheat without scruple, and indulge themselves in practices which natural religion abhors the most. There is something worse than this. The true principles of religion being removed, and these phantastic principles placed in lieu of them, the foundation of all religion is sapped at once. They who cannot persuade themselves that the religion they see practised is a service fit to be paid to a Supreme Being, nor consequently required by any such being, slide easily from the belief that there is no religion, to the belief that there is no God. This happened in China, where the literati, or learned men, are in truth a sect of atheists, and theism seems to be the portion of the vulgar alone. Such has been, and is at this day the effect of artificial theology, and superstitious devotion in that country. The jesuits, from whose relations, as from the best authority in this case, I have taken what I have said on the subject, pretend that FOË, or XACA himself, gave occasion to the atheism that has been since established, by declaring, before his death, to some of his disciples, his inward doctrine, which transpired afterwards. He confessed, they say, that he had concealed the truth under the veil of types, of metaphors, and parables; that vacuity and inanition were the first principles of all things, beyond which nothing was to be sought, because nothing was to be found. What is meant by the terms that the jesuits translate "va-
" cum

“*cuum et inane*”, I know not, nor is it worth our while to guess. Thus much is plain, the consequence of refining in matters of religion, beyond the obvious dictates of nature and reason, has been superstition, and enthusiasm, or atheism, not reformation of manners in China.

XXVIII.

IF we return now to those countries, with which we are better acquainted, we shall find in them much the same course of things. We shall find, indeed, natural religion nowhere established in its full extent and purity, as it seems to have been once in China. Some first principles of it were known and practised by people the least civilised, as JUSTIN* represents them to have been by the Scythians. No people were wholly ignorant of them, no sort of government could subsist without them. But then, as their light shone dimly, among these half savages, thro the clouds of a superstition I some where called natural, and not improperly, we shall find this light actually obscured, and put out, in great part, among the most civilised and learned nations. Instead of dispelling these clouds, and improving natural religion, they had increased by fantastic knowledge what ignorance had begun, and we trace the same ill consequences of pretended revelations, and artificial theology, on this side the Ganges, as we have traced, on the other, the abominable consequences which have followed establishments made on the ruins of natural religion.

It is true that the heathen philosophers were unable to propagate natural religion, and to reform the manners of

* L. 2. C. 2.