

CHAPTER VI.

Brief Inquiry into the present State of Christianity in this Country, with some of the Causes which have led to its critical Circumstances. Its Importance to us as a political Community, and practical Hints for which the foregoing Considerations give occasion.

It may not be altogether improper to remind the reader, that hitherto, our discussion has been concerning the prevailing Religious opinions merely of *professed Christians*; no longer confining ourselves to persons of this description, let us now extend our inquiry, and briefly investigate the *general* state of Christianity in this country.

The tendency of Religion in general to promote the temporal well-being of political communities, is a fact which depends on such obvious and undeniable principles, and which is so forcibly inculcated by the history of all ages, that there can be no necessity for entering into a formal proof of its truth. It has indeed been maintained, not merely by Schoolmen and Divines, but by the most celebrated philosophers, and moralists, and politicians of every age.

The peculiar excellence in this respect also of Christianity, considered independently of its truth or falsehood, has been recognized by many writers, who, to say the least, were not disposed to exaggerate its merits. Either or both of these propositions being admitted, the state of Religion in a country at any given period, not to mention its connection with the eternal happiness of the inhabitants, immediately becomes a question of great *political* importance; and in particular it must be material to ascertain whether Religion be in an advancing or in a declining state; and if the latter be the case, whether there be any practicable means for preventing at least its farther declension.

If the representations contained in the preceding chapters, of the state of Christianity among the bulk of professed Christians, be not very erroneous, they may well excite serious apprehension in the mind of every reader, when considered merely in a political view. And this apprehension would be increased, if there should appear reason to believe that, for some time past, Religion has been on the decline amongst us, and that it continues to decline at the present moment.

When it is proposed, however, to inquire into the actual state of Religion in any country, and in particular to compare that state with its condition at any former period, there is one preliminary observation to be made, if we would not be liable to gross error. There exists, established by tacit consent, in every country, what may be called a general standard or tone of morals, varying in the same community at different periods, and different at the same period in different ranks and situations in

society. Whoever falls below this standard, and not unfrequently, who ever also rises above it, offending against this general rule, suffers proportionably in the general estimation. Thus a regard for character, which, as was formerly remarked, is commonly the grand governing principle among men, becomes to a certain degree, though no farther, an incitement to morality and virtue. It follows of course, that where the practice does no more than come up to the required level, it will be no sufficient evidence of the existence, much less will it furnish any just measure of the force, of a real internal principle of Religion. Christians, Jews, Turks, Infidels and Heretics, persons of ten thousand different sorts of passions and opinions, being members at the same time of the same community, and all conscious that they will be examined by this same standard, will regulate their conduct accordingly, and, with no great difference, will all adjust themselves to the required measure.

It must also be remarked, that the causes which tend to raise or to depress this standard, commonly produce their efforts by slow and almost insensible degrees; and that it often continues for some time nearly the same, when the circumstances, by which it was fixed, have materially altered.

It is a truth which will hardly be contested, that Christianity, whenever it has at all prevailed, has raised the general standard of morals to a height before unknown. Some actions, which among the ancients were scarcely held to be blemishes in the most excellent characters, have been justly considered by the laws of every Christian community, as meriting the severest punishments. In other instances, virtues formerly rare have become common, and in particular a merciful and courteous temper has softened the rugged manners, and humanized the brutal ferocity prevalent among the most polished nations of the heathen world. But from what has been recently observed, it is manifest, that so far as external appearances are concerned, these effects, when once produced by Christianity, are produced alike in those who deny and in those who admit her divine original; I had almost said in those who reject and those who cordially embrace the doctrines of the Gospel: and those effects might and probably would remain for a while, without any great apparent alteration, however her spirit might languish, or even her authority decline. [. . .] When we are inquiring therefore into the real state of Christianity at any period, if we would not be deceived in this important investigation, it becomes us to be so much the more careful not to take up with superficial appearances.

It may perhaps help us to ascertain the advancing or declining state of Christianity in Great Britain at the present moment, and still more to discover some of the causes by which that state has been produced, to

employ a little time in considering what might naturally be expected to be its actual situation; what advantages or disadvantages such a religion might be expected to derive from the circumstances in which it has been placed among us, and from those in which it still continues.

Experience warrants, and reason justifies and explains the assertion, that Persecution generally tends to quicken the vigour and extend the prevalence of the opinions which she would eradicate. For the peace of mankind, it has grown at length almost into an axiom, that “her devilish engine back recoils upon herself.” Christianity especially has always thriven under persecution. At such a season she has no lukewarm professors; no adherents concerning whom it is doubtful to what party they belong. The Christian is then reminded at every turn, that his Master’s kingdom is not of this world. When all on earth wears a black and threatening aspect, he looks up to heaven for consolation; he learns practically to consider himself as a pilgrim and stranger. He then cleaves to fundamentals, and examines well his foundation, as at the hour of death. When Religion is in a state of external quiet and prosperity, the contrary of all this naturally takes place. The soldiers of the church militant then forget that they are in a state of warfare. Their ardour slackens, their zeal languishes. Like a colony long settled in a strange country,¹ they are gradually assimilated in features, and demeanour, and language, to the native inhabitants, till at length almost every vestige of peculiarity dies away.

If, in general, persecution and prosperity be productive respectively of these opposite effects, this circumstance alone might teach us what expectations to form concerning the state of Christianity in this country, where she has long been embodied in an establishment, which is intimately blended, and is generally and justly believed to have a common interest with our civil institutions; which is liberally, though by no means too liberally endowed, and, not more favoured in wealth than dignity, has been allowed “to exalt her mitred front in courts and parliaments:” an establishment—the offices in which are extremely numerous, and these, not like the priesthood of the Jews, filled up from a particular race, or, like that of the Hindoos, held by a separate cast in entailed succession, but supplied from every class and branching by its widely extended ramifications into almost every individual family in the community: an establishment—of which the ministers are not, like the Roman Catholic clergy, debarred from forming matrimonial ties, but are allowed to unite themselves, and multiply their holdings to the general mass of the community by the close bonds of family connection; not like some of the

¹ The author must acknowledge himself indebted to Dr. OWEN for this illustration.*

severer of the religious orders, immured in colleges and monasteries, but, both by law and custom, permitted to mix without restraint in all the intercourses of society.

Such being the circumstances of the pastors of the church, let the community in general be supposed to have been for some time in a rapidly improving state of commercial prosperity; let it also be supposed to have been making no unequal progress in all those arts, and sciences, and literary productions, which have ever been the growth of a polished age, and are the sure marks of a highly finished condition of society. It is not difficult to anticipate the effects likely to be produced on *vital* Religion, both in the clergy and the laity, by such a state of external prosperity as has been assigned to them respectively. And these effects would be infallibly furthered, where the country in question should enjoy a free constitution of government. We formerly had occasion to quote the remark of an accurate observer of the stage of human life, that a much looser system of morals commonly prevails in the higher, than in the middling and lower orders of society. Now, in every country, of which the middling classes are daily growing in wealth and consequence, by the success of their commercial speculations, and, most of all, in a country having such a constitution as our own, where the acquisition of riches is the possession also of rank and power; with the comforts and refinements, the vices also of the higher orders are continually descending, and a mischievous uniformity of sentiments, and manners, and morals, gradually diffuses itself throughout the whole community. The multiplication of great cities also, and above all, the habit, ever increasing with the increasing wealth of the country, of frequenting a splendid and luxurious metropolis, would powerfully tend to accelerate the discontinuance of the religious habits of a purer age, and to accomplish the substitution of a more relaxed morality. And it must even be confessed, that the commercial spirit, much as we are indebted to it, is not naturally favourable to the maintenance of the religious principle in a vigorous and lively state.

In times like these, therefore, the strict precepts and self-denying habits of Christianity naturally slide into disuse, and even among the better sort of Christians, are likely to be softened, so far at least as to be rendered less abhorrent, from the general disposition to relaxation and indulgence. In such prosperous circumstances, men, in truth, are apt to think very little about religion. Christianity, therefore, seldom occupying the attention of the bulk of nominal Christians, and being scarcely at all the object of their study, we should expect, of course, to find them extremely unacquainted with its tenets. Those doctrines and principles indeed, which it contains in common with the law of the land, or which are sanctioned by the gen-

eral standard of morals formerly described, being brought into continual notice and mention by the common occurrences of life, might continue to be recognized. But whatever she contains peculiar to herself, and which should not be habitually brought into recollection by the incidents of every day, might be expected to be less and less thought of, till at length it should be almost wholly forgotten. Still more might this be naturally expected to become the case, if the peculiarities in question should be, from their very nature, at war with pride, and luxury, and worldly mind-ness, the too general concomitants of rapidly increasing wealth; and this would particularly happen among the laity, if the circumstance of their having been at any time abused to purposes of hypocrisy or fanaticism should have prompted even some of the better disposed of the clergy, perhaps from well intentioned though erroneous motives, to bring them forward less frequently in their discourses on religion.

When so many should thus have been straying out of the right path, some bold reformer might, from time to time, be likely to arise, who should not unjustly charge them with their deviation; but, though right perhaps in the main, yet deviating himself also in an opposite direction, and creating disgust by his violence, or vulgarity, or absurdities, he might fail, except in a few instances, to produce the effect of recalling them from their wanderings.

Still, however, the Divine Original of Christianity would not be professedly disavowed; partly from a real, and more commonly from a political deference for the established faith, but most of all, from the bulk of mankind being not yet prepared, as it were, to throw away the scabbard, and to venture their eternal happiness on the issue of its falsehood. Some bolder spirits, indeed, might be expected to despise the cautious moderation of these timid reasoners, and to pronounce decisively, that the Bible was a forgery, while the generality, professing to believe it genuine, should, less consistently, be satisfied with remaining ignorant of its contents, and when pressed, should discover themselves by no means to believe many of the most important particulars contained in it.

When, by the operation of causes like these, any country has at length grown into the condition which has been here stated, it is but too obvious, that in the bulk of the community, Religion, already sunk very low, must be hastening fast to her entire dissolution. Causes, energetic and active like these, though accidental hindrances may occasionally thwart their operation, will not at once become sluggish and unproductive. Their effect is sure; and the time is fast approaching, when Christianity will be almost as openly disavowed in the language, as in fact it is already supposed to have disappeared from the conduct of men; when infidelity will be held to be the necessary appendage of a man of fashion, and to

believe will be deemed the indication of a feeble mind and a contracted understanding.

Something like what have been here premised are the conjectures which we should naturally be led to form concerning the state of Christianity in this country, and its probable issue, from considering her own nature, and the peculiar circumstances in which she has been placed. That her real condition differs not much from the result of this reasoning from probability, must, with whatever regret, be confessed by all who take a careful and impartial survey of the actual situation of things among us. But our hypothetical delineation, if just, will have approved itself to the reader's conviction, as we have gone along, by suggesting its archetypes; and we may therefore be spared the painful and invidious task of pointing out, in detail, the several particulars wherein our statements are justified by facts. Every where we may actually trace the effects of increasing wealth and luxury, in banishing one by one the habits, and new-modelling the phraseology of stricter times, and in diffusing throughout the middle ranks those relaxed morals and dissipated manners, which were formerly confined to the higher classes of society. We meet, indeed, with more refinement, and more generally with those amiable courtesies which are its proper fruits: those vices also have become less frequent, which naturally infest the darkness of a ruder and less polished age, and which recede on the approach of light and civilization.

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But with these grossnesses, Religion, on the other hand, has also declined; God is forgotten; his providence is exploded; his hand is lifted up, but we see it not; he multiplies our comforts, but we are not grateful; he visits us with chastisements, but we are not contrite. The portion of the week set apart to the service of Religion, we give up, without reluctance, to vanity and dissipation. [. . .]

It has also been a melancholy prognostic of the state to which we are progressive, that many of the most eminent of the literati of modern times have been professed unbelievers; and that others of them have discovered such lukewarmness in the cause of Christ, as to treat with especial good will, and attention, and respect, those men, who, by their avowed publications, were openly assailing, or insidiously undermining the very foundations of the Christian hope; considering themselves as more closely united to them by literature, than severed from them by the widest religious differences. Can it then occasion surprise, that under all these circumstances, one of the most acute and most forward of the professed unbelievers² should appear to anticipate, as at no great distance,

² Mr. HUME.*

the more complete triumph of his sceptical principles; and that another author of distinguished name,³ not so openly professing those infidel opinions, should declare of the writer above alluded to, whose great abilities had been systematically prostituted to the open attack of every principle of Religion, both natural and revealed, “that he had always considered him, both in his life-time and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit?”

Can there then be a doubt, whither tends the path in which we are travelling, and whither at length it must conduct us? If any should hesitate, let them take a lesson from experience. In a neighbouring country, several of the same causes have been in action; and they have at length produced their full effect. Manners corrupted, morals depraved, dissipation predominant, above all, Religion discredited, and infidelity grown into repute and fashion,⁴ terminated in the public disavowal of every religious principle which had been used to attract the veneration of mankind. The representatives of a whole nation publicly witnessing, not only without horror, but to say the least, without disapprobation, an open unqualified denial of the very existence of God; and at length, as a body, withdrawing their allegiance from the Majesty of Heaven.

There are not a few, perhaps, who may have witnessed with apprehension, and may be ready to confess with pain, the gradual declension of Religion, but who at the same time may conceive that the writer of this tract is disposed to carry things too far. They may even allege, that the degree of Religion for which he contends is inconsistent with the ordinary business of life, and with the well-being of society; that if it were generally to prevail, people would be wholly engrossed by Religion, and all their time occupied by prayer and preaching. Men not being sufficiently interested in the pursuit of temporal objects, agriculture and commerce would decline, the arts would languish, the very duties of common life would be neglected, and, in short the whole machine of civil society would be obstructed, and speedily stopped.

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In reply to this objection it might be urged, that though we should allow it for a moment to be in a considerable degree well founded, yet this admission would not warrant the conclusion intended to be drawn from it. The question would still remain, whether our representation of what

³ Vide Dr. A. Smith's Letter to W. Strahan, Esq.*

⁴ What is here stated must be acknowledged by all, be their political opinions concerning French events what they may; and it makes no difference in the writer's view of the subject, whether the state of morals was or was not, quite, or nearly as bad, before the French revolution.*

Christianity requires be agreeable to the word of God. For if it be, surely it must be confessed to be a matter of small account to sacrifice a little worldly comfort and prosperity, during the short span of our existence in this life, in order to secure a crown of eternal glory, and the enjoyment of those pleasures which are at God's right hand for evermore. [. . .] But in truth the objection on which we have now been commenting, is not only groundless, but the very contrary to it is the truth. If Christianity, such as we have represented it, were generally to prevail, the world, from being such as it is, would become a scene of general peace and prosperity, and abating the chances and calamities "which flesh is inseparably heir to," would wear one unwearied face of complacency and joy.

On the first promulgation of Christianity, it is true, some of her early converts seem to have been in danger of so far mistaking the genius of the new Religion, as to imagine that in future they were to be discharged from an active attendance on their secular affairs. But the Apostle most pointedly guarded them against so gross an error, and expressly and repeatedly enjoined them to perform the particular duties of their several stations with increased alacrity and fidelity, that they might thereby do credit to their Christian profession.⁵ [. . .] It must indeed be confessed that Christianity would not favour that vehement and inordinate ardor in the pursuit of temporal objects, which tends to the acquisition of immense wealth, or of widely spread renown; nor is it calculated to gratify the extravagant views of those mistaken politicians, the chief object of whose admiration, and the main scope of whose endeavours for their country are, extended dominion, and commanding power, and unrivalled affluence, rather than those more solid advantages of peace, and comfort, and security. These men would barter comfort for greatness. In their vain reveries they forget that a nation consists of individuals, and that true national prosperity is no other than the multiplication of particular happiness.

But in truth, so far is it from being true that the prevalence of *real* Religion would produce a stagnation in life; a man, whatever might be his employment or pursuit, would be furnished with a new motive to prosecute it with alacrity, a motive far more constant and vigorous than any human prospects can supply; at the same time, his solicitude being not so much to succeed in whatever he might be engaged in, as to act from a pure principle and leave the event to God, he would not be liable to the same disappointments as men who are active and laborious from a desire of worldly gain or of human estimation. Thus he would possess the true secret of a life at the same time useful and happy. Following peace also

⁵ Wilberforce probably has in mind St Paul's exhortations in II Thessalonians 3:6-13.

with all men, and looking upon them as members of the same family, entitled not only to the debts of justice, but to the less definite and more liberal claims of fraternal kindness, he would naturally be respected and beloved by others, and be in himself free from the annoyance of those bad passions, by which they who are actuated by worldly principles are so commonly corroded. If any country were indeed filled with men, each thus diligently discharging the duties of his own station without breaking in upon the rights of others, but on the contrary endeavouring, so far as he might be able, to forward their views and promote their happiness, all would be active and harmonious in the goodly frame of human society. There would be no jarrings, no discord. The whole machine of civil life would work without obstruction or disorder, and the course of its movements would be like the harmony of the spheres.

Such would be the happy state of a truly Christian nation within itself. Nor would its condition with regard to foreign countries form a contrast to this its internal comfort. Such a community, on the contrary, peaceful at home, would be respected and beloved abroad. General integrity in all its dealings would inspire universal confidence; differences between nations commonly arise from mutual injuries, and still more from mutual jealousy and distrust. Of the former there would be no longer any ground for complaint; the latter would find nothing to attach upon. But if, in spite of all its justice and forbearance, the violence of some neighbouring state should force it to resist an unprovoked attack, for hostilities strictly defensive are those only in which it would be engaged, its domestic union would double its national force, while the consciousness of a good cause, and of the general favour of Heaven, would invigorate its arm, and inspirit its efforts.

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It must be confessed, that many of the good effects of which Religion is productive to political societies would be produced even by a false Religion, which should prescribe good morals, and should be able to enforce its precepts by sufficient sanctions. Of this nature are those effects which depend on our calling in the aid of a Being who sees the heart, in order to assist the weakness, and in various ways to supply the inherent defects of all human jurisprudence. But the superior excellence of Christianity in this respect must be acknowledged, both in the superiority of her moral code, and in the powerful motives and efficacious means which she furnishes for enabling us to practise it; and in the tendency of her doctrines to provide for the observance of her precepts, by producing tempers of mind which correspond with them.

But, more than all this, it has not perhaps been enough remarked, that true Christianity, from her essential nature, appears peculiarly and pow-

erfully adapted to promote the preservation and healthfulness of political communities. What is in truth their grand malady? The answer is short; Selfishness. This is that young disease received at the moment of their birth, "which grows with their growth, and strengthens with their strength," and through which they at length expire, if not cut off prematurely by some external shock or intestine convulsion.

The disease of selfishness, indeed, assumes different forms in the different classes of society. In the great and the wealthy, it displays itself in luxury, in pomp and parade, and in all the frivolities of a sickly and depraved imagination, which seeks in vain its own gratification, and is dead to the generous and energetic pursuits of an enlarged heart. In the lower orders, when not motionless under the weight of a superincumbent despotism, it manifests itself in pride, and its natural offspring, insubordination, in all its modes. But though the external effects may vary, the internal principle is the same; a disposition in each individual to make self the grand center and end of his desires and enjoyments; to over-rate his own merits and importance, and of course to magnify his claims on others, and in return to under-rate theirs on him; a disposition to undervalue the advantages, and overstate the disadvantages of his condition in life. Thence spring rapacity, and venality, and sensuality. Thence imperious nobles and factious leaders, and an unruly commonalty, bearing with difficulty the inconveniences of a lower station, and imputing to the nature or administration of their government the evils which necessarily flow from the very constitution of our species, or which perhaps are chiefly the result of their own vices and follies. The opposite to selfishness is public spirit, which may be termed, not unjustly, the grand principle of political vitality, the very *life's breath* of states, which tends to keep them active and vigorous, and to carry them to greatness and glory. [. . .]

I might here enlarge with pleasure on the unrivalled excellence, in this very view, of the constitution under which we live in this happy country; and point out how, more perhaps than any which ever existed upon earth, it is so framed, as to provide at the same time for keeping up a due degree of public spirit, and yet for preserving unimpaired the quietness, and comfort, and charities of private life; how it even extracts from selfishness itself many of the advantages which, under less happily constructed forms of government, public spirit only can supply. But such a political discussion, however grateful to a British mind, would here be out of place. It is rather our business to remark, how much Christianity in every way sets herself in direct hostility to selfishness, the mortal distemper of political communities, and consequently, how their welfare must be inseparable from her prevalence. It might, indeed, be almost stated as the main object and chief concern of Christianity, to root out

our natural selfishness, and to rectify the false standard which it imposes on us, with views, however, far higher than any which concern merely our temporal and social well-being; to bring us to a just estimate of ourselves, and of all around us, and to a due impression of the various claims and obligations resulting from the different relations in which we stand. Benevolence, enlarged, vigorous, operative benevolence, is her master principle. Moderation in temporal pursuits and enjoyments, comparative indifference to the issue of worldly projects, diligence in the discharge of personal and civil duties, resignation to the will of God, and patience under all the dispensations of his Providence, are among her daily lessons. Humility is one of the essential qualities, which her precepts most directly and strongly enjoin, and which all her various doctrines tend to call forth and cultivate; and humility, as has been before suggested, lays the deepest and surest grounds for benevolence. In whatever class or order of society Christianity prevails, she sets herself to rectify the particular faults, or, if we would speak more distinctly, to counteract the particular mode of selfishness, to which that class is liable. Affluence she teaches to be liberal and beneficent; authority, to bear its faculties with meekness, and to consider the various cares and obligations belonging to its elevated station, as being conditions on which that station is conferred. Thus, softening the glare of wealth, and moderating the insolence of power, she renders the inequalities of the social state less galling to the lower orders, whom also she instructs, in their turn, to be diligent, humble, patient; reminding them that their more lowly path has been allotted to them by the hand of God; that it is their part faithfully to discharge its duties, and contentedly to bear its inconveniences; that the present state of things is very short; that the objects about which worldly men conflict so eagerly, are not worth the contest; that the peace of mind, which Religion offers to all ranks indiscriminately, affords more true satisfaction than all the expensive pleasures which are beyond the poor man's reach; that in this view, however, the poor have the advantage, and that if their superiors enjoy more abundant comforts, they are also exposed to many temptations from which the inferior classes are happily exempted; that "having, food and raiment, they should be therewith content," for that their situation in life, with all its evils, is better than they have deserved at the hand of God; finally, that all human distinctions will soon be done away, and the true followers of Christ will all, as children of the same father, be alike admitted to the possession of the same heavenly inheritance. Such are the blessed effects of Christianity on the temporal well-being of political communities.

But the Christianity which can produce effects like these must be real, not nominal, deep, not superficial. Such then is the Religion we should

cultivate, if we would realize these pleasing speculations, and arrest the progress of political decay. But in the present circumstances of this country, it is a farther reason for endeavouring to cultivate this vital Christianity, still considering its effects merely in a political view, that, according to all human appearance, we must either have this or none; unless the prevalence of this be in some degree restored, we are likely not only to lose all the advantages which we might have derived from true Christianity, but to incur all the manifold evils which would result from the absence of all religion.

In the first place, let it be remarked, that a weakly principle of Religion, and even such an one, in a political view, is productive of many advantages, though its existence may be prolonged if all external circumstances favour its continuance, can hardly be kept alive, when the state of things is so unfavourable to vital Religion, as it must be confessed to be in our condition of society. Nor is it merely the ordinary effects of a state of wealth and prosperity to which we here allude. Much also may justly be apprehended from that change which has taken place in our general habits of thinking and feeling, concerning the systems and opinions of former times. At a less advanced period of society, indeed, the Religion of the state will be generally accepted, though it be not felt in its vital power. It was the Religion of our forefathers. With the bulk it is on that account entitled to reverence, and its authority is admitted without question. The establishment in which it subsists pleads the same prescription, and obtains the same respect. But in our days, things are very differently circumstanced. Not merely the blind prejudice in favour of former times, but even the proper respect for them, and the reasonable presumption in their favour, has abated. Still less will the idea be endured, of any system being kept up, when the imposture is seen through by the higher orders, for the sake of retaining the common people in subjection. A system, if not supported by a real persuasion of its truth, will fall to the ground.

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The kind of Religion which we have recommended, whatever opinion may be entertained concerning its truth, and to say nothing of the agency of Divine Grace, must at least be conceded to be the only one which is at all suited to make impression upon the lower orders, by strongly interesting the passions of the human mind. If it be thought that a system of ethics may regulate the conduct of the higher classes, such an one is altogether unsuitable to the lower, who must be worked upon by their affections, or they will not be worked upon at all. The ancients were wiser than ourselves, and never thought of governing the community in general by their lessons of philosophy. These lessons were confined to the

schools of the learned, while for the million, a system of Religion, such as it was, was kept up, as alone adapted to their grosser natures. If this reasoning fail to convince, we may safely appeal to experience. Let the Socinian⁶ and the moral teacher of Christianity come forth, and tell us what effects *they* have produced on the lower orders. They themselves will hardly deny the inefficacy of their instructions. But, blessed be God, the Religion which we recommend has proved its correspondence with the character originally given of Christianity, that it was calculated for the poor, by changing the whole condition of the mass of society in many of the most populous districts in this and other countries; and by bringing them from being scenes of almost unexampled wickedness and barbarism, to be eminent for sobriety, decency, industry, and, in short, for whatever can render men useful members of civil society.

If indeed through the blessing of Providence, a principle of true Religion should in any considerable degree gain ground, there is no estimating the effects on public morals, and the consequent influence on our political welfare. These effects are not merely negative; though it would be much, merely to check the farther progress of a gangrene which is eating out the very vital principles of our social and political existence. The general standard of morality formerly described, would be raised, it would at least be sustained and kept for a while from farther depression. The esteem which religious characters would personally attract, would extend to the system which they should hold, and to the establishment of which they should be members. These are all merely natural consequences. But to those who believe in a superintending Providence, it may be added, that the blessing of God might be drawn down upon our country, and the stroke of his anger be for a while suspended.

Let us be spared the painful talk of tracing, on the contrary, the fatal consequences of the extinction of Religion among us. They are indeed such as no man, who is ever so little interested for the welfare of his country, can contemplate without the deepest concern. The very loss of our church establishment, though, as in all human institutions, some defects may be found in it, would in itself be attended with the most fatal consequences. No prudent man dares hastily pronounce how far its destruction might not greatly endanger our civil institutions. It would not be difficult to prove, that the want of it would also be in the highest degree injurious to the cause of Christianity, and still more, that it would take away what appears from experience to be one of the most probable means of its revival. To what a degree might even the avowed principles

⁶ One who stresses the unity of the godhead, and is hence at variance with mainstream Christian emphasis on the divinity of Jesus Christ. Otherwise known as Uniforians.

of men, not altogether without Religion, decline, when our inestimable Liturgy should no longer remain in use; a Liturgy justly inestimable, which continually sets before us a faithful model of the Christian's belief, and practice, and language, restraining us, as far as restraint is possible, from excessive deviations; furnishing us with abundant instruction when we would return into the right path; affording an advantage ground of no little value to such instructors as still adhere to the good old principles of the Church of England; in short, daily shaming us, by preserving a living representation of the opinions and habits of better times, as some historical record, which reproaches a degenerate posterity, by exhibiting the worthier deeds of their progenitors. In such a state of things, to what a depth public morals might sink, may be anticipated by those who consider what would then be the condition of society; who reflect how bad principles and vicious conduct mutually aid each other's operation, and how, in particular, the former make sure the ground which the latter may have gained; who remember, that in the lower orders, the system of honour, and the responsibility of character, are wanting, which in the superior classes, in some poor degree supply the place of higher principles. It is well for the happiness of mankind, that such a community could not long subsist. The cement of society being no more, the state would soon be dissolved into individuality.

Let it not be vainly imagined, that our state of civilization must prevent the moral degeneracy here threatened. A neighbouring nation has lately furnished a lamentable proof, that superior polish and refinement may well consist with a very large measure of depravity.

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What then is to be done? The inquiry is of the first importance, and the general answer to it is not difficult.—The causes and nature of the decay of Religion and morals among us sufficiently indicate the course, which, on principles of sound policy, it is in the highest degree expedient for us to pursue. The distemper of which, as a community, we are sick, should be considered rather as a moral than a political malady. How much has this been forgotten by the disputants of modern times; and accordingly, how transient may be expected to be the good effects of the best of their publications! We should endeavour to tread back our steps. Every effort should be used to raise the depressed tone of public morals. This is a duty particularly incumbent on all who are in the higher walks of life; and it is impossible not to acknowledge the obligations which in this respect we owe as a nation to those exalted characters whom God in his undeserved mercy to us still suffers to continue on the throne, and who set to their subjects a pattern of decency and moderation rarely seen in their elevated station.

But every person of rank, and fortune, and abilities, should endeavour in like manner to exhibit a similar example, and recommend it to the imitation of the circle in which he moves. It has been the opinion of some well-meaning people, that by giving, as far as they possibly could with innocence, into the customs and practices of irreligious men, they might soften the prejudices too frequently taken up against Religion, of its being an austere gloomy service, and thus secure a previous favourable impression against any time when they might have an opportunity of explaining or enforcing their sentiments. This is always a questionable, and, it is to be feared, a dangerous policy. Many mischievous consequences necessarily resulting from it might easily be enumerated. But it is a policy particularly unsuitable to our inconsiderate and dissipated times, and to the lengths at which we are arrived. In these circumstances, the most likely means of producing the *revulsion* which is required, must be boldly to proclaim the distinction between “the adherents of God and Baal.” The expediency of this conduct in our present situation is confirmed by another consideration, to which we have before had occasion to refer. It is this—that when men are aware that something of difficulty is to be effected, their spirits rise to the level of the encounter; they make up their minds to bear hardships and brave dangers, and to persevere in spite of fatigue and opposition: whereas in a matter which is regarded as of easy and ordinary operation, they are apt to slumber over their work, and to fail in what a small effort might have been sufficient to accomplish, for want of having called up the requisite degree of energy and spirit. Conformably to the principle which is hereby suggested, in the circumstances in which we are placed, the line of demarcation between the friends and the enemies of Religion should now be made clear; the separation should be broad and obvious. Let him then, who wishes well to his country, no longer hesitate what course of conduct to pursue. The question now is not, in what liberties he might warrantably indulge himself in another situation, but what are the restraints on himself which the exigencies of the present times render it adviseable for him to impose. Circumstanced as we now are, it is more than ever obvious, that *the best man is the truest patriot*.

Nor is it only by their personal conduct, though this mode will always be the most efficacious, that men of authority and influence may promote the cause of good morals. Let them in their several stations encourage virtue and discountenance vice in others. Let them enforce the laws by which the wisdom of our forefathers has guarded against the grosser infractions of morals [. . .] Let them favour and take part in any plans which may be formed for the advancement of morality. Above all things, let them endeavour to instruct and improve the rising generation, that, if

it be possible, an antidote may be provided for the malignity of that venom which is storing up in a neighbouring country. This has long been to my mind the most formidable feature of the present state of things in France, where, it is to be feared, a brood of moral vipers, as it were, is now hatching, which, when they shall have attained to their mischievous maturity, will go forth to poison the world. But fruitless will be all attempts to sustain, much more to revive, the fainting cause of morals, unless you can in some degree restore the prevalence of Evangelical Christianity. It is in morals as in physics; unless the source of practical principles be elevated, it will be in vain to attempt to make them flow on a high level in their future course. You may force them for a while into some constrained position, but they will soon drop to their natural point of depression. By all, therefore, who are studious of their country's welfare, more particularly by all who desire to support our ecclesiastical establishment, every effort should be used to revive the Christianity of our better days.

Source: William Wilberforce, Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians . . . Contrasted with Real Christianity, London, T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1797, pp. 1–5, 320–30, 364–422.