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By the learned Dr. THOMAS BURNET, late Master of the Charter-House.

A DEFENCE of
NATURAL and REVEALED
RELIGION:
BEING AN
ABRIDGMENT
OF THE
SERMONS

Preached at the LECTURE founded by
The Hon^{ble} *Robert Boyle, Esq;*

V O L. II.



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Dr. STANHOPE's

TRUTH and EXCELLENCY

OF THE

Christian Religion

Asserted against

Jews, Infidels, and Heretics.

PART II.

HAVING shewn that the *Christian* Religion is in no Respect either inferior to, or inconsistent with the Doctrine of *Moses*, and the Prophets, I proceed,

2. To shew that it enjoins nothing as necessary to be believed or done, which, when rightly understood, is repugnant to the Dictates of right Reason.

The main Objection against receiving the *Christian* Revelation seems all along to have been drawn from its containing and requiring our Belief of some Matters, which very wise Men have found themselves unable clearly to perceive, and to account to their own Reason for. The refuting of which, as it will at once take off the most plausible Pretence of the Enemies of Christianity for not believing; or of

VOL. II.

B

Heretics

Heretics for corrupting and misinterpreting the Scriptures of the New Testament, I will take care to do it by observing the following Method.

I. I will explain to you in what Sense and Respects the Mysteries of the Gospel can be said really to exceed our Comprehension.

II. I will offer some Considerations which prove, that their being thus incomprehensible by us, is no just Bar to our believing them.

III. I will answer as distinctly as I can, the principal Arguments made use of to insinuate, that they are not to be believed, because not to be comprehended by us.

Having established the general Part of the Argument, I shall afterwards descend to some particular Points of Faith and Practice, and shew that these have such Evidence as the *Jews* ought to assent to; and are no Way repugnant to the so much boasted Wisdom of an improved, tho' still mere natural Man.

I. I shall explain to you in what Sense and Respects the Mysteries of the Gospel can be said really to exceed our Comprehension.

1. Now it is readily admitted on both Sides, that several Things believed in the World, are of so abstruse a Nature, that no Man by the Strength of his own Discourse could ever have found them out. And therefore all, who embrace Revelation, do likewise agree in confessing, that these Things neither were, nor could be known, but by God's express Declaration. Upon this Acknowledgment *St. Paul* infers the unavoidable Occasion for a Revelation from above in Points peculiar to Christians, and attributes these Discoveries to God. Upon the same Account our Adversaries are content to have these Doctrines thought *mysterious*: Only herein we differ, that they allow this Title to belong to them, with regard to their being obscure before such Revelation, which they

they now think has made them clear ; whereas, we say, that this Revelation notwithstanding, we have not a full and clear Perception of them.

2. A *second* Sort there are, of which, tho' we have Notions sufficiently distinct to serve the Purposes of Life, yet we cannot account for their Causes or Effects, or answer the Difficulties against those Notions, the Truth whereof we nevertheless can see no just Reason to call in Question.

3. Those Things are out of our Reach, of which we have no *Ideas*. But no Man in his Senses ever took upon him to maintain, that any Doctrine which Men are thus ignorant of, is a proper Object of Faith. The *Mysteries* of Religion which command our Belief, may have Depths which it is not possible for us to sound the Bottom of ; but still so far is our own Knowledge necessary, that even in these Cases we be able to explain our Meaning by some such common Notions, as may render the Words in which those Mysteries are expressed, intelligible.

4. A *fourth* Sort of Things there are, that lie beyond the Reach of human Comprehension ; of whose Nature though we have some, yet we have not an adequate Knowledge of. This is plainly our Case with Regard to Beings of an abstracted and incorporeal Nature, where we have no sensible Ideas to lead us into a full Understanding of them.

5. But to come nearer to our present Case, I add, that several Propositions may exceed our Comprehension, in regard that although they be really true, yet the immediate Ground of that Truth may not be discernable by us.

Now it is to be observed, that the Controversy at present depending, does properly concern such revealed Truths, as exceed our Comprehension, either as we have some, but very confused *Ideas* of : Or such as though we understand the Terms, yet we

cannot account to our selves for the Manner of their Agreement, when they make up one entire Proposition.

Having thus explained in what Sense some Articles of Faith exceed our Comprehension, I proceed,

II. To offer my Reasons why this is no just Bar to our believing them.

1. The *first* of these shall be taken from the Nature of Faith itself, which is, properly speaking, that Assent of the Mind to any Thing upon the Testimony of another. And is thus distinguished from that which Evidence of Sense, and Experience, demonstrative Proof, or probable Argument produce in us.

From hence we may distinguish all Manner of Evidence into two Sorts, *internal* and *external*. I call that *internal* Evidence, which induces our Assent by Motives arising from within the Matter itself, termed for this Reason the *Evidence of the Thing*. I call that *external*, which moves us by Considerations taken from without, and is properly called *Evidence of the Testimony*. Concerning the Truth whereof, supposing no just Cause to doubt, that ought to be esteemed sufficient for creating the Assent of *Faith* or *Belief*.

Now Faith in a religious Sense owns no less Motive to determine it, than the Testimony of God himself. And since 'tis certain that his Goodness and Wisdom, and Truth can never suffer him to be deceived, or deceive others, the Word of such a Being must give us the strongest Belief imaginable.

2. Let it be considered, that the only Qualification which gives any Thing a Right to our Assent is the Truth of it. Consequently whatsoever we have Reason by any manner of Means to think true, our Minds have Reason upon that Account fully to acquiesce in. Consequently again, admitting that there be some Things which exceed our
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Comprehension, they are notwithstanding entitled to our Assent, except it could be proved that they cannot be true, merely because we cannot comprehend them. But the Truth of the Thing depends not in any Degree upon the Capacity of the Person that considers it.

3. The present Argument will be strengthened yet more, by observing how it comes to pass that we think ourselves warranted to be confident of the Truth of those Things which we most firmly believe. How do Men know that they see or hear any of those Objects, that strike their Eyes and Ears? Is it because their Senses and their Reason tell them so? But how are they assured, that they do not deceive them? The Answer they would make, would be, that Man and all Nature is the Workmanship of a most wise, and good, and powerful Creator; that these Faculties are implanted in us on purpose to represent Things truly; and therefore as it were a most impious Reflection upon the Wisdom and Power of God, to suppose that he could not frame these Faculties sufficient for the Purposes they are to serve; so it is a no less blasphemous Imputation upon his Goodness to imagine that he would not. This therefore is a sufficient Argument, that Things are as they appear to be.

But then I observe, that we have the same Security for our Assent to Articles of Faith, even those beyond our Comprehension. For here too the Ground of our Assurance rests all at last upon the Perfections of God, who revealed them, who is too glorious for Man to comprehend as he is.

4. Now the Christian Doctrines, alledged to be above our Capacity, are such as concern either the incommunicable Perfections of the divine Nature, or the Decrees of the divine Providence in the Redemption of Man. And shall we, with these poor Faculties, which the meanest of God's Creatures is

an over-match for, be so vain as not to allow God, either to be, or to do any Thing, but what we can account for? As his Doings are so transcendently great, what shall hinder him from publishing those hidden Excellencies which we could never have found out? And if he actually has done so, shall we not take his Word?

Nay, had these Doctrines not come from God, they would never have been known, being too remote from the View of any Faculty upon Earth to have discerned, or ever thought of otherwise. So that how strange soever it may be to advance the Credibility of such Mysteries, upon the confessed unconceivableness of them, yet both Reason and the Apostle bear me out in so doing. *What Man knoweth the Things of a Man save the Spirit of Man, which is in him? Even so the Things of God knoweth no Man, but the Spirit of God.*

5. Another Consideration which renders our Belief of the most mysterious Doctrines highly reasonable, is the Nature of that Assent required on these Occasions. Where we are capable of perceiving the Object propounded, there it is necessary our Faith should be explicit, and distinct: But where the Object is dark and confused, it suffices that our Faith be implicit and general, because we cannot believe more than we have evidence for: If therefore we study to know as much as we can, to receive whatever appears to come from him, this is all that God expects from us; and this can never be unreasonable, unless it be unreasonable to own God infallible.

In a word, if Faith in general be an Assent upon Testimony, and the Ground of *divine Faith* be the Testimony of God: If the Object of this Faith be revealed Truth, and the Truth of any Object do not depend upon the Capacity of the Person contemplating it: If the Power of comprehending be the

Gift

Gift of a Being we cannot comprehend : If the Christian Doctrine disgusts upon Account of the glorious Nature and wonderful Decrees of that very Being : And if the Degrees of Faith are proportioned to the Degrees of the Evidence, then I have proved, that allowing some Parts of the Christian Revelation incomprehensible, yet this will not bear us out in refusing to believe them.

III. I come now to answer some of the principal Reasons brought to prove, that Things which cannot be comprehended, ought not to be enjoined, as necessary to be believed by us.

" All which I hope I shall confute, if I can make out these five Propositions that follow.

1. That there is a real Difference between Things *above*, and Things *contrary* to Reason.

2. That requiring our Assent to Things *above* Reason, does not usurp upon Reason, or take away the Use of it in Matters of Religion.

3. That in order to render the most assured Faith in these Cases a reasonable Act, it is neither necessary or lawful so to interpret Scripture to our common Notions of Things, as to make all the Doctrines delivered there, familiar and intelligible to us.

4. That the Doctrines of this Kind are wrongfully imputed to Priestcraft.

5. That the ill Consequences pretended to rise from these Doctrines, and the Offence said to be taken at them, are neither truly charged upon the Maintainers of them ; nor if they were, are these a sufficient Reason for giving them up ?

I. I am to prove, *That there is a real Difference between Things above, and Things contrary to Reason.*

That those Things do really differ from each other, of which we conceive Ideas plainly different is certain. Now he that declares a Thing to be *above* Reason, implies no more, than that he does not see

how it can be ; but he that pronounces a Thing *contrary to Reason*, implies that he perceives either such an Inconsistence in the Thing itself, or such an Incongruity with other acknowledged Truths, as shew him, that it cannot be.

Again: To be above human Reason means only, that we cannot know perfectly what we affirm to be so ; leaving it undetermined whether Beings of a more extensive Understanding may not understand it more perfectly. But to be *contrary to Reason* infers, that neither we, nor any larger Capacity whatsoever can know it to be true. For Reason in the several Sorts of Minds differs only in Degree, but cannot contradict itself ; and consequently whatsoever is indeed *contrary to the Reason of one Mind*, cannot but be so to the Reason of all. So that as much Difference as there is between being possible to be true, or false, and being impossible to be true ; so great a Difference there is between the Idea of a Thing *above Reason*, and that of a Thing *contrary to Reason*.

Take indeed Reason for understanding in general ; there is no Truth which some intelligent Mind or other does not comprehend ; but to say this of the human Mind is too vain to be cherished by them, who observe the Methods of our Attainment to Knowledge, or other Creatures both below and above us.

1. As to the first of these, some Things are known at first View ; others give us Labour to search out : Those we call self-evident, and the Knowledge of them Intuition ; these we call Consequences, and the Knowledge of them is termed mediate, from that third Idea interposed between Matters not clear of themselves, for representing the Agreement, or adjusting the Differences of the Matters enquired into, by their Agreement or Disagreement with itself.

If then there be some Things in Nature of which we have none but confused *Ideas* ; and if there be others, of which though we have *Ideas* sufficiently distinct, yet can we not discern all their Properties fully, because destitute of a third *Idea*, which should illustrate their Properties, then have we a very plain Account both that some Things may be above our Reason, and whence it is that they may be so.

Now that some Things there are in Nature, of which we have but very dark *Ideas*, without appealing to spiritual Substances, I instance Matter, which though we converse with every Moment, yet neither Sense can descry, nor Reason define what it is precisely.

Again : That some Things there are, of which we have distinct *Ideas*, but far from a full Knowledge, for want of some third *Idea* capable of opening them to us, is so far from wanting a Proof, that the greater Part of our Ignorance in the Secrets of Nature seems chiefly owing to this very Cause.

What hath been argued from the Operations of our own Minds, would be strengthened by a Comparison between other Beings and ourselves ; here we should remember that though we are Creatures indued with Life, Sense, and Reason, which has set us a good way above the other Part of the Creation, yet we must not imagine that our Minds are as capacious as Angels. We are not so absurd as to deny many Appearances and Effects, which depend upon material Causes, because they do not manifest themselves to our Senses ; and is it less absurd to deny, that Angels, but especially God himself, may have a more comprehensive View of many Things, which Faculties, so limited as ours, are not by Nature fitted to perceive ?

As we find Objects whose exceeding Brightness is not only useless, but painful to the Eye of the Body, why may there not be others too gloriously dazzling for that of the Mind ?

In

In a Word, it is most reasonable to think, that God has set Bounds to Mens Understandings, as well as to their Senses.

And thus much is sufficient to make good, that there is a real Difference between Things *above* and Things *contrary* to Reason. And consequently, that whatsoever is not *contrary* to Reason, is possible to be true; and if true, may be assented to as such, notwithstanding it neither be, nor can be comprehended by us. I proceed now,

2. To shew, that requiring our Assent to Things *above* Reason, does not usurp upon Reason, or take away the Use of it *in Matters of Religion*.

For Reason's Business is the same here, generally speaking, as in other Cases, to discern I mean, and be answerable for the Sufficiency of the Motive inducing our Assent. Only we add withal, that the particular Thing Reason is to regard in Matters of Faith, is the Evidence upon which we are moved to receive them, which is the Evidence of Testimony. And consequently it is not the Condition of the Thing revealed, but the Certainty of the Revelation, that makes the proper Subject of our Enquiry. And upon this we are content that Reason should exercise herself. For is it not possible for him who made us to communicate his Will and Nature, and to inform Men with those hidden Treasures of Knowledge, which they could never have found out themselves, and such as are greatly for their Profit to know? All which in Effect is but to debate whether it be not reasonable to believe divine Revelations in general.

Let Reason then enquire again; whether Miracles be not Signs of a divine Power? Whether a Being of Truth and Goodness would attest a Lie by such Wonders? Whether those who wrought such Works ought not to be received, as sent by him? Whether the Old and New Testament be not the Writings

Writings of those Persons, and the Facts related their Doings; and what Assurance we have that they are not corrupted? All which is in Effect to enquire whether the Christian Religion in particular be the Invention of Man, or a Revelation from God.

Let her read those Books with all imaginable Circumspection, observe their mutual Agreement, and the Sense of the Church of all Ages upon all the material, and some confessedly obscure Passages. For this again is in effect but to examine, whether the Mysteries, which some labour to explode, have all along been esteemed essential Parts of Christianity itself.

Let the Precepts of this Religion be brought to the Test, and Men will find no one Doctrine in all this whole System unworthy of God to impart, or of Men to receive. For this in *Matters of revealed Religion*, is the only Enquiry proper to the Thing itself, and that which when we once are satisfied in, our Duty then is to rest for the Belief of it upon Miracles and the Characters of a divine Revelation. These are the Terms upon which the Gospel asks our Belief; and therefore there is no need for those Clamours upon that plausible Head of commanding Men to exclude from Religion, the only Faculty by which God intended we should discern Truth from Falshood.

Having shewn that the requiring our Assent to Things *above* Reason, does not usurp upon Reason, or take away the Use of it in Matters of Religion: I come,

3. To shew, that in order to render the most assured Faith in these Cases a reasonable Act, it is neither necessary or lawful so to interpret Scripture to our common Notions of Things, as to make all the Doctrines delivered there familiar and intelligible to us.

That