

Section I:

"It Is Impossible to Banish All Religion from the World; and If It Were Possible, It Would be the Greatest Calamity Which Could Befall the Human Race"

by

Archibald Alexander

It is not my object here to consider religion as it is a matter of duty or a means of obtaining happiness in a future world, for both these would be equally disregarded by those men who aim at the subversion of all religion. What I shall attempt at present is to state and establish the fact that man is so constituted that he must have some sort of religion. And the truth of this will be manifest from an inspection of the principles of human nature and from the history of the world.

Man has naturally a sense of moral obligation, a perception of the difference between right and wrong, feelings of remorse or approbation on the review of his conduct, fears of future retribution when he has committed a crime, and a propensity to pay religious homage to some object visible or invisible. These are what have been called his *religious feelings*; and from them he has received the appellation of a *religious animal*. And certainly there is nothing by which man is so clearly distinguished from the creatures below him as this capacity for religion. For whatever indications the brutes give of sagacity in other matters, it is impossible to communicate to them any ideas of morality or any impressions of a religious nature.

Now, that these feelings are natural and not adventitious is manifest because they are found to exist in men of all ages, of all countries, and in every different state of society. And hence no nation ancient or modern has ever been found without some kind of religion. It would be as difficult to find a whole nation without religion as to find one destitute of speech. Some travelers, it is true, from superficial observation, have reported that some savage tribes had no ideas of religion and no species of worship. But on more accurate examination it has been ascertained that this was a mistake. And from our present knowledge of the nations of the earth we are authorized to assert that there is not one totally destitute of some sense of religion and some form of worship.

The same thing was well known to all the wisest men of antiquity. It is a fact from which both Plato and Cicero have derived many important conclusions. And these principles of our nature are so deeply radicated that they never can be removed. Men may be induced to abandon their old religion and to adopt a new one, but they never can remain long free from something of the kind. Take away from them one object of worship and they will soon attach themselves to another. If, unhappily, they lose the knowledge of the true God, they will set up gods of their own invention or receive them from others. The history of all nations bears such ample testimony to this fact that it cannot be denied.

Now this universality of religion evinces in the clearest manner that the principle is natural, that it is an essential thing in the constitution of man--just as the fact that men are always found living in society proves that the social principle exists and is natural to man.

Atheistical men have indeed attempted to trace all religious feelings and all rites of worship to the craft of priests and policy of rulers. But this opinion is not only unsupported by historical testimony but is most unreasonable in itself. For if there had not existed a predisposition to religion in the minds of men, such a design would never have been conceived; and if it had, all attempts to introduce into the mind of man ideas so foreign to his nature must have been abortive. At any rate, such an imposition could not have continued for so long a time and could not have been extended to every tribe and nation in the world. If no sense of religion had existed in the minds of men, priests and politicians (however cunning) would have had no handle to take hold of, no foundation on which to build. Besides, it seems to be forgotten by the advocates of this hypothesis that the existence of priests supposes the previous existence of religion.

They have, moreover, alleged that fear produced the gods. Be it so. It still confirms my position that there is something in the nature of man which leads him to religion. And it is reasonable to conclude that a cause which has operated uniformly heretofore will continue to produce the same effects as long as the world stands. It is impossible, therefore, to banish all religion from the world.

To what degree atheists have succeeded in divesting themselves of all religious impression I do not pretend to know. That some men have gone to a great length in counteracting the constitutional tendencies and extinguishing the feelings of nature is undoubtedly true. But there have

been sufficient indications to lead to the opinion that there is more of affectation than reality in the bravery of their profession. It is known that some of them have (above other men) been the slaves of superstitious fears, and that others in times of extreme peril (as in a storm at sea) have for the moment renounced their atheism and cried as earnestly for mercy as those around them. Now if these philosophers with all their reasoning are not able to erase all religious impressions from their own minds, it is vain to attempt to banish all religion out of the world.

But suppose the great work [was] achieved and that every vestige of religion was obliterated. What would be the result? Would men remain without any objects of religious homage? Would they never again be afraid of invisible powers? Would the feelings of remorse at no time urge them to perform some sort of penance or attempt some kind of expiation? Would no impostors and false prophets arise to deceive the world again with their dreams, fancies, and pretended revelations? They must have made but superficial observations on human nature who think that none of these things would ever occur.

If those persons, therefore, who oppose Christianity hope by its subversion to get rid of all religion, they do greatly deceive themselves. This work being accomplished, they would soon have more to perform in endless progression. Instead of the pure, mild, benignant religion of Christ they would soon find themselves surrounded by superstitions as foul and as false, as monstrous and as absurd as any which the hotbed of paganism ever produced.

Look into the heathen world and see the abominations and miseries which inveterate superstition perpetuates in some of the fairest and most populous regions of the globe. Look at the savage tribes of Africa and America and contemplate the cruel bondage of superstition to which the people are subjected. Evils as great should soon grow up among us were it not for the salutary influence of Christianity. Our forefathers, before they became Christians, were in the same degraded and wretched situation. And shall we curse our posterity by bringing back those evils from which our fathers escaped? It is a truth which should be proclaimed everywhere on the housetops that it is the BIBLE which has delivered us from the horrid dominion of superstition, and it is the BIBLE which must prevent its return. Philosophy has had no hand in working out this deliverance from the horrors of idolatry. With all her celebrated schools and sages she never turned one individual from the worship of idols. And she would be equally powerless in preventing the return of superstition if other barriers were removed.

But I proceed now to the second part of my proposition which is, that if religion could be banished from the world, it would be the greatest calamity which could befall the human race.

It has formerly been a matter of discussion with the learned whether the influence of superstition or atheism was most baleful on society. Plutarch, Bacon, Bayle, Warburton, and others have handled this subject in a learned and ingenious manner, and arrived at very different conclusions. However doubtful this question may have been considered in former times, I believe all reflecting men are now pretty well satisfied that the question is put to rest forever.

We have recently beheld the spectacle of a great nation casting off contemptuously the religion of their fathers and plunging at once into the abyss of atheism. We have seen the experiment tried, to ascertain whether a populous nation could exist without the restraints of religion. Every circumstance was as favorable to the success of the experiment as it could be. Learning was in its highest state of advancement; philosophy boasted of an approximation to perfection; and refinement and politeness had never been more cultivated among any people. But what was the result?

It is written in characters of blood. It was as if a volcano had burst upon the world and disgorged its fiery flood over all Europe. Such a scene of cruelty, cold-blooded malignity, beastly impurity, heaven-daring impiety, and insatiable rapaciousness the world never witnessed before, and I trust in God will never witness again. The only ray of hope which brightened the dismal prospect was that this horrible system contained in itself the principles of its own speedy downfall. Atheism has no bond of union for its professors, no basis of mutual confidence. It breeds suspicion, and consequently hatred, in every breast; and it is actuated by a selfishness which utterly disregards all the bonds of nature, of gratitude, and of friendship.

To an atheist, fear becomes the ruling passion. Conscious of his own want [lack] of virtue, honor, and humanity, he naturally views his fellows in the same light, and is ready to put them out of the way as soon as they appear in any degree to become obstacles to the accomplishment of his plans. Hence, the bloody actors in this tragedy, after glutting their revenge by shedding the blood of innocent Christians and unoffending priests, turned their murderous weapons against each other. Not satisfied with inflicting death on the objects of their suspicion or envy, they actually feasted their

eyes daily with the streams of blood which incessantly flowed from the guillotine. Never was the justice of heaven against impious and cruel men more signally displayed than in making these miscreants the instruments of vengeance against each other.

The general state of morals in France during the period that Christianity was proscribed and atheism reigned was such as almost exceeds belief. An eyewitness of the whole scene, and actor in some parts of it, has drawn the following sketch:

Multiplied cases of suicide, prisons crowded with innocent persons, permanent guillotines, perjuries of all classes, parental authority set at nought, debauchery encouraged by an allowance to those called unmarried mothers; nearly six thousand divorces within the single city of Paris within a little more than two years after the law authorized them; in a word, whatever is most obscene in vice, and most dreadful in ferocity.
[Gregoire]

If these be the genuine fruits of atheism, then let us rather have superstition in its most appalling form. Between atheism and superstition there is this great difference: that while the latter sanctions some crimes, the former opens the floodgates to all. The one restrains partially, the other removes all restraint from vice. Every kind of religion presents some terrors to evil doers. Atheism promises complete immunity and stamps virtue itself with the character of folly.

But we must not suppose that the whole mass of the French people became atheists during this period. Far from it. A large majority viewed the whole scene with horror and detestation. But the atheistical philosophers had got the power in their hands, and through a small minority of the nation were able to effect so much mischief. But from this example we may conjecture what would be the state of things if the whole mass of people in a nation should become atheists, or be freed from all the restraints of conscience and religion.

Such an event can never occur. But if it could, all must acknowledge that no greater calamity could be imagined. It would be a lively picture of hell upon earth. For what is there in the idea of hell more horrible than the absence of all restraint and all hope, and the uncontrolled dominion of the most malignant passions! But there would be one remarkable point of difference: for while atheists deny the God that made them, the inhabitants

of hell *believe and tremble!*

Section I from *A Brief Outline of the Evidences of the Christian Religion* by Archibald Alexander (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1825). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.