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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**

**London, 1754**

XXVIII.

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“*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.

**I**F 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.



men effectually. But it is not true that they were so for the reasons CLARKE gives, which have been shewn, I think, to be futile and insufficient. They were so for another reason principally, which has been touched, and requires to be more fully developed. The reason is, that they proceeded, in the doctor's own method, to lay the first principles of all religion, and to reason from them.

THE doctor, whom I cite so often, because his book is the last I have read on this subject, and has been received with the greatest applause, repeats over and over, and very domatically, such maxims as these, "that goodness, and justice, and  
" all the moral attributes are the same in God, as they are in  
" our ideas; that the relations, respects, and proportions of  
" things are just such as they appear to be to our understand-  
" ings that from hence there results a rule, which is the nature  
" and reason of things; that this rule is common to God and  
" man; that it is the law of all his actions, in the government  
" of the world; and that, as it always determines his will, it  
" should always determine ours". From this assumed knowledge of the divine attributes, and of the abstract nature and reason of things, the most extravagant opinions concerning the will of God, and the most audacious judgements on the conduct and dispensations of his providence, have been deduced. How should it be otherwise? They who reason "à posteriori" from the constitution of the human system, and from the works of God, have indeed a rule to go by, precise, invariable, certain. But they who reason "à priori" from the moral attributes of God, and from the abstract nature and reason of things, have no such rule. Theists will concur in ascribing all possible perfections to the Supreme Being, but they will always differ when they descend into any detail, and presume to be particular about them, as they al-  
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ways have differed in their notions of these perfections, and consequently in the application of them. I have said, I believe, already, and I shall not recal what is said, agreeably to universal and constant experience, that the eternal reason of things, founded in the consideration of their abstract nature is, for the most part, as we see it employed by believers and infidels, by the orthodox and the heterodox, nothing better than the reason of party, of prejudice, of system, and of profession. Yet this is the method which some men prescribe, and which CLARKE\* declares to be, of all others, the best and clearest, the certainest and most universal that the light of nature affords to discover the will of God in matters of morality, and to account for the dispensations and conduct of his providence. This author goes even further, and the other method is styled by him †, a collateral consideration which may come in aid of the former, nothing more. This other method, however, extends as far as human wants require, and human knowledge can reach. Where it does not extend, the want is imaginary, and the knowledge fantastic; and if philosophers and divines had aimed at establishing the belief of a Supreme Being, and the duties of natural religion alone, they might, and they would have been contented with it.

BUT they meant something more. They aimed at superiority and fame, at power and riches. He who had never presumed to define the moral attributes of an all-perfect Being, who contented himself to know that such a being existed by the necessity of his nature, and that his wisdom and power are infinite; he who had never troubled himself about eternal respects, relations, and proportions of things, and collected the will, as he collected the existence of this Being “ à

\* Evid. p. 119.

† ib.



“posteriori;” he, I say, knew as much of God, and of his duty to God and man, as natural religion required that he should know. But it was for the interest of philosophers and priests, that men should think there was much more to be known; and if those of Egypt had taught nothing more than natural theology, instead of theurgic magic, nothing more than the plain duties of religion, instead of mysterious rites; it is highly probable the MERCURIES would not have been honored, as they were, in all succeeding ages, nor the clergy have possessed a third part of the whole revenue of the kingdom.

SUCH as have been mentioned were the principles on which artificial theology arose among the heathens, and as the principles were laid neither in reason nor truth, which are always one, it is no wonder that this theology became as various as error could make it. Some of the motives to invent and embrace it, were such likewise as have been mentioned. I say, some; because we may well conceive that when principles, not only false, but vague like these, had been once adopted by the delirium of metaphysics, the enthusiasm of superstition, or the prejudices of ignorance, the men who had been accustomed to reason upon them, and to take for true every thing that use had made familiar, might run into the greatest absurdities, sometimes without having any bad motive, nay with a pious intention of promoting true religion, and of attaching men to it, by a greater authority, and by greater hopes and fears. This might be the case of many, as we shall easily believe, if we consider what has passed in later days. But however it was brought about, art took every where the place of nature, and faith of reason. Artificial theology spread far and wide; philosophers taught it; lawgivers established it; priests improved it: here it was employed to enforce, there

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it was substituted to natural religion: the main principles of it, and even particular opinions, and local institutions have been variously mingled in different systems, and are to be discerned in them even now. This has happened naturally, and almost necessarily. All these systems lean on certain primitive notions, which the human mind is so prone to frame or to receive. The same affections and passions maintain them, work upon them, and direct them in different imaginations. The matter is the same, the form alone is changed.

## XXIX.

**A**MONG many doctrines that were taught by those who pretended to explain the whole scheme, and order of divine oeconomy with respect to man, that of rewards and punishments in a future state was one. It began to be taught long before we have any light into antiquity, and when we begin to have any, we find it established. How powerful is the desire of continuing to exist? How predominant is the pride of the human heart? Nothing seems more natural to man, than to wish to live without restraint or fear, and yet how ready was the multitude, in the pagan world, to embrace the hope of immortality, tho it was accompanied with the fear of damnation? Like the elementary people of the cabalists\*, one may think, they would have chosen to be damned eternally, rather than to cease to exist. But every one was flattered by a system that raised him, in imagination, above corporeal nature, as every one was at liberty to flatter himself further, that he should pass this immortality in the fellowship of the gods, "in contubernio deorum."

\* Vid. BORRI's Letters.

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