



CHAPTER I

Inadequate Conceptions of the Importance of Christianity

Popular Notions—Scripture Account— Ignorance in This Case Criminal—Two False Maxims Exposed

Before we proceed to the consideration of any particular defects in the religious system of the bulk of professed Christians, it may be proper to point out the very inadequate conception which they entertain of the importance of Christianity in general, of its peculiar nature, and superior excellence. If we listen to their conversation, virtue is praised, and vice is censured; piety is perhaps applauded, and profaneness condemned. So far all is well. But let any one, who would not be deceived by these “barren generalities” examine a little more closely, and he will find, that not to Christianity in particular, but at best to Religion in general, perhaps to mere Morality, their homage is intended to be paid. With Christianity, as distinct from these, they are little acquainted; their views of it have been so cursory and superficial, that far from discerning its characteristic essence, they have little more than perceived those exterior circumstances which distinguish it from other forms of religion. There are some few facts, and perhaps some leading doctrines and principles, of which

they cannot be wholly ignorant; but of the consequences, and relations, and practical uses of these they have few ideas, or none at all.

Does this seem too strong? View their plan of life and their ordinary conduct; and not to speak at present of their general inattention to things of a religious nature, let us ask wherein we can discern the points of discrimination between them and professed unbelievers. In an age wherein it is confessed and lamented that infidelity abounds, do we observe in them any remarkable care to instruct their children in the principles of the faith which they profess, and to furnish them with arguments for the defense of it? They would blush, on their child's coming out into the world, to think him defective in any branch of that knowledge, or of those accomplishments which belong to his station in life, and accordingly these are cultivated with becoming assiduity. But he is left to collect his religion as he may; the study of Christianity has formed no part of his education, and his attachment to it (where any attachment to it exists at all) is, too often, not the preference of sober reason, but merely the result of early prejudice and groundless prepossession. He was born in a Christian country, of course he is a Christian; his father was the member of the church of England, so is he. When such is the hereditary religion handed down from generation to generation, it cannot surprise us to observe young men of sense and spirit beginning to doubt altogether of the truth of the system in which they have been brought up, and ready to abandon a station which they are unable to defend. Knowing Christianity chiefly in the difficulties which it contains, and in the impossibilities which are falsely imputed to it, they fall perhaps into the company of infidels; and, as might be expected, they are shaken by frivolous objections and profane cavils [petty objections], which, had they been grounded and bottomed in reason and argument, would have passed them "as the idle wind," and scarcely have seemed worthy of serious notice.

Let us beware before it be too late. No one can say into what discredit Christianity might hereby grow, at a time when the free and unrestrained intercourse subsisting amongst the several ranks and classes of society, so much favors the general diffusion of the sentiments of the higher orders. To a similar ignorance is perhaps in no small degree to be ascribed the success with which Christianity has been attacked of late years in a neighboring

Inadequate Conceptions of the Importance of Christianity

country [France]. Had she not been wholly unarmed for the contest, however she might have been forced from her untenable posts, and compelled to disembarass herself from her load of encumbrances, she never could have been driven altogether out of the field by her puny assailants, with all their cavils [petty objections], and gibes, and sarcasms; for in these consisted the main strength of their petty artillery. Let us beware, lest we also suffer from a like cause; nor let it be our crime and our reproach, that in schools, perhaps even in Colleges, Christianity is almost if not altogether neglected.

It cannot be expected, that they who are so little attentive to this great object in the education of their children, should be more so in other parts of their conduct, where less strongly stimulated by affection, and less obviously loaded with responsibility. They are of course therefore, little regardful of the state of Christianity in their own country; and still more indifferent about communicating the light of divine truth to the nations which "still sit in darkness" [Luke 1:79].

But Religion, it may be replied, is not noisy and ostentatious; it is modest and private in its nature; it resides in a man's own bosom, and shuns the observation of the multitude. Be it so.

From this transient and distant view then, which we have been taking of these unassuming Christians, let us approach a little nearer, and listen to the unreserved conversation of their confidential hours. Here, if any where, the interior of the heart is laid open, and we may ascertain the true principles of their regards and aversions; the scale by which they measure the good and evil of life. Here, however, you will discover few or no traces of Christianity. She scarcely finds herself a place amidst the many objects of their hopes, and fears, and joys and sorrows. Grateful, perhaps (as well indeed they may be grateful) for health, and talents, and affluence, and other blessings belonging to their persons and conditions in life, they scarcely reckon in the number this grand distinguishing mark of the bounty of Providence [God's care and protection]; or if they mention it at all, it is noticed coldly and formally, like one of those obsolete claims to which, though but of small account in the estimate of our wealth or power, we think it as well to put in our title from considerations of family decorum or of national usage.

But what more than all the rest establishes the point in question: let their conversation take a graver turn: here at length their religion, modest and retired as it is, must be expected to disclose itself; here however you will look in vain for the religion of Jesus. Their standard of right and wrong is not the standard of the gospel: they approve and condemn by a different rule; they advance principles and maintain opinions altogether opposite to the genius and character of Christianity. You would fancy yourself rather amongst the followers of the old philosophy; nor is it easy to guess how any one could satisfy himself to the contrary, unless, by mentioning the name of some acknowledged heretic, he should afford them an occasion of demonstrating their zeal for the religion of their country.

The truth is, their opinions on these subjects are not formed from the perusal of the word of God. The Bible lies on the shelf unopened; and they would be wholly ignorant of its contents, except for what they hear occasionally at church, or for the faint traces which their memories may still retain of the lessons of their earliest infancy.

How different, nay, in many respects, how contradictory, would be the two systems of mere morals, of which the one should be formed from the commonly received maxims of the Christian world, and the other from the study of the holy Scriptures! It would be curious to remark in any one, who had hitherto satisfied himself with the former, the astonishment which would be excited on his first introduction to the latter. We are not left here to bare conjecture. This was, in fact, the effect produced on the mind of a late ingenious writer,¹ of whose little work, though it bear perhaps some marks of his customary love of paradox, we must at least confess, that it exposes, in a strong point of view, the *poverty* of that superficial religion which has been above condemned; and that it every where displays that happy perspicuity [clarity of expression] and grace, which so eminently characterize all the compositions of its author. But after this willing tribute of commendation, we are reluctantly compelled to remark, that the work in question discredits the cause which it was meant to serve, by many crude and extravagant positions; from which no one can be secure who forms a hasty judgement of a deep and comprehensive subject, the several bearings and relations of

Inadequate Conceptions of the Importance of Christianity

which have been imperfectly surveyed; and above all, it must be lamented, that it treats the great question which it professes to discuss, rather as a matter of mere speculation, than as one wherein our everlasting interests are involved. Surely the writer's object should have been, to convince his readers of their guilt still more than of their ignorance, and to leave them impressed rather with a sense of their danger than of their folly.

It were almost a waste of time to multiply arguments in order to prove how criminal the voluntary ignorance, of which we have been speaking, must appear in the sight of God. It must be confessed by all who believe that we are accountable creatures, and to such only the writer is addressing himself, that we shall have to answer hereafter to the Almighty for all the means and occasions we have here enjoyed of improving ourselves, or of promoting the happiness of others. And if, when summoned to give an account of our stewardship, we shall be called upon to answer for the use which we have made of our bodily organs, and of the means of relieving the wants and necessities of our fellow-creatures; how much more for the exercise of the nobler and more exalted faculties of our nature, of invention, and judgment, and memory, and for our employment of all the instruments and opportunities of diligent application, and serious reflection, and honest decision. And to what subject might we in all reason be expected to apply more earnestly, than to that wherein our eternal interests are at issue? When God has of his goodness vouchsafed [deigned] to grant us such abundant means of instruction in that which we are most concerned to know, how great must be the guilt, and how awful the punishment of voluntary ignorance!

And why, it may be asked, are we in this pursuit alone to expect knowledge without inquiry, and success without endeavor? The whole analogy of nature inculcates on us a different lesson, and our own judgments in matters of temporal interest and worldly policy confirm the truth of her suggestions. Bountiful as is the hand of Providence, its gifts are not so bestowed as to seduce us into indolence, but to rouse us to exertion; and no one expects to attain to the height of learning, or arts, or power, or wealth, or military glory, without vigorous resolution, and

strenuous diligence, and steady perseverance. Yet we expect to be Christians without labor, study, or inquiry. This is the more preposterous, because Christianity, being a revelation from God, and not the invention of man, discovering to us new relations, with their correspondent duties; containing also doctrines, and motives, and practical principles, and rules, peculiar to itself, and almost as new in their nature as supreme in their excellence, we cannot reasonably expect to become proficient in it by the accidental intercourses of life, as one might learn insensibly the maxims of worldly policy, or a scheme of mere morals.

The diligent perusal of the Holy Scriptures would discover to us our past ignorance. We should cease to be deceived by superficial appearances, and to confound the Gospel of Christ with the systems of philosophers; we should become impressed with that weighty truth, so much forgotten, and never to be too strongly insisted on, that Christianity calls on us, as we value our immortal souls, not merely in *general*, to be *religious* and *moral*, but *specialy* to believe the doctrines, and imbibe the principles, and practice the precepts of Christ. It might be to run into too great length to confirm this position beyond dispute by express quotations from Scripture. And (not to anticipate what belongs more properly to a subsequent part of the work) it may be sufficient here to remark in general, that Christianity is always represented in Scripture as the grand, the unparalleled instance of God's bounty to mankind. It was graciously held forth in the original promise to our first parents; it was predicted by a long continued series of prophets; the subject of their prayers, inquiries, and longing expectations. In a world which opposed and persecuted them, it was their source of peace, and hope, and consolation. At length it approached—the Desire of all Nations—The long expected Star announced its presence—A multitude of the heavenly host hailed its introduction, and proclaimed its character; “Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will towards men” [Luke 2:4]. It is every where represented in Scripture by such figures as may most deeply impress on us a sense of its value; it is spoken of as light from darkness, as release from prison, as deliverance from captivity, as life from death. “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation” [Luke 2:29–30], was the exclamation with which it was

welcomed by the pious Simeon; and it was universally received and professed among the early converts with thankfulness and joy. At one time, the communication of it is promised as a reward, at another, the loss of it is threatened as a punishment. And, short as is the form of prayer taught us by our blessed Savior, the more general extension of the kingdom of Christ constitutes one of its leading petitions [Matthew 6:9–13].

With what exalted conceptions of the importance of Christianity ought we to be filled by such descriptions as these? Yet, in vain have we, “line upon line, and precept upon precept” [Isaiah 28:13].—Thus predicted, thus prayed and longed for, thus announced and characterized and rejoiced in, this heavenly treasure poured into our lap in rich abundance we scarce accept. We turn from it coldly, or at best profess it negligently, as a thing of no account or estimation. But a due sense of its value would be assuredly impressed on us by the diligent study of the Word of God, that blessed repository of divine truth and consolation. Thence it is that we are to learn our obligations and our duty, what we are to believe and what to practice. And, surely, one would think it could not be required to press men to the perusal of the sacred volume. Reason dictates, Revelation commands; “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” [Romans 10:17]—“Search the Scriptures” [John 5:39]—“Be ready to give to every one a reason of the hope that is in you” [1 Peter 3:15]. Such are the declarations and injunctions of the inspired writers; injunctions confirmed by commendations of those who obey the admonition. Yet, is it not undeniable that with the Bible in our houses, we are ignorant of its contents; and that hence, in a great measure, it arises, that the bulk of the Christian world know so little, and mistake so greatly, in what regards the religion which they profess?

This is not the place for enquiring at large, whence it is that those who assent to the position, that the Bible is the word of God, and who profess to rest their hopes on the Christian basis, contentedly acquiesce in a state of such lamentable ignorance. But it may not be improper here to touch on two kindred opinions, from which, in the minds of the more thoughtful and serious, this acquiescence appears to derive much secret support. The one is, that it signifies little what a man believes; *look to his practice*. The other (of the same family) *that sincerity is all in all*. Let a

man's opinions and conduct be what they may, yet, provided he be sincerely convinced that they are right, however the exigencies of civil society may require him to be dealt with amongst men, in the sight of God he cannot be criminal.

It would detain us too long to set forth the various merits of these favorite positions, of which it is surely not the smallest excellence, that they are of unbounded application, comprehending within their capacious limits all the errors which have been believed, and many of the most desperate crimes which have been perpetrated among men. The former of them is founded altogether on that grossly fallacious assumption, that a man's opinions will not influence his practice. The latter proceeds on this groundless supposition, that the Supreme Being has not afforded us sufficient means for discriminating truth from falsehood, right from wrong; and it implies, that be a man's opinions or conduct ever so wild and extravagant, we are to presume, that they are as much the result of impartial inquiry and honest conviction; as if his sentiments and actions had been strictly conformable to the rules of reason and sobriety. Never indeed was there a principle more general in its use, more sovereign in its potency. How does its beautiful simplicity also, and compendious brevity, give it rank before the laborious subtleties of Bellarmin!² Clement,³ and Ravaillac,⁴ and other worthies of a similar stamp, from whose purity of intention the world has hitherto withheld its due tribute of applause, would here have found a ready plea, and their injured innocence shall now at length receive its full though tardy vindication. "These, however," it may be replied, "are excepted cases." Certainly they are cases of which any one who maintains the opinion in question would be glad to disencumber himself; because they clearly expose the unsoundness of his principle. But it will be incumbent on such a one, first to explain with precision why they are to be exempted from its operation, and this he will find an impossible task; for sincerity, in its popular sense, so shamefully is the term misapplied, can be made the criterion of guilt and innocence on no grounds which will not equally serve to justify the assassins who have been instanced. The conclusion cannot be eluded; no man was ever more fully persuaded of the innocence of any action, than these men were, that the horrid deed they were about to perpetrate was

not lawful merely, but highly meritorious. Thus Clement and Ravailac being unquestionably sincere, they were therefore indubitably innocent. Nay, the absurdity of this principle might be shewn to be even greater than what has yet been stated. It would not be going too far to assert, that whilst it scorns the defense of petty villains, of those who still retain the sense of good and evil, it holds forth, like some well frequented sanctuary, a secure asylum to those more finished criminals, who, from long habits of wickedness, are lost alike to the perception as to the practice of virtue; and that it selects a seared conscience and a heart become callous to all moral distinctions as the special objects of its care. Nor is it only in profane history that instances like these are to be found, of persons committing the greatest crimes with a sincere conviction of the rectitude of their conduct. Scripture will afford us parallels; and it was surely to guard us against the very error which we have been now exposing, that our blessed Savior forewarned his disciples: "The time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service" [John 16:2].

A principle like this must then be abandoned, and the advocates for sincerity must be compelled to restore this abused term to its genuine signification, and to acknowledge that it must imply honesty of mind, and the faithful use of the means of knowledge and of improvement, the desire of being instructed, humble inquiry, impartial consideration, and unprejudiced judgment. It is to these we would earnestly call you; to these (ever to be accompanied with fervent prayers for the divine blessing) Scripture every where holds forth the most animating promises. "Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" [Matthew 7:7]. "Ho! every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters" [Isaiah 55:1]; such are the comfortable assurances, such the gracious encouragements to the truly sincere inquirer. How deep will be our guilt, if we slight all these benevolent offers. "How many prophets and kings have desired to hear the things that we hear, and have not heard them" [Matthew 13:17]. Great indeed are our opportunities, great also is our responsibility. Let us awaken to a true sense of our situation. We have every consideration to alarm our fears, or to animate our industry. How soon may the brightness of our meridian sun be darkened! Or, should the long-suffering of God still continue to us the mercies which we so much

A Practical View of Christianity

abuse, it will only aggravate our crime, and in the end enhance our punishment. The time of reckoning will at length arrive. And when finally summoned to the bar [the railing in a law court behind which persons on trial are stationed] of God, to give an account of our stewardship, what plea can we have to urge in our defense, if we remain willingly, and obstinately ignorant of the way which leads to life, with such transcendent means of knowing it, and such urgent motives to its pursuit?