

## ON THE EXISTENCE OF GOD, AND OF NATURAL RELIGION

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Foreseeing that my health will not permit me, for a considerable time, to meet my respected friends at New Cottage, I comply with the request which several of them have made me, in sending them in writing, my ideas on the two noblest subjects which can occupy the mind of man: *the Existence of God, and the Truth of Christianity*. In doing this I profess not to make new discoveries, but barely to state certain arguments, which I collected in my youth from the learned Hugo Grotius, our own judicious Clark, and other advocates of Natural and Revealed Religion. I offer no apology for adopting the words of Scripture, in arguing with persons, who are supposed not to admit its authority, when these express my meaning as fully as any others can do.

The first argument for the existence of God is thus expressed by the Royal Prophet: *Know ye that the Lord He is God: it is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves*. Ps. c. 3. In fact, when I ask myself that question, which every reflecting man must sometimes ask himself: *How came I into this state of existence? Who has bestowed upon me the being which I enjoy?* I am forced to answer: *It is not I that made myself*; and each of my forefathers, if asked the same question, must have returned the same answer. In like manner, if I interrogate the several beings with which I am surrounded, the earth, the air, the water, the stars, the moon, the sun, each of them, as an ancient Father says, will answer me, in its turn: *It was not I that made you; I, like you, am a creature of yesterday, as incapable of giving existence to you as I am of giving it to myself*. In short, however often each of us repeats the questions: *How came I hither? Who has made me what I am?* we shall never find a rational answer to them, till we come to acknowledge that there is an *Eternal, Necessary, Self-existent Being*, the author of all contingent beings, which is no other than God. It is this *Necessity of being*, this *Self-existence*, which constitutes the nature of God, and from which all His other perfections flow. Hence, when He deigned to reveal Himself, on the flaming mountain of Horeb, to the holy legislator of His chosen people, being asked by this prophet what was His *proper name*, He answered: *I Am That I Am*. Exod. iii. 14. This is as much as to say: *I alone exist of Myself: all others are created beings, which exist by My will*.

From this attribute of *Self-existence*, all the other perfections of the Deity, *eternity, immensity, omnipotence, omniscience, holiness, Justice, mercy, and bounty*, each in an infinite degree, necessarily flow; because there is nothing to limit His existence and attributes, and because whatever perfection is found in any created being, must, like its existence, have been derived from this universal source.

This proof of the existence of God, though demonstrative and self-evident to reflecting beings, is, nevertheless, we have reason to fear, lost on a great proportion of our fellow-creatures; because they hardly reflect at all; or, at least, never consider, *who made them, or what they were made for*. But that other proof, which results from the magnificence, the beauty, and the harmony of the creation, as it falls under the senses, cannot be thought to escape the attention of the most stupid or savage of rational beings. The starry heavens, the fulminating clouds, the boundless ocean, the variegated earth, the organized human body, all these, and many other phenomena of nature, must strike the mind of the untutored savage, no less than that of the studious philosopher, with a conviction that there is an infinitely powerful, wise and bountiful Being, who is the author of these things: though, doubtless, the latter, in proportion as he sees more clearly and extensively than the former the properties and economy of different parts of the creation, possesses a stronger *physical* evidence, as it is called, of the existence of the Great Creator. In fact, if the Pagan physician, Galen<sup>1</sup>, from the imperfect knowledge which he possessed of the structure of the human body, found himself compelled to acknowledge the existence of an infinitely wise and beneficent being, to make the body such as it is; what would he not have said, had he been acquainted with the circulation of the blood, and the use and harmony of the arteries, veins, and lacteals! If the philosophical orator, Tully, discovered and enlarged on the same truth, from the little knowledge of astronomy which he possessed<sup>2</sup>, what strains of eloquence would he not have poured forth upon it, had he been acquainted with the discoveries of Galileo and Newton, relative to the magnitude and distances of the stars, the motions of the planets and the comets! Yes, all nature proclaims that there is a Being who is *wise in heart and mighty in strength*: – *who doeth great things and past finding out; yea, wonders without number*: – *who*

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1 *De Usu Partium*

2 Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, l. ii.

*stretcheth out the north over the empty places and hangeth the earth upon nothing. – The pillars of heaven tremble and are astonished at His reproof. – Lo! these are a part of His ways; but how little a portion is heard of Him! The thunder of His power, who can understand? Job ix., xxvi.*

The proofs, however, of God's existence, which can least be evaded, are those which come immediately home to a man's own heart; convincing him, with the same evidence which he has of his own existence, that there is an all-seeing, infinitely just, and infinitely bountiful Master above, who is witness of all his actions and words, and of his very thoughts. For whence arises the heartfelt pleasure which the good man feels on resisting a secret temptation to sin, or in performing an act of beneficence, though in the utmost secrecy? Why does he raise his countenance to heaven with devotion, and why is he prepared to meet death with cheerful hope, unless it be that his conscience tells him of a munificent rewarder of virtue, the spectator of what he does? And why does the most hardened sinner tremble and falter in his limbs and at his heart, when he commits his most secret sins of theft, vengeance, or impurity? Why, especially, does he sink into agonies of horror and despair at the approach of death, unless it be that he is deeply convinced of the constant presence of an all-seeing witness, and of an infinitely holy, powerful and just Judge, *into whose hands it is a terrible thing to fall? – In vain does he say: Darkness encompasseth me and the walls cover me: no one seeth; of whom am I afraid?* for his conscience tells him that *The eyes of the Lord are far brighter than the sun, beholding round about all the ways of men.* Ecclus. xxiii. 26, 28.

This last argument in particular is so obvious and convincing, that I cannot bring myself to believe there ever was a human being of sound sense who was really an Atheist. Those persons who have tried to work themselves into a persuasion that there is no God, will generally be found, both in ancient and modern times, to be of the most profligate manners, who, dreading to meet Him as their Judge, try to persuade themselves that He does not exist. This has been observed by St. Augustine, who says: “No man denies the existence of God, but such a one whose interest it is that there should be no God.” Yet even they who, in the broad daylight, and among their profligate companions, pretend to disbelieve the existence of a Supreme Being; in the darkness of the night, and still more, under the apprehension of death, fail not to confess it; as Seneca, I think, somewhere observed<sup>1</sup>.

*A son heareth his father, and a servant his master; says the Prophet Malachi. If then I be a father, where is Mine honor? I and if I be a master, where is My fear? saith the Lord of Hosts (i. 6).* In a word: it is impossible to believe the existence of a Supreme Being, our Creator, our Lord, and our Judge, without being conscious, at the same time, of our obligation to worship Him interiorly and exteriorly, to fear Him, to love Him, and to obey Him. This constitutes *Natural Religion*; by the observance of which the ancient Patriarchs, together with Melchisedech, Job, and, we trust, very many other virtuous and religious persons of different ages and countries, have been acceptable to God in this life, and have attained to everlasting bliss in the other; – still we must confess, with deep sorrow, that the number of such persons has been small, compared with those of every age and nation, who, as St. Paul says: *When they knew God, glorified Him not as God, neither were they thankful, but became vain in their imaginations; and their foolish hearts were darkened; they changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for evermore.* Rom. i. 21, 25.

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<sup>1</sup> It is proper here to observe, that a large proportion of the boasting Atheists who signalized themselves by their impiety, during the French Revolution, or a few years previous to its eruption, acknowledged, when they came to die, that their irreligion had been affected, and that they never doubted in their hearts, of the existence of God and the truths of Christianity. Among these were the Marquis d'Argens, Boulanger, La Metrei, Gollot d'Herbois, Egalité Duke of Orleans, etc.

## ON THE TRUTH OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

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Though the light of nature is abundantly sufficient, as I trust I have shown in my former essay, to prove the existence of God, and the duty of worshipping and serving Him, yet this was not the only light that was communicated to mankind in the first ages of the world concerning these matters, since many things relating to them were revealed by God to the Patriarchs, and, through them, to their contemporaries and descendants. At length, however, this knowledge was almost universally obliterated from the minds of men, and the light of reason itself was so clouded by the boundless indulgence of their passions, that they seemed everywhere sunk almost to a level with the brute creation. Even the most polished nations, the Greeks and the Romans, blushed not at unnatural lusts, and boasted of the most horrid cruelties. Plutarch describes the celebrated Grecian sages, Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Cebes, etc., as indulging freely in the former<sup>1</sup>, and every one knows that the chief amusement of the Roman people was to behold their fellow-creatures murdering one another in the amphitheatres, sometimes by hundreds and thousands at a time. But the depravity and impiety of the ancient pagans, and I may say the same of those of modern times, appear chiefly in their religious doctrines and worship. What an absurd and disgusting rabble of pretended Deities, marked with every crime that disgraces the worst of mortals, lust, envy, hatred and cruelty, did not the above-named refined nations worship; and that, in several instances, by the imitation of their crimes! Plato allows of drunkenness in honor of the Gods; Aristotle admits of indecent representations of them. How many temples were everywhere erected, and prostitutes consecrated, to the worship of Venus!<sup>2</sup> And how generally were human sacrifices offered up in honor of Moloch, Saturn, Thor, Diana, Woden, and other pretended Gods or rather real demons, by almost every Pagan nation, Greek and barbarian, and, among the rest, by the ancient Britons, inhabitants of this island! It is true some few sages of antiquity, by listening to the dictates of nature and reason, saw into the absurdity of the popular religion, and discovered the existence and attributes of the true God; but then how unsteady and imperfect was their belief, even in this point? And when *they knew God they did not glorify Him as God, nor give Him thanks, but became vain in their thoughts.* Rom. i. 21. In short, they were so bewildered on the whole subject of religion, that Socrates, the wisest of them all, declared it “impossible for men to discover this, unless the Deity Himself deigned to reveal it to them”.<sup>3</sup> Indeed; it was an effort of mercy, worthy the great and good God, to make such a revelation of Himself, and of His acceptable worship, to poor, benighted, and degraded man. This He did, first, in favor of a poor afflicted captive tribe on the banks of the Nile, the Israelites, whom He led from thence into the country of their ancestors, and raised up to be a powerful nation, by a series of astonishing miracles; instructing and confirming them in the knowledge and worship of Himself by His different prophets. He afterwards did the same thing in favor of all the people of the earth, and to a far greater extent, by the promised Messiah and His Apostles. It is to this latter Divine legation I shall here confine my arguments: though, indeed, the one confirms the other; since Christ and the Apostles continually bear testimony to the mission of Moses.

All history, then, and tradition prove, that in the reign of Tiberius, the second Roman Emperor after Julius Caesar, an extraordinary personage, Jesus Christ, appeared in Palestine, teaching a new system of religion and morality, far more sublime and perfect than any which the Pagan Philosophers, or even the Hebrew Prophets had inculcated. He confirmed the truths of natural religion and of the Mosaic revelation; but then He vastly extended their sphere, by the communication of many heavenly mysteries, concerning the nature of the one true God, His economy in redeeming man by His own vicarious sufferings, the restoration and future immortality of our bodies, and the final, decisive trial we are to undergo before Him our destined Judge. He enforced the obligation of loving our heavenly Father, above all things, of praying to Him continually, and of referring all our thoughts, words and actions, to His divine honor. He insisted on the necessity of denying, not one or other of our passions, as the philosophers had done, who, Tertullian says, *drove out one nail with another*; but the whole collection of them, disorderly and vitiated as they are, since the fall of our first parent. In opposition to our innate avarice, pride, and love of pleasure, He opened His mission by teaching that: *Blessed are the poor in spirit; Blessed are*

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1 *De Isid. et Osirid.* Even the refined Cicero and Virgil did not blush at these infamies.

2 Strabo tells us that there were a thousand prostitutes attached to the Temple of Venus at Corinth. The Athenians attributed the preservation of their city to the prayers of its prostitutes.

3 Plato, *Dialog. Alcibiad.*

*the meek; Blessed are they that mourn*, etc. Teaching, as He did, with respect to our fellow-creatures, every social virtue, He singled out fraternal charity for His peculiar and characteristic precept; requiring that His disciples should love one another as they love themselves, and even as He Himself has loved them; He who laid down His life for them! And He extended the obligation of this precept to our enemies, equally with our friends.

Nor was the morality of Jesus a mere speculative system of precepts, like the systems of the philosophers; it was of a practical nature, and He Himself confirmed, by His example, every virtue which He inculcated, and more particularly that hardest of all others to reduce to practice, the love of our enemies. Christ had *gone about*, as the sacred text expresses it, *doing good to all*, Acts x. 38, and evil to no one. He had cured the sick of Judea and the neighboring countries, had given sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and even life to the dead; but, above all things, He had enlightened the minds of His hearers with the knowledge of pure and sublime truths, capable of leading them to present and future happiness; yet was He everywhere calumniated and persecuted, till at length His inveterate enemies fulfilled their malice against Him, by nailing Him to a cross, thereon to expire by lengthened torments. Not content with this, they came before His gibbet, deriding Him in His agony with insulting words and gestures! And what is the return which the author of Christianity makes for such unexampled affronts and barbarity? He excuses the perpetrators of them! He prays for them! *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!* Luke xxiii. 34. No wonder this proof of supernatural charity should have staggered the most hardened infidels; one of whom confesses that, "if Socrates has died like a philosopher, Jesus alone has died like a God!"<sup>1</sup>

The precepts and the example of the Master have not been lost upon His disciples. These have ever been distinguished by their practice of virtue, and, particularly, by their charity and forgiveness of injuries. The first of them who laid down his life for Christ, St. Stephen, while the Jews were stoning him to death, prayed thus with his last voice: *Lord, lay not this sin to their charge!* Acts, vii. 59.

Having considered the several systems of Paganism, which have prevailed, and that still prevail in different parts of the world, both as to belief and practice, together with the speculations of the wisest infidel philosophers concerning them; and having contemplated, on the other hand, the doctrine of the New Testament both as to theory and practice; I would ask any candid unbeliever, where he thought Jesus Christ could have acquired the idea of so sublime, so pure, so efficacious, a religion as Christianity is; especially when compared with the others above alluded to? Could He have acquired it in the workshop of a poor artisan of Nazareth, or among the fishermen of the Lake of Genesareth? Then, how could He and His poor unlettered Apostles succeed in propagating this religion, as they did throughout the world, in opposition to all the talents and power of philosophers and princes, and all the passions of all mankind? No other answers can be given to these questions, than that the religion itself has been *divinely revealed*, and that it has been *divinely assisted*, in its progress throughout the world.

In addition to this *internal evidence* of Christianity, as it is called, there are *external proofs*, which must not be passed over. Christ, on various occasions, appealed to the miracles which He wrought, in confirmation of His doctrine and mission; miracles public and indisputable, which, from the testimony of Pilate himself, were placed on the records of the Roman Empire,<sup>2</sup> and which were not denied by the most determined enemies of Christianity, such as Celsus, Porphyrius, and Julian the apostate. Among these miracles, there is one of so extraordinary a nature, as to render it quite unnecessary to mention any others, and which is therefore always appealed to by the Apostles, as the grand proof of the gospel they preached; I mean the *Resurrection of Christ from the dead*. To the fact itself must be added also its circumstances; namely, that He raised Himself to life *by His own power*, without the intervention of any living person; and that He did this *in conformity with His prediction, at the time which He had appointed* for this event to take place, and in *defiance of the efforts of His enemies*, to detain His body in the sepulcher. To elude the evidence resulting from this unexampled prodigy, one or other of the following assertions must be maintained: either that the *Disciples were deceived* in believing Him to be risen from the dead, or that *they combined to deceive the world* into a belief of that imposition. Now it cannot be credited that they themselves were deceived in this matter, being many in number, and having the testimony of their eyes, in seeing their Master repeatedly during forty days; of their ears, in hearing His voice;

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1 Rousseau, *Emile*.

2 Tertul. *in Apolog.* cap. xxii. [Migne, p. 403.]

and one, the most incredulous among them, the testimony of *his feeling, in touching His person and probing His wounds*. Nor can it be believed that they *conspired to propagate an unavailing falsehood* of this nature throughout the nations of the earth; namely, that a person, put to death in Judea, had risen again to life: and this too, without any prospect to themselves *for this world*, but that of persecution, torments, and a cruel death, which they successively endured, as did their numerous disciples after them, in testimony of this fact; without any expectation *for the other world*, but the vengeance of the God of truth.

Next to the miracles wrought by Christ is the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies concerning Him, in proof of the religion which He taught. To mention a few of these: He was born just *after the scepter had departed from the tribe of Juda*, Gen. xlix. 10; at the end of *seventy weeks* of years from the restoration of Jerusalem, Dan. ix. 24; while the *Second Temple* of Jerusalem was *in being*, Hagg. ii. 7. He was born in *Bethlehem*, Mic. v. 2; worked the identical *miracles foretold* of Him, Isai. xxxv. 5. He was *sold* by His perfidious disciple for *thirty pieces of silver*, which were laid out in the *purchase of a potter's field*, Zach. xi. 13. He was *scourged, spit upon*, Isai. l. 6; placed *among malefactors*, Isai. liii. 12. His *hands and feet were transfixed* with nails, Ps. xxii. 16; and His *side was opened* with a spear, Zach. xii. 10. Finally, He *died*, was *buried with honor*, Isai. liii. 9; and *rose again* to life *without experiencing corruption*, Ps. xvi. 10. The sworn enemies of Christ, the Jews, were during many hundred years before His coming, and still are, in possession of the Scriptures, containing these and many other predictions concerning Him, which were strictly fulfilled.

The very existence, and other circumstances respecting this extraordinary people, the Jews, are so many arguments in proof of Christianity. They have now subsisted, as a distinct people, for more than four thousand years, during which they have again and again been subdued, harassed, and almost extirpated. Their mighty conquerors, the Philistines, the Assyrians, the Persians, the Macedonians, the Syrians, and the Romans, have in their turns ceased to exist, and can nowhere be found as distinct nations; while the Jews exist in great numbers, and are known in every part of the world. How can this be accounted for? Why has God preserved them alone, amongst the ancient nations of the earth? The truth is, they are still the subject of prophecy, with respect to both the Old and the New Testament. They exist as monuments of God's wrath against them; as witnesses to the truth of the Scriptures which condemned them; and as the destined subjects of His final mercy before the end of the world. They are to be found in every quarter of the globe; but in the condition with which their great legislator Moses threatened them, if they forsook the Lord; namely, that He would *remove them into all the kingdoms of the earth*, Deut. xxviii. 25, that they should become *an astonishment, and a by-word, among all nations*, Ibid., 37. That they should *find no ease, neither should the sole of their foot have rest*, Ibid., 65. Finally, they are everywhere seen, but carrying, written on their foreheads, the curse which they pronounced on themselves in rejecting the Messiah: *His blood be upon us and upon our children!* Matt. xxvii. 25. Still is this extraordinary people preserved, to be, in the end, converted, and to find mercy. Rom. xi. 26, etc.

Essays from:

Milner, Bishop John, *The End of Religious Controversy*, London: Catholic Truth Society, 1906