

THE CATECHUMEN.

A TRANSLATION FROM VOLTAIRE, SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN
WRITTEN BY A NATIVE OF CHINA.

COMMERCIAL affairs had engaged me to make a sea-voyage. I had got far off from the shores of my native country, when a dreadful tempest threw me on an unknown coast: however, I fell into the hands of a very humane people, and soon found they had brought the arts to great perfection, that they practised many virtues, and appeared to me in a state as enlightened as humanity could attain. My admiration of them equalled my gratitude; but, alas! it is but too true that man always discovers by some failing the weakness of his being.

These people showed as much friendship towards me as I could possibly do to them. Their mildness and civility entirely gained my affection. They said to me, one day, "Of what religion are you?" The question surprised me. I asked them if there are two religions: at which they smiled; and I saw they were astonished at my ignorance. They added, "Do you adore gods of wood, or metal, or of stone?" I shrugged my shoulders; and they, with an air of satisfaction, continued, "Do you believe in Moses, who massacred thousands of his fellow-citizens by the order of God?" I expressed indignation. They then demanded if I were a disciple of Mahomet, who cut the moon in two, and concealed the half in his sleeve. I answered only by signs of contempt, which pleased them greatly.

"Are you a Christian?" they said to me at last. I answered, that I did not understand what they meant. They appeared much astonished, and observed, that they knew of but four kinds of religion in the world, and that I did not profess either. I replied, that I was born in a country where but one God, of supreme intelligence and beneficence, was worshipped; who created and governed the world, and who recompensed in another life the good acts that men do in this; that our worship consisted in gratitude and entire submission, and in the habitual exercise of the virtues; that is to say, of moderation, temperance, humanity, beneficence, and justice. "Is that all?" said they. I told them that the whole was included in those words. "How is that?" they remarked: "has your God performed no miracles?" — "He has created the heavens and the earth," I replied; "what would you have more?" — "What! no mysteries, priests, and ceremonies?" I bowed, and said I did not comprehend them. I heard them exclaim among themselves, "Poor man, into what excess of blindness, ignorance, and barbarism, is he plunged!" "My friend," said one of them, "give thanks to God for having conducted you among us to be instructed in our holy religion. You do not know, then, that God has made himself a man?" I assured them it was the first time I had heard of it, and asked them why he had become a man. "Know," continued they, "that the

first man ate an apple which God had forbidden him; in consequence of which all his posterity were condemned to eternal punishment. At another time, men became so criminal, that the Almighty repented of having created them, and drowned them all, with the exception of eight persons. The posterity of these became no better. God continued to be displeased; and, as it was necessary to reconcile him to mankind, God the Son became a man to appease God the Father. . . .

“O sir! these are mysteries which God himself has revealed to men, to the end that they might understand nothing.” — “Wonderful!” said I. They continued, “God wished to humble men’s reason; that is, to give them a disregard for the most precious gift they hold of his bounty.” — “And you make no use of your reason, then?” — “Oh, yes! we are allowed to use it in all other actions of our lives; but in matters of religion it would be impious.” — “Better and better,” said I. “So, then, I find you have three Gods?” — “No, no,” replied they. “We have, indeed, three persons, each of whom is God, — the first is the Father; the second is the Son, or Word; the third is the Holy Spirit: but all these three make only one God.” — “How, gentlemen? these three make but one, and one makes three?” — “Yes, it is so,” replied they, “though contrary to all the rules of arithmetic. You must know that our theology is far superior to this petty science: however, we will explain the whole to you.”

“What do you call the third person?” said I. “The Holy Ghost.” — “Has the Holy Ghost been a man also?” — “No; but he became a pigeon. We do not know, indeed, that this was his natural form; but, when he appeared to the apostles, he was pleased to borrow that shape.”

“And the Son of God has been a man from all eternity?” — “Oh, no! only seventeen hundred years.” — “Of whom, and how, was he born?” — “He was born of a virgin.” — “And who was his mother?” — “The wife of a carpenter.” — “What kind of a life did he lead?” — “He served thirty years in his father’s shop, and was very serviceable to him.” — “Indeed! gentlemen: very well! I perceive you have sublime notions of the Divinity.” — “At the age of thirty, he began to preach to the people in the country, which lasted some time; at length the magistrates became displeased, because in his sermons he said a great deal about rich men, and the officers of government. He foresaw that he would be punished, and perspired both water and blood.” — “Indeed! that is another fine trait in his character.”

“At length he was arrested by the magistrates, and crucified between two robbers.” — “And he died?” — “Yes.” — “And was buried?” — “Yes.” — “Well, then, I suppose that is the end to his history?” — “Hold, sir, you go too fast. He died, it is true; but it was in consideration that God would pardon mankind.” — “Oh! I understand you. God would pardon the sins of mankind because they had killed his Son. Truly, nothing could be better imagined.” — “But know, for testimony of his divinity, he rose again the third day.” — “And what proofs have you of this?” — “The writings

of the disciples." — "But what said the people?" — "They contradicted it."

"O gentlemen! I find you are as well provided with proofs as with reasonings; but did he perform any other miracles?" — "Yes: he cured those possessed of evil spirits, dried a fig-tree, sent devils into a herd of swine, filled the nets of his disciples with fishes, and changed water into wine; but he loved so to humble himself, that never in his life did he own that he was God." — "And why do you believe it?" — "His sectaries have disputed a long time on this important article, as well as of the Holy Ghost, because these persons were not spoken of in the Old Testament. The Holy Ghost was found out to be God after twelve hundred years had passed over; and, as for the divinity of Jesus, three hundred years of disputes, troubles, and massacres, sufficed to decide the matter in his favor."

"As you love this God so much, I suppose he was born in your country?" — "No: he was born in another quarter of the globe." — "Indeed! You go very far to seek your gods. He must, then, have left a book of doctrines of religion, which you thought proper to adopt?" — "No: he did not teach a new religion, neither did he write any thing; but some of his disciples have written his history and discourses." — "And your religion is there exactly described?" — "Oh, no! We have only a few particulars of his life, accompanied by some moral precepts: he has there declared that he came to fulfil the ancient law, and not to change it." — "Then there was a particular religion in the country where he was born, before his time?" — "Yes." — "And it is that same religion that you still observe?" — "No: ours is in direct opposition to it." — "But whence, then, is this new religion; for you own that it was never announced by your God?" — "We have explained, commented, interpreted, without ceasing, these seventeen hundred years on the discourses of Christ; and have drawn from them a long succession of dogmas and mysteries quite new." — "And do you all agree in these interpretations?" — "No: far from it. We have always been disputing, fighting, and killing one another, on account of them." — "Well, I am very sorry to tell you that I do not think your religion very attractive. You do not agree in the explanations, and you quarrel and kill each other about them. Your religion does not at all please me; yet I suppose it had been adopted by the people of the country where your God dwelt?" — "You are again deceived: Christ had but a very small number of disciples, and these were from the lowest class of the people. Have we not already told you that he was put to death by order of the magistrates?" — "What do you say, gentlemen? Was not his doctrine believed by the people he attempted to instruct?" — "No." — "His miracles, have they not persuaded those who were witnesses?" — "No." — "And why should you believe them; you who came seventeen hundred years after him?" — "O sir! all things require an explanation. Know, then, that God sent his Son among this people, whose hearts he had hardened purposely that they might not believe in him."

“ Well explained ! I am quite delighted with your mode of reasoning ; but pray what name do you give this people ? ” — “ Jews. ” — “ Jews, Jews ! I never heard of them. ” — “ No, I believe you. They occupied such a small territory, that their reputation did not extend far : nevertheless, they were formerly God’s favorite people. God chose them from among all the nations of the earth ; he governed them himself, and often conversed with their chiefs. Sometimes, through tenderness for his people, he ordered them to massacre each other ; and at one time twenty-three thousand were put to death by their own citizens at the express command of God.

“ God ordered one of the kings to murder every man of a nation they had vanquished. The king had the audacity to spare some who were not in a state to defend themselves, and was punished for it. A son of this king was condemned to die for eating honey on the day of battle ; and God, who was justly irritated at the father as well as son, proscribed them both, and made choice of a new king.

“ This king (whom God had expressly chosen) committed adultery with the wife of one of his generals, and massacred her husband. By the adulteress he had a son who kept seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines in his seraglio ; but you must know these two kings were cherished by our God : both had heavenly benedictions heaped on their heads. The father was the man after God’s own heart ; and the son was the wisest of men. The Son of God, who became a man, descended in direct line from this *wisest of men*, and from the adulteress of whom we have just spoken.”

“ O gentlemen ! ” exclaimed I, “ you make me shudder at your impious ideas. ” They resumed, “ Have we not told you that the conduct of this God was always mysterious, purposely to humble our weak reason ? The first legislator whom God gave to his favorite people was an assassin ; but he had, nevertheless, the gift of performing a number of miracles. He composed a body of civil and religious rites and laws, which we still revere as having been inspired by the Deity. ” — “ And yet you do not observe them ? ” — “ No, truly. We hold those people in horror who do so. It is true, that this was formerly the favorite people of God, and all other nations were chosen, and this favorite people rejected. Do you not admire, sir, the wisdom of this God we adore ? ”

At this discourse, I stole away from them, and could scarcely persuade myself it was more than a dream. Having before seen to what great perfection this people had attained in every human science, I began to fear the weakness of my nature, and determined to return to my country, lest those abominable European prejudices should make me forget my duty to my fellow-creatures, and reverence for the God of all worlds.