
THE
BRITISH CRITIC,

For MARCH, 1800.

Pluribus quippe adminiculis opus est, ad tuendam pretiosæ supellectilis varietatem. BOETHIUS.

Where a great variety of valuable objects is to be brought forward, the co-operation of many hands must be required.

ART. I. *Geological Essays.* By Richard Kirwan, Esq.
F. R. SS. Lond. et Edin. M. R. I. A. &c. 8vo. 502 pp.
gs. Bremner, Strand. 1799.

THE merits of Mr. Kirwan are so generally known to the learned, not only of this country but of all Europe, that it would be superfluous to speak of his reputation in science, or of the various works by which it has been established. Eminently skilled in chemistry, mineralogy, and natural philosophy, he may be said to be possessed of three of the principal avenues which lead to the sacred cells in which the archives of the earth lie concealed. Prepared by study, and a love of truth, and matured by age and experience, he ought to be capable of taking a calm, dispassionate, and clear view of the wonders which this earthy treasure contains, and of explaining the great and mysterious documents which Nature presents to his research.

They who know Mr. K. best will allow, that, with a mind stored with useful information, which displays itself in a happy
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tions before. On the whole, however, we consider this Poem as a valuable production, enriched with all that history and antiquarianism, a learned taste, and a luxuriant fancy, can throw over so contracted, yet so pleasing a subject.

ART. X. *Modern Infidelity considered; with Respect to its Influence on Society. A Sermon, preached at the Baptist Meeting, Cambridge. By Robert Hall, A. M. Second Edition.* 8vo. 81 pp. 2s. Deighton, Cambridge; Button, London. 1800.

IT cannot now be necessary to inform our readers, that we are from conviction zealously attached to the Church of England; but we have also given sufficient proofs, that we are never disposed to withhold from members of other Christian Communions that praise which their exertions for our common Christianity may deserve. Our conviction is proportioned to the certainty of doctrines, but our zeal to their importance. We believe the opinions of the English Church to be those of the Gospel, and we think her system of government and worship agreeable to the spirit of the primitive ages, and conducive to good order, piety, and virtue. But we are extremely solicitous to convince those Christian sects which dissent from that Church, that the zeal of her children is not intolerant, nor even uncharitable. Most heartily therefore do we agree with the author of this admirable Sermon, in his truly Christian Prayer.

“May it please God so to dispose the minds of Christians of every visible church and community, that *Ephraim no longer vexing Judah, nor Judah Ephraim*, the only rivalry felt in future may be who shall most advance the interests of our common Christianity, and *the only provocation sustained that of provoking each other to love and good works.*”
Pref. p. vi.

Certainly there never has been a time since the first revelation of the Gospel, in which the union of all Christians was more necessary against the enemies of humanity and religion than the present, when, as Mr. Hall very justly observes,

“To obliterate all sense of religion, of moral sanctions, and a future world, and by these means to prepare the way for the total subversion of every institution, both social and religious, which men have hitherto been accustomed to revere, is evidently the principal object of modern sceptics, *the first Sophists who have avowed an attempt to govern*
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the world without inculcating the persuasion of a superior power.*" Pref. p. iv.

Against this infernal conspiracy to rob mankind of their only sure guide in life, and of their sole consolation in death, Mr. Hall has taken up arms, and in this most righteous warfare he has fought with weapons that are both bright and keen; with vigorous reason, and with splendid eloquence; with that ardent zeal which becomes a Christian, "*contending for the faith once delivered to the Saints.*" The masters of those Sophists who have in our days deluged Europe with blood, and filled the world with the renown of their atrocities, surpassing all former Infidels in effrontery, and resolved to be as unparalleled in the extravagance of their speculations, as they confessedly are in the enormity of their crimes, made it the leading principle of their new system of blasphemy and murder, that religion is *pernicious to society*; that a belief in the government of the universe by infinite goodness, is unfriendly to virtue; and an expectation of the future punishment of all impenitent guilt, an encouragement to immorality. A desire to set men free from those restraints which make them unfit to be the blind instruments of atrocious ambition, was doubtless the real motive for the propagation of these detestable and self-refuted paradoxes. These Sophists have, in truth, done the most signal homage to Christianity. They have confessed by their conduct, that it was impossible to destroy all morality and humanity in the human heart without first destroying religion. They perceived that Christianity guarded the quiet of states, which they conspired to subvert; that it prescribed the obedience of subjects, whom they were to enslave into rebellion; that it inspired them with an abhorrence for robbery and murder, which are the most effectual instruments, and the ultimate objects of their policy. They knew that such a system as theirs could never be successful so long as mens' morals were guarded by religion. Against religion, therefore, they have proclaimed eternal war.

Against their monstrous position, that religion is pernicious, the Sermon before us is directly aimed. The author observes, very justly, that the truths of natural religion have been so completely demonstrated upon philosophical principles, and the evidences of Revelation so fully laid open, that it is not easy to add to what has been said on these important subjects, though it be useful to repeat it, and to inculcate it under various forms. He therefore confines himself to the practical influ-

* What the author says, in p. 5, about literary men, is clearly confined to those who live by the use or *abuse* of the pen.

ence of irreligion ; which indeed may be read in such legible characters, in the history of the French Revolution, that it scarcely requires any other illustration than an appeal to the progress and result of that profligate and terrible experiment. Mr. Hall gives a clear and concise exposition of the arguments which demonstrate the existence of the infinitely perfect Creator and Governor of the universe, which he concludes by observing :

“ Such are the proofs of the existence of that great and glorious being whom we denominate God, and it is not presumption to say, it is impossible to find another truth in the whole compass of morals which, according to the justest laws of reasoning, admits of such strict and rigorous demonstration.” P. 9.

He proceeds to show, that every scheme of morality, confined within the boundaries of the present life, must necessarily be imperfect, because many occasions occur in which, according to such schemes, our duty must be at variance with our interest ; a difficulty, from which no merely human morality can ever extricate its followers. He then displays the effect of impiety on the temper and character. This part of the Sermon peculiarly abounds with ingenious, solid, and most valuable observations. The author evinces a deep insight into the intricacies of the human constitution ; and he traverses, with a firm step, several paths of reflection untrodden by former speculators. After having proved that Atheism destroys all *moral taste*, by banishing the only true model of perfection from the universe ; and, by stripping virtue of her dignity, destroys the principles which alone can animate men in arduous and perilous acts of duty, he goes on to prove that modern infidelity is the nursing mother of the three greatest vices that vex the world ; overweening vanity, relentless ferocity, and unbridled sensuality.

His arguments on the subject of vanity appear to us to be of singular importance. They may indeed be considered as a luminous commentary on the admirable observations of Mr. Burke, in his character of Rousseau. Mr. Burke had there observed, that vanity, which in its ordinary state is only a ridiculous frailty, when it is expanded to a great size, and when it acts on a large theatre, becomes one of the most monstrous of all vices, and the fruitful parent of all others. “ Christian humility,” said that great philosopher, “ is the low but deep and firm foundation of all real virtue.” These truths are ably unfolded by Mr. Hall. After explaining, very justly and clearly, how disappointed vanity degenerates into envy, and even misanthropy,

anthropy, he thus contrasts the feelings of the good and of the vain man.

“ The truly good man is jealous over himself, lest the notoriety of his best actions, by blending itself with their motive, should diminish their value; the vain man performs the same actions, for the sake of that notoriety. The good man quietly discharges his duty, and shuns ostentation; the vain man considers every good deed lost that is not publicly displayed. The one is intent upon realities, the other upon semblances: the one aims to *be* virtuous, the other to *appear* so.” P. 29.

The observation which immediately follows, on the effect of vanity upon the speculative powers, is so frequently exemplified, in this age of pretended discovery, and daring paradox, that nothing can be more useful than the just reprehension it conveys.

“ Nor is a mind inflated with vanity more disqualified for right action than just speculation; or better disposed to the pursuit of truth than the practice of virtue. To such a mind, *the simplicity of truth is disgusting*. Careless of the improvement of mankind, and intent only upon astonishing them with the appearance of novelty, the glare of paradox will be preferred to the light of truth; opinions will be embraced, not because they are just, but because they are new: the more flagitious, the more subversive of morals, the more alarming to the wise and good, the more welcome to men who estimate their literary powers by the mischief thus produced, and who consider the degree of anxiety and terror they impress as the measure of their renown. Truth is simple and uniform, while error may be infinitely varied; and as it is one thing to start paradoxes, and another to make discoveries, we need the less wonder at the prodigious increase of modern philosophers.” P. 30.

The application of the author's reasonings on this subject, to the follies and crimes of the French revolution, is peculiarly admirable. “ The short-lived forms of power and office glided with such rapidity through successive ranks of degradation,” as to spread vanity more widely than ever it was diffused before. “ Political power, the most seducing object of ambition, never before circulated through so many hands.” The display of vanity exhibited all the mummeries and the disappointment of vanity, produced all the crimes of that monstrous tragi-comedy.

The manner in which Mr. Hall proves that infidelity is naturally productive of *ferocity* is, in our opinion, no less satisfactory than it is ingenious. Stripping human nature of that dignity which is bestowed on it by the belief that we are destined for immortality, it tends to make human life too mean and worthless an object to be regarded with reverence.

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“ Having taught its disciples to consider mankind as little better than a nest of insects, they will be prepared in the fierce conflicts of party to trample upon them without pity, and to extinguish them without remorse.” P. 41.

He supports his arguments by the testimony of ancient and modern history, but chiefly by the experience of the French Revolution; on which he very forcibly remarks,

“ that the reign of Atheism was avowedly the reign of terror; that in the height of their career, in the highest climax of their horrors, they shut up the temples of God, abolished his worship, and proclaimed death to be an eternal sleep; as if by pointing to the silence of the sepulchre, and the sleep of the tomb, these ferocious barbarians meant to apologize for leaving neither sleep, quiet, nor repose to the living.” P. 43.

“ Settle it therefore in your minds,” says this able teacher, “ as a maxim never to be effaced or forgotten, that ATHEISM is an INHUMAN, BLOODY, FEROCIOUS SYSTEM, equally hostile to every useful restraint, and to every virtuous affection; that leaving nothing above us to excite awe, or around us to awaken tenderness, it wages war with heaven and with earth; its first object is to dethrone God, its next to destroy man!” P. 44.

The observations which follow, on the tendency of infidelity to degrade the intercourse of the sexes into a brutish sensuality, are very worthy of the most serious attention of those, who consider the multiplied connections of that intercourse with every part of morality. The author concludes with observations, which are of singular importance. “ Efforts are now, for the first time, made to diffuse the principles of infidelity among the common people.” Infidels formerly addressed themselves to the more polished classes of society. The reason of this difference is well stated.

“ While infidelity was rare and confined to a few, it was employed as the instrument of literary vanity; its wide diffusion having disqualified it for answering that purpose, it is now adopted as the organ of political convulsion.” P. 64.

The princes and magistrates who keep this truth constantly in view, will have a simple and easily applicable principle by which they may govern their conduct. This Sermon closes with some remarks on the great prevalence of infidelity, which, as Mr. Hall observes, instead of shaking our faith in the Scriptures, ought to confirm it, as that apostacy is predicted in the Scriptures. The characters of that great apostacy, which is foretold by the inspired writers, are indeed so strikingly applicable to the modern propagators of impiety, that if they were

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seriously examined, they might produce an impression on the most incredulous. They are, as Mr. Hall abridges them, from the second and third chapters of the second Epistle of St. Peter, "prophaness, presumption, lewdness, impatience of subordination, restless appetite for change, vain pretensions to freedom, and to emancipate the world! while they themselves are the slaves of lust." P. 66. Some remarks on this subject follow, which, for their singular excellence and energy, notwithstanding the length of this article, we cannot forbear extracting.

"It is impossible that a system, which by vitiating every virtue, and embracing the patronage of almost every vice and crime, wages war with all the order and civilization of the world, which, equal to the establishment of nothing, is armed only with the energies of destruction, can long retain an ascendancy. It is in no shape formed for perpetuity—*Sudden in its rise, and impetuous in its progress, it resembles a mountain torrent which is loud, filthy, and desolating, but exciting a general alarm, and being fed by no perennial spring, is soon drained off, and disappears.* Religion being primarily intended to make men wise unto salvation, the support it ministers to social order, the stability it confers on government and law, is a subordinate species of advantage which we should have continued to enjoy, without reflecting on its cause, but for the development of deistical principles, and the experiment that has been made of their effects in a neighbouring country. It had been the constant boast of infidels, that their system, more liberal and generous than Christianity, was so much better adapted to guide and enlighten the world, that it needed but to be tried, to produce an immense accession to human happiness; and Christian nations, careless and supine, retaining little of religion but the profession, and disgusted with its restraints, lent a favourable ear to these pretensions. GOD PERMITTED THE EXPERIMENT TO BE MADE. In one country, and that in the centre of Christendom, *the light of revelation was suffered to undergo a total eclipse, while Atheism performing on a darkened theatre its strange and fearful tragedy, confounded the first elements of society, blended every age, rank, and sex, in indiscriminate proscription and massacre, and convulsed all Europe to its centre; that the imperishable memorial of these events may teach the last generations of mankind to consider religion as the pillar of society, the safeguard of nations, the parent of social order, which alone has power to curb the passions, and to secure to every one his right.*" P. 67.

In addition to the important specimens already given, we shall now quote only the following most animated and eloquent passage.

"More than all their infatuated eagerness, their parricidal zeal to extinguish a sense of deity, must excite astonishment and horror. Is the idea of an Almighty and perfect ruler, unfriendly to any passion that is consistent with innocence, or an obstruction to any design, which it is not shameful to avow? Eternal God! on what are thine enemies intent;

intent: what are those enterprizes of guilt and horror that, for the safety of their performers, require to be enveloped in a darkness, which the eye of heaven must not pierce? Miserable men! proud of being the offspring of chance; in love with universal disorder; whose happiness is involved in the belief of there being no witnesses to their designs, and who are at ease, only because they suppose themselves inhabitants of a forsaken and fatherless world." P. 72.

Various reasons have induced us to extend this article beyond the limits to which we must generally confine our review of single sermons. The singular importance of the subject, and the great excellence of the composition, are indeed sufficient to justify us. But we are also desirous of proving to Dissenters, that the prejudices which have arisen against them, did not originate in the intolerance of Churchmen, as they are sometimes taught to believe, but in the indiscretions (to use no harsher term) of some of their own leaders; and that whenever they distinguish themselves as champions of religion and morality, the Church of England will not be backward in her applauses. It gives us great pleasure to add the name of Mr. Hall to the increasing list of men of genius and virtue, who, having been originally seduced by the promises of the French Revolution, have long ago been undeceived by experience, and have now the courage and honour, publicly and for ever, to renounce all its pestilential principles. Of all the promises of the French leaders, they have kept none but those by which they held out plunder to indigent ruffians, usurped power to criminal ambition, and the destruction of the worship of God to fanatical Atheists. It cannot be democracy which now attaches any man to France, for no shadow of it exists in that country. They who now admire French principles, must either have a taste for confiscation, or usurped tyranny, or persecuting Atheism: for these are the only principles which have survived the shock of so many revolutions. But they who admire such things in foreign countries, can scarcely be safe members of their own community. They who have a disinterested taste for confiscation, would hardly be very scrupulous about enriching themselves by rapine. They who admire French usurpation, will not be very good subjects of their native government. They who are delighted with Atheistical persecutions, will not be supposed to be men of great piety and humanity. Such men afford the public an easy method of estimating, not their political opinions, but their moral character.