

The Nature, Procedure, Extent, Value and Effects of a Rational Faith considered.

In T W O
S E R M O N S

Preach'd before the
U N I V E R S I T Y
O F
O X F O R D,

On March 11. and June 24. 1744.

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Rector of S H O T T E S B R O O K *Berks.*

O X F O R D,

Printed for *James Fletcher* in the *Turl*; and
sold by *Sam. Birt* in *Ave Marie Lane*, and
J. Rivington in *St Paul's Church-Yard*, *London*. M C C X L V.

Imprimatur,

EUS. ISHAM,

Vice-Can. OXON

Jun. 15. 1745.



1 Pet. III.†15.

Be ready always to give an Answer to Every Man that asketh You a Reason of the Hope that is in You.

THIS was the Direction of an Apostle, who well understood the Foundation of the Religion He was commissioned to preach; This the Method by which He proposed the Christian Faith should be received, diffused and continued in the World. The particular Arguments, with which They were to answer Enquirers, He had elsewhere instructed them in, and He here directs Them to fix Them deep in their Minds, that they might be able to apply them upon any sudden Demand, for the Justification of themselves and the Conversion of Others. Enquirers of all Sorts were naturally to be expected upon the Publication of a Religion, which prescribed such exalted Rules of Life, and enforced them with such exalted Motives. Some, for the Sake of the Hope that was in them, might be glad to see so desirable a Scheme well founded,

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whilst Others would be industriously solicitous to disprove a System, which crossed their received Opinions, and forbad the Gratification of their beloved Lufts and Passions. However whether They made the Enquiry of *Envy and Strife*, or of *Good Will* towards this Dispensation, whether They asked a Reason of their Hope, of *Contention*, not sincerely, supposing to confound their best Expectations, or of *Love*, knowing the comfortable Prospect which It afforded, The Disciples of this Religion were to be provided against all Demands however intended; They were to be prepared to offer sufficient Evidence for their Faith, for the Confutation of its Enemies, and the Satisfaction of Those, who were disposed to be its Friends. The peculiar Circumstances of their Situation made it necessary for Them to be well-grounded in the Faith, which they might probably be called on to support at the Expence of their Lives; and the great Importance of the Doctrine must incline Those, who sincerely believe it Themselves, to use all Endeavours to satisfy Others of the Truth of it. --- And indeed had this Scheme been proposed in any other Light, had the First Preachers of our Religion placed it on any other than a Rational Foundation, the Philosophers had

had had sufficient Matter of Triumph over a new Institution, which did not pretend to be *founded on Argument*, and there had been still the same Room for the Ridicule of the Wits of the present Age; or rather It could never have continued for the Diversion of their Posterity, but must have sunk deservedly under the Insult, Reproach and Contempt of those Times. But now in this Case Matter of Fact is an Argument of real Force. This Religion prospered against all opposition, and Those, who according to *St Peter's* Direction were prepared to *give a Reason of the Hope that was in Them*, did actually defend it with Success against Persecution and Misrepresentation: By Strength of Reasoning They silenced the Objections of Wit and Learning, and by the Integrity of their Lives and Constancy of their Deaths offered an *Argument* superior to what any other Institution had ever offered. --- Yet Opposition has been made to this powerful Source of Light and Virtue in this very View of it, and Difficulties have been raised concerning the Nature, Procedure, Extent, Value and Effects of a Rational Faith, which it is of great Importance to examine and explain; for if our Religion be found defective in this Point, in vain shall We seek out for any other

sufficient Foundation for it. If our Religion be not founded in Reason, It cannot be a Religion calculated for Reasonable Creatures. And yet the Pretensions of Christianity to a rational Foundation, which indeed shine throughout the New Testament, could only shew its Want of a sufficient Foundation, if “ Reason “ or the intellectual Faculty cannot possibly “ both from its own Nature and that of Re- “ ligion be the Principle intended by God to “ lead Us into a true Faith.” This is the great Point, which requires Examination, and It may I hope sufficiently illustrate this Subject, and obviate all the material Difficulties in it, if I observe and prove

First, that a Rational Faith does not only imply no Inconsistency in its Notion, but is indeed the only Kind of Assent, which deserves the Name of Faith ;

Secondly, that it is not only not inconsistent with the Methods of Education and Instruction, but is in the very Nature of it to be secured and promoted in that Manner ;

Thirdly, that it is not only calculated for Scholars and Philosophers, but for all Sorts and Degrees of Men, and that the
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Meanest Capacity, where Means of Information are afforded, is able to attain it;

Fourthly, that It is therefore a proper Matter of Probation, justly to be required under Penalties, and suitably to be inserted in our Petitions to our Maker;

Fifthly, that It is sufficient to answer all the Ends of Religion, such as Unity of Opinion amongst its Members, and Personal Amendment in Each Individual.

First then I observe, that a Rational Faith does not only imply no Inconsistency in its Notion, but is indeed the only Kind of Assent, which deserves the Name of Faith. The various Uses of this Term in Scripture, wherein it is taken sometimes for the *Cause*, sometimes for the *Effect* of the Acknowledgment of the Truth, sometimes for the *Substance of the Truths* acknowledged, make it necessary to ascertain the peculiar Sense in which We use it, that We may prevent Verbal Disputes, and all the Inconveniences, which arise in Argument from Mistake and Misapprehension. This Case indeed requires only Illustration, and where there is no Misrepresentation of the Subject, there can be no Difficulty in it. Now *Faith* in the
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sacred Writings, is sometimes used for that preparative Good Disposition of Mind, which leaves Men open and attentive to the Examination of Truth, and thereby leads them to the Happy Discovery of it: sometimes it is taken for the laudable Application of the Truth discovered in the real Fruits of Goodness and Virtue, which It was intended to produce: sometimes for that peculiar Religion, which has Truth for its Foundation and Righteousness for its End; or even for some particular Doctrine of that Religion, which is more immediately calculated to promote these great and good Effects. Sometimes again *Faith* is used for the Perswasion of a Man's Mind, whatever it be, whether erroneous or well-founded, which may possibly be rational in One Sense, as being founded on some Kind of Argument, tho' extremely irrational in another, as being built on gross Absurdities. Particular Texts therefore, wherein *Faith* is mention'd, may be much misapplied, and the Whole Subject confused, unless Care be taken to fix the Meaning of a Term, which upon such Authority bears so many different Significations. But Some of These are apparently figurative, express the Whole by a Part, and represent rather the Properties, the Object and the Event,

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than the Nature of that Faith, which is the Subject of our present Enquiry.

Faith then in its primary and most general Meaning, and in which We are now concern'd, is That which We usually and properly call *Belief*, or an Assent of the Mind to any Doctrine or Fact as credible upon the Motives of its Credibility, whereby it stands distinguished from certain Knowledge, or slight Opinion; and according as Those Motives of Credibility are proposed to Us from God or Man, That Assent, which is the Result of them, is properly termed Divine or Human Faith. This general Notion does not exclude, but imply the several particular Acts and Qualities which precede or follow it, and This Assent, We say, not only *may* but *must* be *Rational*, and that Nothing else can deserve the Name of *Faith*. For let Us consider the Means, which our Maker has afforded Us of discerning the Credibility of Every Thing proposed to our Assent. Now These Means must be either Natural or Supernatural. Of Those which the Author of our Nature has bestowed on all our Species, the only Inlets of Discernment are our Senses and our Reason. But our Senses do not represent Things as *credible* but as *certain*. We do not *believe*, but We *know* what falls within their

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their Reach. Here the Sceptick cannot doubt, nor the most Credulous exceed their Reports. Our Reason indeed may err in judging of some Appearances, but as far as They are properly the Objects of Sense, there is no Deception. This Fallibility of Reason, which is the other Natural Means of Discernment, brings down our Knowledge to Belief, and leaves Room for Credibility in all the Different Degrees and Measures of it. By our Intellectual Faculty We discern the Connection of Propositions and the Truth of Things, and according as these appear with greater or less Force to this Faculty, our Assent is proportionably weaker or more confident. The Understanding, We readily allow (without any Disadvantage to our Cause, as will be seen hereafter,) determines necessarily as the Evidence appears, and the Conviction is more or less doubtful, as the Grounds of it seem more or less weighty. Some have confined Credibility to Testimony, and will not allow, that Any Thing, "which appears clear and evident to the Understanding, or which may certainly be collected, either antecedently by its Cause, or reversely by its Effect, can be any proper Object of Faith." But there is no Necessity or Reason for this Distinction. The Being and

Attributes of God, for Instance, are most certainly to be collected by their Effects from the Works of the Creation, and are likewise, I think, demonstrable *à priori*, and yet They are the proper Objects of our Faith, as our Creed teaches us justly to profess, that We “believe
 “in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Hea-
 “ven and Earth,” and the Scripture it self speaks the same Language. Faith is there put for the Belief of those Things, which We learn by the Exercise of our Reason, in Opposition to what We perceive by the Use of our Senses, and in its strictest Definition there recorded is said to be the *Substance of Things hoped for, the Evidence of Things not seen.* Whether the Evidence be more or less perspicuous, will make a Difference in the *Degree*, but not in the *Nature* of Faith. The clearest Demonstrations are not irresistible, nor can extort Assent from the Unwilling: They are no Demonstrations to Those, who attend not at all to Things of this Kind, and They lose much of their Weight with Those, who with Industry and Pleasure attend to every Cavil which can be raised against them; as We have been told, there have been Those in former Ages, who have even arrived at Atheism, and of late We have heard of Improvements in the Science; of Those

who have much outgone their unbelieving Predecessors, and have even pretended to Demonstrations on their Side. Such Examples however may shew, that the highest Evidence, which can be offered to our Understanding, cannot force our Assent, but that where there may be *Unbelief*, there is certainly Room for *Faith*. It was an Old Observation, that there was Nothing so clear, but what might be disputed, and that there was no Opinion so extravagant, but what some Philosophers had maintained. That those Points, which do admit of Demonstration, do usually in Fact pass without Contradiction, is not that their Force is insuperable, but that They are unconcerning Truths, and Points which have little or no Relation to our Schemes in Life. Were our Lusts and Passions as much interested in the Mathematicks as they are in Religion, I doubt not, but We should have as formidable Opposition against the One as the Other, and *Euclid* would have as many zealous Adversaries as the Bible. The Proofs, which are offered in Favour of Religion, may be called morally demonstrative, yet We see them often rejected; and from the same Temper of Mind, Those which are Mathematically demonstrative, if there could be the same View in canvassing them, would like-

wise

wise be rejected. What is therefore called scientific on the one Hand, and probable on the Other, are indeed but different Degrees of Credibility, and will prove sufficient or ineffectual to gain our Assent, according to the Attention and Disposition with which we apply ourselves to the Examination of it. The Grounds of Credibility then are not to be confined to Testimony only, unless We consider the Works of Nature, and the Connection of Propositions, as the Attestation, which the Author of Nature and Truth has afforded to his Creatures; which is Altering the Usual Sense of the Term, Destroying the Distinction of Reason and Authority, and Reducing the Question to a Verbal Difference. However What is here observed will hold equally true, that as by the Exercise only of our Understanding We can discern the Probability of Facts, and the Connection of Doctrines, so the highest Proof which can be offered to Us this Way, exclusive of our Senses, will not destroy the Nature of Faith, because it may be rejected, as in Fact It often is. What is proposed to our Reason, our Reason may neglect or evade. Be it ever so conclusive or demonstrative in it self, yet if it be disregarded, it must lose its Weight; or if so much Regard be paid to it, as to give it an Opportunity of

shining in Evidence really unanswerable, yet if
 It be artfully ballanced with Difficulties, which
 may be thought unanswerable, or may really
 be so, as being out of our Power and Province
 to determine, the Result may prove to be
 only Scepticism, and the Mind may be left in
 a State of Neutrality and Hesitation. As far
 as our Reason actually discerns, so far only
 We truly believe, and This is very evidently
 the only Natural Means of arriving at Faith.
 Let us next consider the Supernatural Means
 by which our Assent may be wrought on, or by
 which We may come to the Acknowledgment
 of the Truth. And These must be either out-
 ward Miracles or inward Inspirations, either
 publick Supernatural Works, or the secret Te-
 stimony of the Spirit to the Spirit of particular
 Persons. The former of These again can be
 applied to Us for our Conviction only in a Ra-
 tional Way. They could force Assent only
 from Those, who saw them; but in the very
 next step, to Those, who were not Eye-Wit-
 nesses, They must depend on Testimony, on
 the Sufficiency, that is, the Integrity and Abi-
 lity of the Reporters. And even to Those, be-
 fore whose Eyes these Miracles were wrought,
 yet, as Proofs of the Truth of any particular
 Religion, They could only be received in an
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argumentative Method. Their Senses could only assure Them of the Truth of the Facts, but the Connection of those Facts with Doctrines, the Consideration of them as manifest Interpositions of the Great Author of Nature, who would not lend his Almighty Power to countenance an Imposture, This is a very Methodical Inference, a very Just and Rational Conclusion. --- As to the other supernatural Means of Information, the particular Inspiration of the Holy Spirit, if It be taken only in that lower Sense, as cooperating with our own Endeavours, in which our Church sometimes uses it, as when We pray that *God would cleanse the Thoughts of our Hearts by the Inspiration of his Holy Spirit*, and again that *by his Holy Inspiration We may think those Things that be Good, and by his merciful Guiding may perform the same*; when the Holy Spirit is thus considered as working with our Spirit, remedying our depraved Nature, enlightening our Understanding, purifying our Affections, and rectifying our Will, there is Nothing in this Doctrine, which can exclude the Application of our own Reason. Rather hereby We are better disposed to examine into the Truth, better enabled to distinguish the Evidence of it, and better prepared to receive and comply with the
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Directions of it. Tho' We stand in need of such Divine Assistance to help our Infirmities; yet we are not merely passive under the Operations of it; but by exerting and applying its salutary Aid We arrive at the Acknowledgment of the Truth, and both Grace and Nature conspire to establish Us in a Rational Faith. --- But if This Inspiration and Testimony of the Spirit be represented, --- "as irradiating the Soul at once with a thorough Conviction, as an irresistible Light from Heaven flashing Conviction in a Moment, as compleating our Faith in an Instant, and producing at once the most perfect and finished Creed, as bespeaking the immediate Presence of the Divinity, and making its Dictates, as it were, self-evident to the Mind, where it is lodged," and in a Word, "as of a Nature little differing from that of Intuition it self," under such a Representation of it, the Exercise of our Reason would indeed be excluded, but so would the Nature of Faith also; for the Result of such Means of Information would not be *Belief* but *Knowledge*. Whether This be the Doctrine of the Bible is not at present the Question, nor need it be largely argued, where the Scriptures are allowed to be of Publick Use.

But if there was any Ground to expect such

“a constant and particular Revelation, im-
 parted separately and supernaturally to every
 Individual,” then the very Nature of the Af-
 sent wrought by it would be entirely changed;
 and an Inspiration, “which stamps such inde-
 lible Characters on the Heart, as no Misre-
 presentations can ever possibly intervene to
 corrupt,” would create an absolute Certainty
 and Infallibility, and destroy the very Notion
 of a virtuous and obedient *Faith*. We should
 be as sure of the Testimony of these inward
 Feelings as of That of our outward Senses, and
 the Case of Assent could then be no Part of
 our Probationary State. The Possibility of re-
 jecting such “a present standing Miracle” is
 a plain Contradiction, and the only Matter of
 Trial in Us, would be that of a Practical Obe-
 dience suitable to the Direction of those Arti-
 cles, which We so certainly *knew* to be true:
 The Condemnatory Sentences against Unbelief
 would then be inconsistent and trifling, as re-
 ferring to an imaginary Case, and prohibiting
 an Event, which no Neglect or Misapplication
 of ours could occasion. --- That God Almighty
 can impress on the Minds of his Creatures so
 strong a Sense of any Revelation or particular
 Doctrine, by Inspiration, as to supersede the
 Necessity of any Rational Enquiry, and to leave
 them

them beyond Question satisfied of its coming from Him, cannot be question'd by any but Those, who are daily limiting the Power, and prescribing to the Wisdom of their Maker; and that in Fact He did thus Inspire the Prophets under the Old, and the Apostles under the New Testament, is a necessary Part of every Christian's Faith. But then this Kind of Inspiration was more for the Sake of Others than Themselves. What was by this Means Matter of certain *Knowledge* to them, was to be proposed to the *Rational Belief* of the Rest of the World, and could only be proved to them by the internal Excellency of the Doctrines and Precepts proposed, and the external Evidences of their Divine Mission. These Inspired Persons had before by the due Exercise and Cultivation of their Understandings attained to a *Rational Faith*, and were now favoured with farther and more immediate Revelations of the Will of their Maker. This Inspiration was rather the Reward of their former, than the Trial of their present Belief. There was no Room for Doubt or voluntary Assent in this, but their Minds were really irradiated with a thorough and irresistible Conviction of Divine Truths. Those who had given a Pattern of the Love of Truth, and a faithful Adherence

to it, whilst It was only a Matter of Rational Enquiry, were now by this Heavenly Confirmation of it chosen to be the Instruments of Providence in publishing it to Others; and What They had thus learnt immediately from their Maker, was by their Ministry to be made known to, and on their Testimony to be received by their Fellow-Creatures. The Trial of their own Faith was now concluded and recompenced; Their Belief was hereby changed into absolute Certainty, and the remaining Part of their Probation was only a Conduct suitable to that high Priviledge. And as the Case was apparently thus in all the Instances of real Inspiration, so had This Inspiration been Universal, as Universal a Certainty must have ensued. Men might indeed hereby have known the Will of their Maker, but They would have known it in such a Method as They could not have avoided or resisted. They could not have received and embraced it as Credible, but as Certain. The Necessity of their Assent and inevitable Determination, which is thro' great Error urged as a Difficulty in a *Rational Faith*, would have been of real Weight in this Scheme, and This Kind of Intuitive Knowledge, which was instant and irresistible, must have left them entirely passive, neither blameable nor praise-worthy

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worthy in their Assent. Where there is no Possibility of Error or Unbelief, there can be no Virtue in the Discernment of the Truth, nor consequently any Room for Reward or Punishment. There is no Merit in seeing the Objects which unavoidably present Themselves before Us. An Evidence, which extorts Assent, may in some Cases be a Happiness, but cannot in Any be a Trial of our Disposition. And therefore an Inspiration, which forces on Men the Knowledge of Divine Truths, however in particular Instances It may answer other Ends of Providence, yet if It were “constant
“and general, imparted separately and super-
“naturally to every Individual,” It could not answer this great End, of exercising and manifesting our Dutiful Regard to and voluntary Reception of the Divine Dictates. This can only be by the free Use of our Understanding, and therefore from this Review of all the possible Means of Information, We may now presume to infer, that a *Rational Faith* does not only imply no Inconsistency in its Notion, but is indeed the only Kind of Assent, which deserves the Name of *Faith*.

I proceed *Secondly* to shew, that It is not only not inconsistent with the Methods of Education and Instruction, but is in the very Nature

ture of it to be secured and promoted in that Manner. This indeed might seem a very certain and obvious, but withal a very unnecessary Remark, to Any who were unacquainted with the State of the Controversy, and knew not what forced Objections have been raised on this Subject. For whether Mankind has naturally more than a Capacity for Reason, whether Any One of our Species in a supposed solitary State, without the Assistance and Converse of his Human Brethren, would any more attain to any Degree of Speculation than of Speech, may well be doubted. However the Improvements of our Understanding by Education are in Fact visible and certain, and This One Blessing enjoyed in its best Advantage, distinguishes some Creatures from Others of the same Species, to a Degree almost as great as is seen in some Different Kinds of Beings. And if our Reason it self, at least every considerable Degree of it, is attained in this Method, then certainly a *Rational Faith*, a *Religion, which is founded on Argument*, not only may, but must be taught in the same Method, by opening and assisting the tender Mind, which must proceed by gradual Advances, to apprehend the Argument, and discern the Truth of Propositions or the Certainty of Facts. Now This would readily be

allowed in all other Cases; but Religion being a Personal Thing and a Matter of such infinite Consequence, It is insisted on that It ought to be left wholly and absolutely to Every Man's own Determination without any Influence of any Kind whatsoever. If the Assent required of Men be a Rational One, It is said to be "highly wicked and unjust to prepossess their tender Minds in any Manner before They come to the full Use of their rational Faculties." Yet it can only be by such Prepossessions, that is, by Instruction and Education, that They ever come to the full Use of their rational Faculties at all. It can only be by the Exercise of those Faculties, and the Assistance given to them in those tender Years, that they are able to make such Progress and arrive at Maturity. --- But Other Subjects, It is thought, may be found to employ these Talents for their Improvement, and Religion is to be kept out of the Question, 'till They are perfectly qualified to judge in the Case. For "if Reason is to determine the Cause, She must be left to herself to determine fairly, and It is said to be the greatest Injustice and Mockery to invite Her to give Sentence, where there have been Practices before-hand, and are Practices still continued, to obstruct or limit her Influence".

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But in Truth, This unassisted, undirected, self-sufficient State of Reason is plainly an imaginary Case. There is no Possibility amongst the civilized Part of Mankind of Any Person's being left so entirely to Himself, as to determine upon the Subject of Religion without any Help or Assistance from Others, nor does the Nature of a Rational Faith imply the Necessity of any such Condition. On the contrary, It is a Blessing that We are by exprefs Command entitled to the Advice and Direction of Others, when We are incapable of judging for Ourselves. It is an Instance both of the Wisdom and Goodness of Providence, that by this Method We enjoy a Ballance for the Growth of our natural Passions, and for the Force of outward Allurements and Evil Examples. Without this Reason could never come tolerably qualified to the Enquiry, and therefore It is no Injustice to invite Her to give Sentence, where there have been Practices beforehand to limit her Influence, if Instruction and Education are thought Limitations of its Influence; which are indeed the only Methods of preventing the greatest Obstructions to Reason. We must consider ourselves not in any imaginary but in our actual Situation. We are not born like our first Parent in the Strength of our

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our Reason, but if ours be not cultivated with Care in our tender Years, It will necessarily be choked with Prepossessions of a contrary Nature, which will much more obstruct its Influence. And the very Proposal of deferring all Thought or Judgment of Religion, till Reason be arrived to its full Perfection, must evidently proceed upon a Supposition, that Faith is not Rational but Irrational, and that there are no good Grounds at all for Religion, since, if there be, Its Obligations must commence with our Early Years, begin with our first Degree of Capacity, and proceed in Proportion with Every Improvement of it. Many are the Blessings We receive, Many the Assistances We need in that most helpless Part of Life, which require some Return of Devotion and Acknowledgment to the great Author of our Being and Well-Being. The Sum of All, that has been, or can be offered on this Head by Way of Objection, is, that Education, if allowed, may lead them Wrong, Children not being Judges; and that if it should prove Right, yet their Assent is not Rational, being on the same Grounds, that Others believe wrong: Now that Education, like other good and useful Provisions, may be misapplied, and made instrumental to the Establishment of some Errors, is not denied.

nied; which is a proper Ground of Caution for the Management of it, but no Kind of Argument for the Difuse of it. Here indeed the Objection concerning Prejudices has its greatest Weight, and let Us therefore examine in this Case what It will amount to. --- Let It be observed then, that whatever Errors are established in this Way, are not of equal Importance with the Truths that are hereby inculcated, and that It is better both for their own Personal Happiness and the Welfare of Society, that They should be instructed in those useful Principles of Religion, even tho' blended with Mistakes, rather than be left in entire Ignorance, and those corrupt Notions, which, without any Education, would soon be contracted in their Passage thro' a corrupt World. Wherever there are any Pretensions to Education, Obedience to the Will of God is the great Point always inculcated, even tho' They fail in the Interpretation of his Will, and This must be a Principle of sovereign Use in the Conduct of Human Life. The Distinctions likewise of Virtue and Vice have never been lost or confounded by these mixed Errors, for tho' Doctrines may have been taught, which have been argued as inconsistent with them, yet the Consequences have ever been disowned by the Authors of them.

them. The great Principles of Morality, of Devotion towards God, of Justice and Charity to our Neighbours, and of a sober and temperate Conduct of Ourselves, are a professed Part of every Scheme of Religious Education, and surely such desirable Maxims ought not to be left untaught, lest some inferior Errors should be taught with them. That these Moral Virtues ought farther to be sublimated, enforced, and perfected by truly Christian Principles, is most true, but that They are of no Avail without the right Knowledge of our Holy Religion, is no Part of Christian Doctrine. An Article indeed of our Church teaches us, that “Works done before the Grace of Christ, and the Inspiration of his Spirit, are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as They spring not of Faith in Jesus Christ, neither do They make Men meet to receive Grace.” But then the Article does not rest here, or leave its Sense thus doubtful and indeterminate, but goes on expressly to add, “or, as the School-Authors say, deserve Grace of Congruity.” Now when We come to examine the Meaning of this Language of the Schools, We find them interpreting it, of that Claim and Right to Reward, which from the natural Relation and Fitness of Things is due to Works meritorious or naturally

turally perfect. But the Works of the best mere Moralists are not thus perfect, either in Themselves or their Principle, and therefore cannot of Congruity deserve Grace or Favour; nay, as being defective in their Degree and erroneous in their Motive, They rather need an Atonement, than merit a Reward; or as the Article expresses it, “ yea rather for that They
 “ are not done, as God hath willed and com-
 “ manded them to be done, We doubt not but
 “ They have the Nature of Sin.” This is the Sense of the Article, and very true and justifiable Doctrine It contains; not decrying the Use and Excellency of Morality, as far as it can be attained upon any Principle; but reflecting on the Insufficiency of Heathen Morality in Comparison of the Christian, on the Imperfection even of our best Attainments in Moral Duties, and inculcating the Necessity of relying on the Merits of our Saviour, to supply the Defects and procure the Acceptance even of our Good Works. But It does not follow, that because the best Moral Acts are not perfect enough to justify Men in the Sight of God, therefore they are of no Avail, or that They are not both commendable and beneficial in Comparison of unrestrained Irregularity or dissolute Impiety. Morality is, under every Perswasion, of Service

to Men both in their temporal and spiritual State ; for besides its present Advantages, No One can think, that a Moral Heathen and a Vicious Infidel are in the same State of Favour with their Maker, or have the same Prospect before Them in Regard to Futurity, tho' neither of Them has a Title to the Glorious *Hope that is in Christians*. --- It is a Consideration then of some Weight in Favour of a Religious Education, that tho' It may sometimes establish some Errors in particular Points, yet its general Principles are always right, and of more immediate practical Effect than its peculiar Mistakes. The Rules of Good Life which It prescribes, and the Restraints which It inculcates, are of Service greater than the Inconvenience of any mistaken Doctrine ; it being much better, that Men should be taught to live virtuously, and in the Fear of God, even tho' that Fear be sometimes misapplied, than that They be left to do what is Good in their own Eyes, without any Principle of Conscience, or Awe of a Superior Presence. That *Superstition is Worse than Atheism*, as We were not long since taught from the Pulpit and the Press, was one of the most unseasonable, absurd and prejudicial Errors, that ever came from a professed Minister of Jesus Christ. It might indeed both

in the Force of the Argument and the Tendency of its Effect, have well become the Mouth of an Infidel, but what End a Preacher of the Gospel could propose in apologizing for Atheism, is hard to conceive. Tho' Nothing is to be pleaded in Defence of Superstition, yet if Two bad Things must be compared, surely That, which only misleads in particular Tempers and particular Instances, must be infinitely more tolerable, than that which strikes at the Root of all Obligation, takes off the Force of every Restraint, and leaves Men without Sense of Guilt or Fear of Punishment. Since then the Inconveniences even of an erroneous Education are not equal to the Benefits of it, since of the Prejudices, which It is said to instil, the best are the most considerable, the Argument will still conclude in its Favour, even in this Case, where It is stated to the greatest Disadvantage. We may say the same of the great Principles of Saving Knowledge, if We consider Education not merely according to the Moral System, but in the Christian View and Scheme of Things. Wherever the Light of the Gospel has in any Degree shined upon Mankind (and concerning Others the foregoing Remarks were intended) there the Essentials of Christianity have almost Universally been

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taught, tho' clouded in some Places with unnecessary Additions, and in Others Defective in Points greatly contributive to the Purity and Perfection of it. Yet still the Mercy of God in Christ has hereby been published and received, and Those, who have a suitable Regard for the Importance of that Blessing, must think it desirable, that It should rather be published in an imperfect, or an additional Form, than in None at all. There is a great Difference betwixt those Points which are necessary to the Salvation of particular Persons, and those which are necessary to the Order and Well-Being of a Church, and, without any Want of a proper Zeal for the latter, One cannot but wish that the former were in any Method Universal. The Words of St *Paul* on a like Occasion are the Language of every real Professor of our Religion, *Phil. 1. 18. What then? Notwithstanding every Way, whether in Pretence or in Truth, Christ is preached, and I therein do rejoice, yea and will rejoice.* This is more particularly applicable to this Purpose, because when the Apostle had just before declared, that some preached the Word *not sincerely*, ἐκ ἀγνώσε, He did not mean, that They were Heathens or Hypocrites, but that They had not a true Notion of the Simplicity of the Gospel, mixing their foreign

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Jewish Opinions with it; not that They wanted Sincerity in their own Hearts, but that They wanted a Right Understanding of the Purity of the Christian Doctrine, and had mistaken Contentions with Him, because He taught it as a distinct, sufficient Institution of itself, and would not join with them in insisting on the equal Necessity of still continuing the Observance of the Ceremonies of the Mosaic Law. Yet the Apostle rejoices, that even their Method as well as his contributed to make known the Redemption of Mankind by Jesus Christ, tho' They besides, laid Strefs on Things of no Value, and mixed their private Notions with the Doctrines of their Master. Still however the Knowledge of this gracious Scheme for our Salvation, tho' blended with Errors, He judges infinitely preferable to an entire Ignorance of it, and triumphs even in this or any Method of its Publication as tending to the Glory of God and the Good of Souls. The Differences therefore amongst Christians and the erroneous Prejudices, which by Means of Education are established amongst Some of them, are according to an Apostle's Judgment no Reason against such Method of early Instruction, and for this plain Reason, because the fundamental Principles in which They all agree, are

are of much greater Consequence, than the several Particulars in which They differ amongst themselves. --- But after All, neither is Prejudice such an absolute Disqualification for fair Reasoning, as is asserted. The very Method of Education, by assisting and improving the Reason of Mankind, must be helpful in detecting all unreasonable Doctrines, and if it instils some wrong Prepossessions, yet it carries its own Antidote against them. By opening the Mind to discern the Strength of Argument, It must naturally contribute to the Support of Every Doctrine, which is really *founded on Argument*, and That which is not, however early taught, may then appear to have no such Foundation. If the Erroneous Prejudice is only in Things of less Consequence, then it does not affect the Question concerning that Rational Faith, which is necessary to Salvation, and which has been made the Subject of the Dispute; but if it really affect Fundamentals, then there is such unanswerable Evidence against such a Prejudice every essential Point being so strong and clear as may secure the Faith of Every One, who has been only taught to be a Rationalist. If indeed Men are not afterwards permitted to look into the Foundations of their Faith, then such fundamental Prejudices may be continued, but

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then the State of the Case and of the Question is altered, and the Objection is no longer against the Institution and Education of Children, but against a Blind Imposition upon Men, in which Objection all Rational Believers will be ready to join. And if from mere Speculation We proceed to look into Fact, We may see in numberless Instances, that Prepossessions are no such invincible Obstacles to Free-Thinking and Alteration of Opinion. The Many Dreadful Examples of Apostacy, which this Nation affords, may shew, that even Prejudices which are founded on Argument, which are allowed Examination, and which have Truth and Reason to support them, are not always sufficient to keep Men in the Right Path, when there are Temptations to think Wrong: which the Way may suggest Something of the Crime of Error, and of the Share which our Wills as well as Understandings bear in the Disposal of our Assent. Some Instances likewise, God be thanked, may be assigned, of those who have overcome the strongest erroneous Prejudices; who having been educated with a Dislike of some Good Principles, have upon a fair Enquiry discerned their Error, and acknowledged the Truth, and This not only in different Communion amongst Christians, but

but in Those who originally were Enemies to the Gospel itself, in the Jews particularly, the greatest Bigots, and by Education the most zealous Adversaries of Christianity. --- But there is yet a farther Objection against Education as an Obstacle to Rational Faith, not only as It sometimes instils Errors, Children not being Judges, but as their Belief is said not to be Rational, even tho' They are taught right, since It is grounded on the same Principle as Theirs who are misled, namely on the bare Authority of their Parents and Instructors. But is not This in plain Terms saying, that there is the same Foundation for a right and a wrong Religion, and that there is no more Reason for the One than the Other? If there be, why may not this Reason be assigned, and Children be instructed in the *Evidence* as well as the *Nature* of the Religion They profess? Can it, for Instance, be said, that the Children of Mahometans have the same Reason for their Belief, as the Children of Christians have for theirs? The Latter must have had very negligent or injudicious Instructors, if it be so, since there are great and glorious Evidences of the Gospel, which the Other can lay no Claim to. The Authority indeed of Parents and Instructors is every where the same, but the Nature

of their Instructions is widely different, and Absurdities and Impostures can never be recommended to any Degree of Understanding with the same Force as the Pure Dictates of Truth and Goodness may. Christian Parents need not like Others teach only on their own Authority, but may explain the Grounds of their Belief, and teach even their Children *a Reason of the Hope that is in them*. They may very early explain even to their Capacities much of the internal and some of the external Evidence of Christianity, may illustrate the excellent Doctrine, Holy Precepts, exemplary Life, miraculous Birth and meritorious Death of the Great Author of our Religion, in such a Manner as may appear convincing to every Degree of Apprehension. As their Capacities improve, greater Light may gradually be given into the Grounds of our Belief, and thus a rational Faith may in some Degree be formed, as soon as They can become Moral Agents; which if it be not so highly argumentative as That of the riper Christian, yet it is as truly rational, and as well suited in Proportion to influence and direct that Part of Life, as the After Improvements are to regulate the more dangerous State of Manhood. If this Method be not used, nor this Care taken in the Education of

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baptized Infants, the Charge lies strong against the Neglect, but no ways affects the Argument concerning the Nature of a rational Faith, as acquired by early Instruction and Prepossession. We trust likewise that the frequent Charges of this Neglect in those of our Communion are much aggravated ; We are sure, that the Method of its Establishment is peculiarly calculated to prevent it ; where the Labour of the Minister is added to the Care of the Parent, and Catechetical Expositions provided for the Instruction of the Meanest, as well as practical Exhortations to enforce the Observance of their Duty on Those, who are already sufficiently instructed. --- The sufficient Capacity of Mankind for a Rational Belief, the Value and Virtue of such a Faith, and the sufficient Efficacy of it to answer all the Purposes of Religion, which was the Substance of the other Particulars proposed, require a distinct Consideration, and must be reserved to another Opportunity. --- I will conclude at present with observing, that the Difficulty here objected of promoting a rational Faith by Education and Instruction is least of all applicable to that Church, whose Guides and Ministers have 'Themselves had the Happiness of being educated in these Seminaries of Light and Truth,

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where no implicit Trust is required, where the Foundations of every Science are regularly examined and demonstrated; where They are habituated to close Thinking, and are early taught by clear and solid Rules to distinguish the most flourishing and plausible Appearances from that which is more weighty and substantial, and by reducing in a perspicuous Method the Substance of a declamatory Style to strict Argument, to weigh its Force and detect its Fallacies; to prevent the Impositions of a designed Falshood, or a Mistaken Zeal, and to establish that only, which has a sufficient Establishment in Nature, Reason or Scripture. The Objections against the Methods of Institution and Instruction here practised are such as end in a Reflection on Human Nature and all its Works, that They are not perfect and infallible; but with all the Allowances that must be made to, and the Miscarriages that will happen amongst Free Agents, It is but Justice to add, that This is at least the most hopeful Method, that Human Wisdom can frame for the perpetual Defence and Establishment of a rational Religion. A Faith, which *is founded on Argument*, as all true Faith must be, must proportionably receive Assistance and Support from these excellent Me-

thods of cultivating and improving Reason here used; and They who are thus well grounded in the Religion They profess, are thereby the better qualified to teach Others also; to refute the Misrepresentations of its Adversaries, and to explain the Evidence of it to the Satisfaction of All, who have Minds open to a Regard to Truth and Virtue; to second and assist the Labours of knowing and pious Parents, and to supply in some Measure the Defect of Those, who are altogether negligent and ignorant. By these Means, under God's Blessing, our Holy Religion has hitherto prospered, and We trust will prosper to the End of the World; By these the Unlearned have been taught in a Method suitable to their Station and Capacity, the Better Instructed have been shewn that a thorough Insight into Philosophical Learning does really confirm the Dictates of Faith, and Truth has received the only Assistance It needs, a fair Representation. The Disguises of Wit and *of Science falsely so called* have hence been placed in their just Light, and Religion, recovering its native Dress, has been too piercing and amiable to fail of its just Effect. --- These Benefits have arisen to the Advantage of Christianity, even from the late Oppositions to it, by the deeper Conviction of every

every serious impartial Person ; and as its Foundations will bear the strictest Examination, the same Effect may ever be expected from the freest Enquiries into it, whilst there are Those who with virtuous Dispositions have their Minds thus opened and improved with every Branch of Polite Literature. Human Learning, since the Ceasing of Miracles, ever has been, and ever will be a necessary Assistant to Divine ; and They either do not understand the Religion They profess, or do not wish well to it, who are Enemies to these Places of true Knowledge and sound Education. Let Us add our sincere Prayers and Endeavours that Those who enjoy the Benefit of them, may be suitably diligent to improve the Blessing They are favoured with, to the Honour and Support of Religion, and the Ornament and Comfort of their own Lives ; more especially, that They consider Knowledge as subservient to Virtue, and defend their Christianity by an Argument, by which the Meanest may, and the Greatest must adorn it, an Holy Life ; which is the Rational End of a Rational Faith, the necessary Support of this Life, and the only Preparative for Another.

1 Pet. III. 15.

Be ready always to give an Answer to Every Man that asketh You a Reason of the Hope that is in You.

THis whole Epistle of St *Peter*, and this particular Direction of it, were addressed to the whole Body of Christian Brethren. It was not peculiar to Jew or Gentile, or to Those who bore any Office in this Spiritual Society; but It was designed for, and indeed immediately concerned, Each Individual Member of the Church. Whatever was their former Perswasion before their Conversion, Whatever was their present Station in the Church of Christ, All were equally concerned to maintain their Religion upon a Rational Foundation. Whoever at that Time undertook the Profession of Christianity, assumed a Title and Character, which hazarded every Thing that was valuable in this Life, and even Life itself; and if any Thing can render a Rational Faith more necessary at one Season than at Others, surely these were Circumstances, which

which obliged each single Disciple, as well as the Pastors and Ministers of the Word, to prepare Themselves with proper Arguments to convince Enquirers of the Truth of their Profession; and this with Regard to the Conversion and Salvation of Unbelievers, the Confirmation of their Novices, or *Babes in Christ*, as the Apostle calls them, the Instruction and Edification of their own Families, who were to be educated in this Belief, and their own final Perseverance, even if They should be called to Martyrdom for the Faith of Christ. These were Considerations, in which Those of Private as well as Publick Character were interested, and by which Both were obliged; and in This Light I am at this Time particularly to consider it. The Nature and Consistency of a Rational Faith in itself, The Reasonableness and Necessity of promoting it by early Education and Instruction, were illustrated and vindicated in a preceding Discourse. --- The sufficient Capacity of all Mankind for a Rational Belief, The Value and Virtue of such a Faith, and The sufficient Efficacy of it to answer all the Purposes of Religion, was the Substance of the other Particulars, which remain now to be considered.

It was observed then *Thirdly*, that This Rational

tional Faith was not only calculated for Scholars and Philosophers, but for all Sorts and Degrees of Men, and that the Meanest Capacity, where Means of Information are afforded, is able to attain it. What has hitherto been said of a Rational Assent in general is now to be applied particularly to the Christian Revelation. This is the Faith, which comes enjoined by Authority, and enforced by Penalties, and which alone We are concerned to prove to be within the Reach of every One's Understanding. Whatever is said on the Insufficiency of Human Reason, on the Uncertainty of its Conjectures, the Fluctuation of its Determinations, its doubtful Discoveries in the Hand of its best Masters, and its slender Progress in the Bulk of Mankind, is, as far as it is true, of Weight on our Side, and may shew the Expediency at least, if not the Necessity, of Revelation. It may serve to reprove the vain Confidence of Those, who contend that Reason is and ever was a sufficient Guide at all Times, in all Cases, and to all Mankind, who are here confuted not only by the learned Arguments of the Defenders of Religion, not only by plain Fact and Experience, but even by the Testimony of their Unbelieving Brethren. But the Case of unassisted Reason is not the Point before Us.

The Times of that Ignorance God winked at. Where less Light was afforded, less Improvement was required, and their Defects either in Belief or Practice were neither charged with so heinous a Degree of Guilt, nor threatened with so heavy a Degree of Punishment. To relieve that Darkness and Ignorance, to enlighten the Understandings and correct the Wills of Mankind, Revelation was afforded, which, teaching by Authority, was in that very Respect of infinite Use to the low Capacities of the greater Part of them, and by reducing the Question to a single Point concerning the Evidence, and offering that in a plain Manner suited to their Capacities, has now enabled All to attain to such a *Rational Faith*, as may be a sufficient Principle of Knowledge and Enforcement of Practical Virtue. --- Of this Revealed Faith We are now to treat, which is very truly Rational, as founded on an open Examination and full Conviction of its coming from God, tho' not discoverable by All (or by Any in a perfect Degree) by the Use of their Natural Reason only. And That This is calculated for all Sorts and Degrees of Men, who can justly be called Reasonable Creatures, a very brief Review of the Understanding imparted to the Bulk of Mankind, and of the Evi-

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dence with which this Religion is supported, may sufficiently satisfy Us.

Now the Reason of common People, who are employed in the more laborious active Scenes of Life, is not either so dull and stupid, nor so quick-sighted and discerning, as Different Persons for the same End have represented it. It cannot of it self attend to and pursue those tedious and intricate Deductions, which are necessary to form and to enforce a proper Rule of Life, where a Superior Authority is wanting, but under those Helps and Assurances, which Revelation affords, It is by no means incapable of apprehending the Proofs of its Divine Original. The great Difference betwixt Mankind is owing principally and chiefly to Education. Their Capacities for Improvement are much more equal than their Means and Opportunities for it. The Prepossessions of Instruction therefore, as They are called, are so far from being Obstructions to a Rational Belief, that They are the best Preparatives for it and Assurances to it; and consequently Revelation, having made the best Provision for Instruction, has improved the Capacity of All Men for a Rational Faith. Few, We

Assistance and Information. Their Progress is usually proportionable to the Care of their Teachers, and what They could not have discovered by their own natural Sagacity, They can easily perceive to be Conclusive, when shewn the Force of it by Others. Nor is their Faith then the less Rational in them, or their Arguments for it of the less Weight, because They did not at first discern them by the Exercise of their own Faculties, but received them by Way of Instruction from their Preceptors. The Apostle did not in the Text direct his Disciples to find out their Duty of Themselves, or to improve their Notions higher than any Philosophers had yet carried them, but to *be ready always to give a Reason of the Hope that was in them*; to communicate the Arguments, which had been communicated to them, and to assign those Proofs, which had won their own Assent. To deny the Capacity of Mankind for Rational Conviction in this Method of Instruction, is to contradict Experience; To observe their small Progress or Improvement under these Methods, the little Evidence of any Rational Belief amongst the Vulgar, is sometimes Misrepresentation, and, when most true, amounts only to a Charge of Neglect: and It ought to be added, that where this Neglect is most

justly charged, where the Parents or Teachers of Religion are the most criminally careless, yet their very Living in a Christian Country, their daily unavoidable Intercourse with Christians who are better Instructed, must let them into some Knowledge of the Grounds of it; and accordingly the Meanest and most Ignorant amongst Us, have yet better Notions of God, of the Necessity of Repentance, and of the Hope of Mercy, than Many of the most celebrated ancient Philosophers; which may shew the Advantage of the lowest Degree of Instruction, beyond the highest Natural Abilities unassisted. We have an Instance of the same Benefit of Instruction to improve the slowest Capacities in those very Occupations and Professions, which employ the Time and Thoughts and Labours of this Part of the World. With what Ease and Readiness do They learn the Mysteries of a Trade, which They could never have brought to half that Perfection Themselves, and how compleatly will They enter into and execute such Arts as seem unaccountable to Others of like Capacity, who are unacquainted with them, who yet make equal Proficiency in their respective Employments? And if there be scarce an Instance of Any but what may be made capable
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of and useful in some Profession or Other (for concerning Idiots or Madmen We are not speaking) then surely It is a greater Difficulty than Any that this strange Supposition is calculated to avoid, that Those who are capable of such Rational Improvement in Other Instances, should only be incapable of it in that which is most their Concern, that which It is owned is to influence their Conduct in this Life, and to support their Hope of Another, their Notion of Religion. --- For if, from this View of their improveable Capacities, We proceed to reflect on the general Evidences of Religion, We need not scruple to affirm, that They are capable of being demonstrated to the Meanest Understanding with greater Clearness than Any of those Principles with Relation to Temporal Affairs, on which They act securely in common Life. It is not such a dry speculative abstracted Course of Argument, as may have been represented, but however Controversies and Cavils may have enlarged the Defences of Religion, the strongest Proofs of it are really the plainest, such as may be reduced to a narrow Compass and levelled to the most ordinary Capacity. Every Man may be assured of the Being of a God, by the very same Argument by which He is assured of his own. No-
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thing certainly could create it self, but Every Object upon which He casts his Eyes, testifies in some Respect the Greatness or Wisdom or Goodness of its Author. Now from this single Article, from the Relation, which We stand in to our Great Creator, follows immediately and directly the Necessity of Religious Worship. It is in the Nature of the Thing morally fit, It is in Point of Gratitude and Expectation absolutely incumbent on us, that We should thank Him for past Mercies and pray to Him for future Blessings; that We should trust in his Protection, love his Goodness, praise his Wisdom, adore his Power and obey his Commands. But the same infinite Goodness has not left even these plain Consequences merely to be reasoned out by Us, but has given us farther Evidences of our Duty even in Ourselves, has implanted in our very Nature strong Apprehensions of his Righteousness and Justice, together with clear Notions of the Distinctions of Good and Evil, and a certain Approbation of Virtuous Conduct, and Detestation of Wickedness in every Case, wherein We are Ourselves disinterested. Our Consciences presage a future Reckoning under a Righteous Governour and Judge, require of Us an Imitation of his adorable Attributes, and particularly

larly teach Us, that Justice and Charity must be his Laws to Creatures whom He has made Social and placed in Society. Thus, in the great Articles of Morality and Natural Religion, there is scarce any Room for Error in any plain unprejudiced Person, at least not in the Methods of Education before vindicated, but, under this Advantage, the Certainty of these Truths and Necessity of these Practices appears indisputable, and may serve even in more controverted Points as a certain Rule to distinguish our Maker's Will and our Duty. --- But our Obligation to obey all the Laws of our Maker being Universal, and Revelation claiming to be considered as his Law, is on that Account deserving of Examination, and upon Examination will on Account of its Truth and Evidence be found deserving of Reception. For here again the Evidences of revealed Religion are level to common Capacities, and may be judged of by the same Degree of Sense and Reason, which enables Men to judge of the Ordinary Affairs of Life. It might be previously presumed, that the Goodness of God would not leave his Creatures uninformed in the great Rules of Duty and Motives of Encouragement, and that our Reason unassisted is insufficient to these Purposes, is a Matter of

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Fact rather than of Argument: And if This Method of Reasoning be thought equally conclusive for the Universality of Revelation, It may be observed, that the Mercies of God are in no Instance equally conferred on All; that It is more reconcileable to our Notions of his Goodness, to believe, that He has afforded this Blessing to Some rather than to None; and that in Reality the Means of Revelation have been almost Universal, tho' the Iniquity and Criminal Neglect of Mankind have defeated the Effect; and It was never the Intent of Providence necessarily to overrule the Liberty of Free Agents either in Matters of Faith or Practice. But if there were not these preparatory Grounds to expect a Revelation, the positive Proofs of it are clear, obvious and sufficient. The Reasonableness of the Doctrines therein delivered, The Excellency of the Precepts thereby enjoined, are in themselves a strong Proof of its Divine Original. The Meanest Capacity can judge of this, can see that Laws so Holy and Just and Good are genuine Copies of their Maker's Will, and worthy that Heaven from whence They claim their Descent. With Regard particularly to the Precepts of Christianity, This is so Evident, that there are Some, who pretend to receive it merely on this Authority,

thority, who distinguish Themselves by the new
 Title of Christian Deists, as pretending to em-
 brace the Gospel solely because of its Rea-
 sonable and Moral Fitness, rejecting all the ex-
 ternal Evidence on which It is founded. And
 tho' This Disguise is too thin to impose on the
 lowest Understanding, and was probably scarce
 intended as a Cloak to their Infidelity, but as
 a more plausible Method of attacking all Re-
 velation; tho' the Authors of it desire not, I
 suppose, to be suspected of being Christians,
 and it is impossible, that They should really be-
 lieve the new Testament, who reject and vilify
 the Old, yet This is however a strong Acknow-
 ledgment of the Reasonableness of the Moral
 Precepts of Christianity, a Testimony from an
 Enemy of their Excellency, Truth and Usefulness.
 With Regard farther to the Doctrines
 peculiar to Christianity, tho' They were not
 discoverable by Reason, yet They are perfectly
 suitable to it, and clear up many Difficulties,
 in which the thinking Men amongst the Hea-
 thens were involved. Nay the Foundation
 even of these Doctrines may I think be said
 to be discernible in Ourselves. Our own Hearts
 may shew Us the Want of a Saviour, may te-
 stify the Imperfection of our best Actions, and
 the Inexcusableness of our many bad ones,

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which according to our natural Notions of Justice and Equity seem to require some Satisfaction and Atonement. Now here the Gospel opens to Us a comfortable and consistent Scheme of Divine Goodness, instructs Us how Mercy and Justice were reconciled, that Pardon might be extended to the Reformed without derogating from the Authority of the Divine Laws; and that, tho' Sin was hereby rendered more exceeding Sinful, yet Penitent Sinners might be admitted to Forgiveness and Happiness. Nor are the main Points of the external *Evidence* of Christianity less easy to be distinguished and cleared. A Man that lays Claim to a Commission from Heaven to instruct Mankind, and teaches Doctrines worthy of God and useful to Men, that confirms that Claim by working Miracles in many Instances plainly supernatural, makes even those Miracles charitable and beneficial, and offers them freely to Publick Examination, persists in this good and miraculous Conduct thro' his Life and at length offers up that Life in Confirmation of all his foregoing Pretensions, offers Evidence, One would think, almost irresistible and incapable however of any rational Answer or Evasion. God Almighty undoubtedly would not lend his Power to confirm a Lye, nor the De

wil assist in supporting the Cause of Piety and
 Virtue. --- But farther, if a Person, who had
 thus laid down his Life in Vindication of his
 Truth and Faithfulness, should likewise speedi-
 ly take it again by his own Divine Power,
 should select Disciples to publish his Religion,
 and enable them to preach the same Doctrine
 in the same miraculous Manner; if They should
 attest publickly his Resurrection by every Mark
 of Truth and Sincerity, which can be affixed
 to a just Evidence, should in Pursuance of his
 Command disperse Themselves over the World,
 every where agreeing in the same Account,
 giving up every View in Life to confirm their
 Testimony, and unmoved by all the Terrors of
 Death. If in Consequence of this Testimony
 They should inculcate the same Righteous Pre-
 cepts, and command the Powers of Heaven
 and Earth to bear Witnesses to their Doctrine
 in Signs and Wonders and miraculous Gifts;
 if thus uninfluenced by any Motive but the
 Love of Truth, and unassisted by any Advantage
 but the Force and Evidence of it, They should
 at length prevail, and establish their Religion,
 tho' They lost their Lives, All This must be-
 yond Controversy manifest the Truth of these
 Pretensions; which is still farther confirmed by
 the Conversion of Those, who could not be

convinced but by undeniable Evidence, and would have avoided the Conviction, if possible. But farther yet, if All this was foretold, when It could not be foreseen but by Divine Inspiration, If many minute Circumstances relating to the Time of the Appearance of the Author of this Religion, his Parentage and Birth, Doctrines and Practices, Life and Death, were distinctly predicted and punctually fulfilled in the Event, If This whole Scheme of our Salvation was gradually revealed from the Original Occasion of the Necessity of it in the Fall of our First Parents, and was prefigured both in the Patriarchal and Jewish Dispensations, in the Sacrifices under the former, and the numerous Ceremonies of the latter; If lastly Every such significant Rite was truly compleated in the Life or the Doctrine of our Saviour, then to whatever Cause Infidelity may be owing, yet It is not to the Want of plain Evidence, suited to the Capacity of the Meanest of Mankind. Other Arguments may be brought, and have been brought by Great and Good Men, for the Confirmation of our Religion; but It is not necessary to a Rational Faith, that Every One must know Every Thing, which has been said in Defence of it; and in Truth These, which are the most usual and obvious

Proofs

Proofs of it, are likewise the most convincing and least liable to Evasion. Objections indeed may be raised against each several Part of it, and so there might against Demonstration itself, but They are capable of a very sufficient Reply, as has appeared upon every Trial; and Those, who are capable of comprehending a Difficulty, may We hope comprehend a Solution also. On this Account several long and laboured Defences have appeared, which had not otherwise been necessary, as One in particular of a very convincing Kind, which, by shewing that the same Objections which are made against our Holy Faith, would in every Instance lie equally strong against the Constitution of Nature, has driven the Objectors to their true and only Refuge, That of Atheism, and has demonstrated the Inconsistency of all these Cavils when proceeding from a professed Deist. Such Discoveries as These are of singular Use for the Satisfaction of Those, who have had their Minds distracted with the frequent Discourse or Writings of Unbelievers, but are not requisite to the Establishment of a Rational Faith in Those, whose Practical Employment has placed Them out of the Way of such abstracted Speculations; who having justly acquiesced in a View of the Reasonableness of the

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the Doctrine taught, the Purity of the Precepts enjoined, and the farther Confirmation of them by Miracles and Prophecies, are sufficiently qualified to *give a Reason of the Hope that is in them*, tho' They are not able to give an Account of all the Controversies that have been raised upon the Subject. The Objections to the main Points of this Evidence lie out of the Road of all common Sense and common Understanding. No plain sensible Man would ever have found out, that Morality itself was groundless, that the Distinctions of Virtue and Vice, of Good and Evil, were imaginary, and Nothing more than the Creatures of Policy; that those Practices, which have the hateful Name of Vice affixed to Them, are not only Innocent but Useful and Necessary to the Support and Welfare of Society; that, as to outward Evidence, Facts contrary to the Course of Nature are absolutely impossible, and Predictions, however exactly accomplished, no better than lucky Guesses, which prove Nothing; that Human Testimony can deserve no Credit, because of its Fallibility, this Possibility of Error being an Answer to all the most certain Assurances of Truth; that History of past Facts however attested, is still more precarious, as being indeed only an Uncertain Hearsay, deserving

serving of no other Attention than what our Curiosity may afford it; that Inspiration is in its own Nature absurd and impossible; that Revelation is incapable of being communicated, and that the very Supposition of Various Dispensations would be a Reflection on the Divine Immutability. --- These I say are Observations, which would never have offered of themselves to disturb the Rational Belief of the Generality of Mankind. These Noble Discoveries have been offered as Arguments of the Superior Genius of the Authors of them, and indeed We own They do not lie level to the Common Apprehension of Mankind. The Misfortune is, that They are contradicted likewise by other Advocates of Infidelity, who would be unwilling to be thought of less Superiour Reach of Understanding, who have endeavoured to serve the Glorious Cause in another Method and Course of Argument, and have overthrown this whole Set of Principles, which Some had thought so formidable to Religion. By These we are taught that the Rules of Truth and Virtue are so clear and indelible, that They cannot be overlooked or mistaken, that Virtue is in itself so amiable that It needs no outward Enforcement, nor Any Thing but its own intrinsic Beauty and Suitableness to our Moral Taste

Taste to recommend and support it ; that, allowing the Possibility of Revelation, the Credibility of History, and the Sufficiency of Miracles and Prophecies, when well attested, to confirm it, yet in this Case They are not applicable, for that Fraud and Imposture might occasion the Attestation of the Disciples of Jesus, tho' They acted indeed in a Manner unusual with Deceivers, and sacrificed all their Interests in this Life and all their Hopes in another, for the Sake of an useless unprofitable Falshood ; or Enthusiasm might work Wonders and Miracles, and be the Foundation of this rational and consistent Scheme of Religion. Whichever of these contradictory Principles of Unbelief be thought of most Weight, 'tis plain at first View, that there are Difficulties in both of them much greater than in the Faith of Christians ; that They contain Paradoxes abhorrent to Human Reason, and such as None, who were guided by the common Principles of it could have been in Danger of falling into ; that, however acutely urged, They betray a great Moral Blindness, and may shew that the greatest Capacities do not always judge best in Matters of Religion ; the Examination of Controversies may and will confirm all Impartial Persons in the Belief of our Religion when

when They see what Absurdities its Wisest Opponents are driven to, to evade the Evidence of it; but this Knowledge of the Objections to it is not in itself necessary to a Rational Belief. The plainest Understanding, as was before observed, is able to judge of the plain Evidence of Religion, and in one Respect best able, as It is less liable to be influenced by the Affectation of peculiar Notions and new Discoveries. --- And This very Observation will properly lead Us to the next Point which I proposed to consider, namely

That a Rational Faith is therefore a proper Matter of Probation, justly to be required under Penalties, and suitably to be inserted in our Petitions to our Maker. --- Conscience and Belief are represented as Articles which have not the least Connection with Each Other. The Understanding, it is said, is necessarily determined by the Evidence as it appears; and as the Assent therefore is not voluntary, It must be incapable of any Imputation of Virtue or Demerit. Some have carried the same Kind of Argument a little farther, and urged it as conclusive against any Freedom of the Will, for that it is necessarily determined by the last Judgment of the Understanding; and thus there is an End at once of all Religion and Virtue,

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since We are deprived of all Liberty either in our Thoughts or Actions. But as Rising and Walking was the shortest and easiest Confutation of all the Philosophers Arguments against the Possibility of Motion, so the Power of Choice, which We All experience and daily exercise in our Conduct, is the clearest Answer to all the speculative Difficulties, that are raised concerning Human Liberty; and particularly how much We are influenced in our Opinions by our Inclinations, is obvious even to Proverbial Observation. --- Let Us first then briefly look into Fact, and observe how clearly the supposed Strength of this Objection is disproved by plain Experience. If there was no Possibility of Choice in the Nature of Belief, if the Understanding was always necessarily determined by the Appearance of the Evidence, and That Appearance was necessary likewise (otherwise it affects not the present Question) then where the Evidence was offered openly and publickly to All with equal Clearness, and where there is an equal Degree of Capacity to apprehend it, there the Result would certainly be in All the Same, and an Universal Assent or Disbelief would ensue. This must unavoidably be the Consequence, if the Evidence did of Necessity force the Judgment

for if It was insufficient, It must equally appear to be so to All of Equal Abilities; If satisfactory, It must extort the Same Assent from All of like Capacity. But the Event We see is very far otherwise. Men, who are in every other Respect entirely on the Level, are greatly divided in their Judgment on the Evidence of Religion; which is a strong Presumption, I may say a strict Demonstration, that the Judgments of Some of them are influenced by Something else than the Appearance of the Evidence. It is owned on the One Side, that there have of late arisen Some very able Advocates for Religion, who have offered some very masterly Performances in Defence of it, and have managed the Evidence of it so advantageously, that in the End It has amounted to a convincing Demonstration: (tho' the Intent of this Acknowledgment was only to argue the Incapacity of the Vulgar for such argumentative Views of it) and It must likewise be owned on the Other, that there are too many Persons of sufficient Abilities and Reach of Understanding engaged in the Opposition; from whence this Conclusion however may be drawn, that Faith is no such involuntary necessary Result from the Appearance of the Evidence; for when All, who are so well qualified to judge,

would judge alike, where the Grounds of Religion are so openly and freely examined, as They are amongst Us. --- But, in Truth, This Case of the Freedom of Assent, and the Consequent Virtue of a Right and Blameableness of a Wrong Belief, is, when clearly represented, void of all Difficulty. To say, that It is necessarily determined according as the Evidence appears conclusive, or not, is playing with Words, and is no Other than Saying, that It cannot judge otherwise than It does then actually judge, that is, It cannot give and refuse its Assent to the same Thing at the same Time. It is like the forementioned Argument against Freedom of Will from its being determined by the last Judgment of the Understanding; whereas this final Determination of the Judgment to chuse or not to chuse is plainly the very Act of Volition, and the Whole amounts to no more, than that a Man cannot choose otherwise than He does, on Supposition He actually makes this Choice. Thus likewise our Judgment of the Force of the Evidence is the very Act itself of our Assent or Dissent, and to say, that This is necessarily determined, as That appears to Us, is only Saying, that We cannot judge otherwise than We do, on Supposition that We make this Judgment. --- But
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if our Judgment of the Evidence does depend entirely on our free Use of the proper Means to form a Right Judgment, then a Criminal Disregard to all Obligations, or Vicious Prejudices in our Enquiry into the Nature and Extent of them, may possibly be the Foundation of a very false Judgment or Assent, which in this Case must justly bear the same Imputation. Now the very Nature of a Rational Faith may shew Us, that This is and must be the Case. The Arguments, which are offered to assure Us of the Truth of Religion, can be convincing to Us only by the Application of them to our own Understandings. If no such Application is made, the Whole of the Evidence, however demonstrative, must be entirely lost; If It be made partially, We shall see just so much of the Force of it, as our own Inclinations lead Us to look into; In both Cases, We shall judge indeed as the Evidence appears, but that It does not appear in all its commanding Strength, sufficient to extort and establish a Right Faith, is plainly our own Fault, and the Error can have no Claim to the Excuse of being involuntary. There is not any Thing in the World that We have a freer Use of our Faculties in, than in such an Enquiry into the Evidences of God's Will and our Duty. We may
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or may not be diligent in this important Examination; we may or may not be honest in comparing the Evidences, or admitting the Whole Weight of it on that Side, which We may have private Reasons to wish might prove least conclusive; We may or may not be rash in judging from a single Difficulty, which at first Sight appears Insuperable, without waiting for the proper Solution of it; or We may come with or without the presumptuous Expectation of having the Whole Schemes of Infinite Wisdom made plain to our Narrow Capacity, and cleared from every Difficulty; Which Expectation can only open the Way to Universal Scepticism. In All these Cases our Determination will end according to the Disposition We begin and proceed with, and our Faith will be blameable or Virtuous, as the Motives and Means were Good or Bad, which occasioned this Assent. The Whole of this Doctrine concerning the Virtue of Believing proceeds upon this Supposition; that there is Evidence sufficient to satisfy every sincere impartial Person, who proceeds with that Fidelity and Care, which are apparently due to an Enquiry so important as that which relates to the Will of his Maker: If this Supposition be allowed, the Difficulty is at an End; for It is plain, that a Man by
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the due Use of his Faculties, which is in his own Power, and by the Exercise of those Virtues and Discharge of those Duties; which are unquestionably binding, may attain to a right Faith as far as it is necessary to Him; and is justly accountable for his Iniquity and the Abuse of his Talents, if he do not. If the Supposition itself be disputed, We are ever ready to join Issue upon it; but then the present Question is given up, and a proper Enquiry will follow into the Merits of the Cause, which, when fairly conducted, will ever turn to the Advantage of Christianity. Such Enquiry will set the Evidence of it in so fair a Light, as will open the Eyes of all Mankind, who are not blinded by some wilful Degree of Darkeness; who either do not entirely avoid the Sight, or cast an oblique Reflection on it, or view it thro' some Mist or unclear Medium; that is, who do not totally disregard it, or partially examine it, or are not clouded by the Veil of Prejudice. --- As to the frequent Professions of the Sincerity of Unbelievers, who declare They have faithfully and impartially examined, and yet are not satisfied, We are not obliged to account for these. There are very many false Pretensions in the World, and where there is no fraudulent Design of Imposing upon Others, there

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is often much Criminal Self-Deceit in our own Hearts, which may possibly so blind Us, as to make Us insensible of the Wilfulness of our own Errors, which nevertheless are not on that Account Innocent ; but this Whole Case is in the Hands of God the Searcher of Hearts, who will fully reveal them to Themselves and Others at the last Day. --- And since by Him the Case is finally to be determined, let Us view it at present more particularly with Respect to Him. Now whatever Doubts and Disputes We may raise on this Subject, yet the Author of our Nature, and of the Revelation afforded for the Guidance of our Conduct, best knows the just Strength of Both. He knows the Extent of our Capacities, and the Sufficiency of the Evidence which He has afforded for our Conviction, and, in requiring Belief of Us, has required Nothing more than such dutiful Attention to the Nature and the Attestation of his Laws, as will not fail to end in our compleat Satisfaction. Thus Conviction may be ensured, tho' Examination be allowed and Men may be invited to judge freely, and yet a Right Determination be expected and required of them ; and that for this plain Reason, because such a fair Examination, free from all Passion or other vicious Prejudice, will certainly

tainly lead them to so plain and easy a Discovery. --- For the same Reason the Restraints of Threats in this Case, and the Danger of wrong Decisions, are very consistent with a Rational Faith; because the Event does plainly depend upon the Sincerity of our own Proceedings. The Enforcement of that Law, which requires Belief by Terrors, has Nothing peculiar in it, which can arise to an Objection in this, more than in the Case of any other Law, which commands Something within our own Power; nay, what there is peculiar in the Case, may be urged more strongly in Favour of the Penalty here assigned, since the Importance of this Precept requires a suitable Enforcement. The Goodness of our Practice must depend on the Purity of our Faith. An honest Enquiry into the Will of God must be the Foundation of a Right Obedience, and This, as being the Basis of the Whole, must be of more Consequence than any single Practical Duty, and justly deserve even a stronger Penal Sanction. For the same Reason again, This may very properly be made the Subject Matter of our Devotions, and We may very consistently pray for the Increase or Perseverance of our Faith, so Rational, since the Success of it, as such, depends on the free and proper Use of our

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own Reason. This is so far from an Objection, that It is in itself, without the Christian Doctrine of cooperating Grace, a proper Ground of Application to our Maker, and is just as Reasonable as praying, that We may be Humble, Diligent, Temperate and Faithful. It is as proper in this as in all other Cases, wherein our own honest Labours and Endeavours are necessary: And This is even an Article of Natural Religion, and may be argued from the Relation which a Creature stands in to his Creator, even to their Satisfaction, who are to be convinced by Nothing but the Reason and Fitness of Things. I proceed therefore to

The Last Point, which I proposed to consider, namely, that This Rational Faith is sufficient to answer all the Ends of Religion, such as Unity of Opinion amongst its Members, and Personal Amendment in Each Individual.

It has been before observed, that our Faith is not the less Rational, because the Articles of it were not originally of our own Discovery, but were communicated to Us and confirmed to Us by Arguments sufficient to convince our Understandings: and on this plain Distinction depends the Determination of this Part of the Subject. Were We to have reasoned out the Whole System of our Duty by our Natural
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Light only, and been obliged to find it, the Objection had been plausible, that it could not be expected, that in this Method We should ever be brought to think alike, or could attain to such an Unity of Faith, as might be the Foundation of United Publick Worship. But when the One great Point of our Enquiry is That only concerning the Evidence of those revealed Truths which are offered for our Instruction, upon our Examination of this One Article and Acknowledgment of the Sufficiency of it, the Authority of the Whole stands unquestionably confirmed; and All particular Doctrines and Precepts are received by Us without Hesitation, as coming immediately from the Author of Nature and God of Truth. Upon this Principle our Assent to them is strictly Rational; and This is plainly a more short, more easy, and more certain Method of arriving at the Knowledge of Truth, than by any Delineation of the Religion of Nature by each Particular Person. Thus Unity of Belief in all necessary Points may reasonably be expected from those, who upon proper Conviction acknowledge the same Revelation, and much more a written Revelation, as the common Rule of their Faith; because all necessary Articles are delivered therein with a Clearness answerable

to their Importance. In this Sense even *common Standard Creeds may be the Effects of Private Reasoning*, as being plain Summaries of the Doctrine contained in that Book, of whose Divine Authority Every One has or may have Evidence sufficient for the Conviction of his own Understanding. If indeed by Private Reasoning was meant Each Man's separate Arguings upon the Stock of his own Natural Abilities, This Effect of one Uniform Belief would be an Impossibility; but All that can be said upon this Subject concerning the Uncertainty of such Philosophical Determinations, the precarious Conclusions and frequent Variations, is foreign to the Point before Us, and proves only what We cannot too often be reminded of, the Blessing, which We enjoy in a Revealed Religion, and the Ingratitude and Insensibility to their own Interest of Those who reject it. But It is sufficient to answer the Direction in the Text, of *giving a Reason of the Hope that is in them*, if They are able to assign proper Grounds of their Acknowledgment of the Divine Authority of Revelation, by which the Truth of all the Contents of it is at once unanswerably confirmed. And from hence will follow amongst the Professors of this Religion, not perhaps an exa

Conformity of Opinion in every Point, but such an Uniformity of Belief in the Essential Articles of it, as will be a sufficient Foundation for Religious Union and Communion. The Fundamentals of Christianity are on All Sides acknowledged to be few, plain and easy; and even Those, who have carried the Notion of Them to the highest Extent, do yet distinguish justly betwixt such Points, as may be essential to the Scheme of our Salvation in itself, and such as may be necessary to the Salvation of particular Persons. That Some of these clearest most fundamental Articles are sometimes rejected, is no more an Objection against their Truth or Perspicuity, than It is against the Evidence of this Religion itself, that the Whole of its Authority is denied and ridiculed by Others. That Some, for Instance, in Doctrine, oppose the Satisfaction made by Christ to the Divine Justice for the Sins of the World, which the Scriptures in repeated Passages and great Variety of Phrases do clearly assert; and on which the very Nature and Notion of our Redemption depend; that Others in Practice have set aside those authoritative Institutions which were ordained by Christ Himself as the only Means of entitling Us to the Benefit of his Covenant, can be accounted for in no other

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Way than the Possibility and the Progress of Infidelity itself. It only shews how much, notwithstanding all Objections, Men's Faith is in their own Power, that no Proofs of this Nature can extort Assent, but that, let the Evidence be never so conclusive and demonstrative in itself, It may however be evaded and rejected. It is sufficient to establish and vindicate a Rational Faith and the Unity proposed to be effected by it, that there is Evidence enough to convince every Impartial Mind both of the Authority of the Revelation, and of every Article which It teaches as really necessary to Salvation; and where the Examination is made with the Fidelity due to Religious Enquiries, there will, in these Essential Points at least, be no Danger of an erroneous Determination.

And as such a Rational Faith will be sufficient to establish an Unity of Belief amongst the Professors of it, as far as such Unity is indispensably requisite, so will it also be sufficient to answer the other great End of Religion, to influence each private Believer to a true, faithful and virtuous Conduct. That in very many Instances It fails of its proper Effect, is to be attributed to the Neglect and criminal Abuse of the Professors; but We are only concerned to shew, that it is well calculated to influence the Determination

nation of a Moral Agent, and that It will have its Weight with every Wise Man who is guided by Reason, or affected by Gratitude, or moved by the most important Hopes or Fears. Indeed, as was before observed, if a Rational Faith implied such Motives only as Each private Person would, without any Assistance or Information, be able to argue out of Himself, One might plausibly declaim upon the small Effects that It would have in Life, not only on Account of the slender Progress of it amongst the Bulk of Mankind, but thro' the Want of sufficient Sanctions, where these Reasonings were carried to the best Perfection. The Distinction of Good and Evil, the bare Discernment of Right and Wrong, would scarce have sufficient Weight amongst the Necessities and Temptations of the World; and, however warm the contemplative Philosopher might be, whilst actually engaged in his abstracted Speculations, yet when He came out into Life, and found Virtue on the suffering Side, when He must cross his Passions, sacrifice his Interests, deny his Appetites, and perhaps forfeit his Reputation, if He will adhere to the Path which his Reason approves, 'tis easy to see that He will stand in need of some better Support, to establish his Conduct and crown it with Perseverance.

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But All This is only a Reflection on the Insufficiency of Philosophy, but is not applicable to Those, who acknowledge a Divine Revelation, and believe that their Duty is enforced by the Sanction of Eternal Rewards and Punishments. For if Reason alone be not sufficient to command our Passions, yet a Faith, which is founded on a Rational View of the Evidence of its Divine Original, may have greater Weight; as This represents the Case in a much higher Light, and presents Us with such Motives to the Discharge of our Duty, that upon the Consideration of Them every Temptation vanishes into Nothing: As our Belief is hereby much extended, our Practice appears suitably of greater Importance; and He who believes that the Eternal Son of God condescended to endure the general Infirmities of Human Nature, and the peculiar Miseries of an afflicted and persecuted State, concluded by the painful and shameful Death of Crucifixion; that He endured all this, only to render our Transgressions capable of Forgiveness, and to entitle Us to Glory and Felicity; and that He has required of Us a Life of Piety and Virtue, as the indispensable Condition of receiving Benefit from his Merits, and obtaining this Title to Pardon and Happiness; He, I say, who ac-
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knowledges this Method and Mystery of Mercy, lies under Obligations superior to all Difficulties, and is supported by every Motive, which ought or which can influence a Reasonable Creature. 'Tis true even this Faith will not enable Us to work Miracles, nor was it ever designed that It should. There was indeed a Peculiar Promise of this Kind made to Those, who were to be the First Witnesses of the Gospel, to enable Them to propagate it with Success; but This was Part of the Supernatural Evidence of their Faith, not a Natural Effect of it. It is sufficient, that It will raise Us to each practicable Degree of Virtue, and afford Us such Strength and Consolation in all Trials and Distresses, as no other Principle can equal. Complacency and Satisfaction of Mind even in the worst Circumstances are the Peculiar Privileges of this Rational Faith, the Constant Support of Those, who can *give a Reason of the Hope that is in them.* The Philosopher might be at a Loss, for the Reasons before given, when He should most need Comfort; but the Christian can always with Readiness and Joy remember in whom He has trusted. To instance in the most difficult Case, that can be put upon this Question, the Case of Martyrdom, even here that a Rational Faith is sufficient to enable Men to go through it, is confirmed by plain

Experience. Not to mention the Noble Army of Primitive Martyrs, our First Reformers submitted to Blood upon a Rational Belief: They went against the Prejudices of their Education. They were converted by Argument from their former Opinions, neither was the Question concerning the Authority of Christianity itself, but the Truth of Some of its particular Doctrines. Yet for these only did They lay down their Lives, and that with very aggravating Circumstances of Horror. The greater Importance of their future Interest overballanced the present Terrors, and whatever is said to the contrary may be confuted by Fact in a View of their Sufferings. The Instance is the more Remarkable, as It is the very Case of Conversion, and shews that the Alteration of a Man's First Notions does not immediately lead him to an Indifference to All Opinions whatsoever. The Common Observation is, We know, on the other Side, that Converts are apt to be most zealous, as indeed Who should be more in Earnest than Those, who are satisfied They have embraced the Truth, not by Prejudice, but by Personal Enquiry and serious Conviction? It would be strange to think, that a Rational Faith should in its own Nature be too cold a Principle of Action in Rational Creatures; or that Those,

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who upon Examination best know that their Religion is well founded, should be therefore the least Zealous in its Favour. The Truth is, the little Effect which We see of so powerful a Principle of Piety and Virtue, as our Holy Religion, is owing to this very Cause, that Men do not examine it so much as They ought; that They bestow their Thoughts less on Religion than on any other Subject, and that They do not attend to it with that Diligence and Impartiality, which the Importance of it plainly deserves. Where it is rationally and faithfully attended to, It has better Influence; and the World, God be thanked, is not yet with all its Degeneracy without some Glorious Instances of the Spirit of Christianity, such as shew the great and good Effects of a Rational Faith; such as shew the Excellency of it in itself and its Usefulness to the World, and by a plain practical Proof give a strong presumptive Argument of the Divine Commission of their Master. May the Numbers of such Professors daily increase, who by their Lives as well as Arguments illustrate the Foundation of their Faith, the Heavenly Authority of the Religion that influences them.

The Result of all that has been offered, with Regard both to Faith and Practice, is briefly This; that We defend this Direction of the

Apostle against all Adversaries whatsoever, and justify a free Enquiry into the Foundation and the Doctrines of Religion, as our best Preservative both from Infidelity and Superstition; that, by a fair and faithful Attention and Examination, the Evidences of our Faith may shine upon Us in their due Strength, and We may at the same Time and by the same Method be delivered from those Extravagancies of Enthusiasm, which have given an Handle to the Common Enemy to misrepresent and ridicule the Whole; that, in our Conduct, We take the same faithful Care to do Justice to our Belief, that We may not disparage the Force of so noble an Argument of its Truth and Usefulness, as is drawn from its Tendency to reform and amend the Practice of Mankind. If our Life be but answerable to our Faith, Its Evidence will be next to irresistible, and the Divine Original of it will be clearly visible in the Fruits which It produces. Thus fulfilling the true Design of our own Faith, We may recover Others to the Acknowledgment of it; and by Both answer the End of our Probation, carry on the Designs of Providence, and become Instrumental to the Everlasting Happiness of Ourselves and our Fellow-Creatures.