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From the COLUMBIAN MAGAZINE.

An Enquiry into the consistency of OATHS with Reason and Christianity.

IN discussing this question, I shall first mention the objections to oaths, which are founded in reason; and, secondly, the objections to them which are derived from the precepts and spirit of the Christian religion.

1. Oaths produce an idea in the minds of men, that there are two kinds or degrees of truth; the one intended for common, and the other for solemn occasions. Now, this idea is directly calculated to beget a want of reverence for the supposed inferior kind of truth; hence men are led to trifle with it in the common affairs of human life. I grant that some men will tell the truth, when urged to it by the solemn formalities of an oath, who would not otherwise do it: But this proves the great mischief of oaths in society; for as these men are called upon to speak the truth 999 times in common life, to once they are called upon to swear to it, we have exactly 999 falsehoods to one truth told by them. How extensive, then, must be the mischief of this great disproportion between truth and falsehood; in all the affairs of human life! It is wrong to do anything that shall create an idea of two kinds of truth. There is a scale of falsehoods; but truth has no degrees or subdivisions. Like its divine author, it is an eternal unchangeable UNIT.

2. The practice of swearing according to human laws, appears to be the cause of all the profane swearing, which is so universal among all ranks of people; for if there are two modes of speaking the truth, it is natural for men to prefer that mode which the laws of our country have entitled to the first degree of credibility; hence men swear, when they wish to be believed, in common conversation.

3. Oaths have been multiplied upon so many trifling occasions that they have ceased, in a great degree, to operate with any force upon the most solemn occasions: hence the universal prevalence of perjury in courts, armies and custom-houses, all over the world. This fact is so notorious in Jamaica, that a law has lately been passed in that island, which requires a bond of £. 200, instead of an oath, from every Captain that enters his vessel in the custom house, as a security for his veracity in the manifest of his cargo, and for the amount of his duties to the government.

Reason and scripture (when perfectly understood) are never contrary to each other; and revelation from God can never give a sanction to that which is so evidently absurd, and unfriendly to the interests of human society. Let us proceed then to examine the bible, and here we shall find, that oaths are as contrary to the precepts and spirit of Christianity as they are to sound reason.

Before I mention either the precepts or the spirit of the gospel, which militate against oaths, I shall first mention a few of the cases of swearing which I find upon record in the new testament. I shall first mention the precedents in favour of this practice, and then the precepts and precedents against it.

The first precedent I shall produce, is taken from the example of the devil, who addresses our Saviour in an oath, in Mark v. 7. "What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God that thou torment me not."

A second precedent is taken from the example of the high priest, who addresses our Saviour in an oath, in Matthew xxvi. 63. "I adjure thee," says he, just before he consents to his death, "by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ the son of God." It has been said that there was no impropriety in this mode of expression, otherwise our Saviour would have rebuked it; but let it be remembered, that he stood before the tribunal of a high priest, as a prisoner, and not as a teacher; and hence we find he submits in silence to all the profane insults that were offered him.

He moreover accomplished by this silence a prophecy respecting himself, that when he should be led to judgment, he should be "dumb, and open not his mouth."

Peter furnishes a third example in favour of swearing. "And again he denied" (says Matthew, chap. xxvi. 72.) "with an oath, I know not the man." It would seem from this account, that a bare affirmation was so characteristic of a disciple of Jesus Christ, that Peter could not use a more direct method to convince the maid, who charged him with being a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, than he was not a Christian, than by having recourse to the Jewish and pagan practice of taking an oath.

Herod furnishes a fourth instance of swearing, in Matthew xiv. 7. when he promised to give the daughter of Herodias whatever she should ask of him: she asked for John the baptist's head in a charger: the King repented of his hasty promise; "nevertheless, for the oaths sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded it to

be given her." Here it is evident he would have violated a common promise. But if common promises are not held sacred, and binding, there is an end of a great portion, of truth in society, and of all the order and happiness which arise from it. To secure constant and universal truth, men should swear always or not at all.

A fifth precedent for swearing we find in the six of Acts and 13th verse. "Then certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them which had evil spirits, the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, we adjure thee, by Jesus whom Paul preacheth. And the man in whom the evil spirit was, leaped on them, and overcame them; so that they fled out of the house naked and wounded."

The last precedent for swearing that I shall mention, is the one related in Acts xxiii. 21st. It contains an account of forty men who had bound themselves, by an oath, not to eat or drink, until they had killed St. Paul. It would seem that this banditti knew each other perfectly, and that they would not act together under the form of a common obligation. The occasion indeed, seems to require an oath. It was an association to commit murder. I am disposed to suspect that oaths were introduced originally to compel men to do things that were contrary to justice, or to their consciences.

In mentioning the precepts and precedents that are to be found in the new testament against swearing, the following striking passage, taken from Matthew v. verses 34, 35, 36, 37, should alone determine the question. "Swear not at all, neither by Heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be yea, yea; nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these, cometh of evil."

I know that these words are said to be levelled only against profane swearing in common conversation; but this will appear improbable, when we reflect upon the frequency and number of oaths which were admitted by the Jewish institutions, and that the principal part of the discourse of our Saviour, from whence that passage is taken, is intended to shew the corruptions or imperfections of those institutions, and the superiority of the gospel dispensation over them.

There is a peculiar meaning in the reason which is given for the prohibition of swearing in this precept, viz. that any thing more than a bare affirmation, cometh of evil. Yes, it came originally from the universal prevalence of falsehood in society; but the Christian religion, by opening new sources of moral and religious obligation, and by discovering more fully the beauty and rewards of truth, and deformity and future punishment of falsehood, has rendered the obligation of oaths wholly unnecessary. They comported with the feeble discoveries of the Jewish, and numerous corruptions of the Pagan religions; but they are unnecessary under that full and clear manifestation of the divine will which is contained in the gospel. Cesar's wife should not be suspected.—With how much more propriety should this be said of the veracity of a Christian, than of the chastity of the wife of a heathen Emperor. Every time a Christian swears, he exposes the purity and truth of his religion to suspicion. "As for you, Petrach, your word is sufficient," said the Cardinal Colonna, in an enquiry into the cause of a riot that happened in his family, while that celebrated poet was a member of it; and in which he exacted an oath from every other member of his family, not excepting his own brother, the Bishop of Luna. The same address should be made to every Christian, when he is called upon to declare the truth, "You believe in a future state of rewards and punishment—you profess to be the follower of that Being who has inculcated a regard for truth, under the awful consideration of his omniscience, and who has emphatically styled himself the TRUTH." Your word, therefore, is sufficient.

A Nobleman is permitted, by the laws of England, to declare the truth upon his honor. The profession of Christianity is declared in scripture to be an high calling, and Christians are said to be priests and Kings. Strange! that persons of such high rank, should be treated with less respect than English Noblemen; and still more strange! that persons possessing these august titles should betray their illustrious birth and dignity, by conforming to a practice which tends so much to invalidate the truth and excellency of their religion.

It is very remarkable, that in all the accounts we have of the intercourse of our Saviour with his disciples, and of their subsequent intercourse with each other, there is no mention made of a single oath being taken by either of them.

Perhaps there never was an event in which the highest degrees of evidence were more necessary, than they were to establish the truth of the resurrection of our Saviour, as on the truth of this miracle depended the credibility of the Christian religion. But in the establishment of the truth of this great event, no oath is taken, or required. The witnesses of it simply relate what they saw, and are believed by all the disciples; except one,

who still remembered too well the prohibition of his master, swear not at all, to ask for an oath to remove his unbelief.

It is worthy of notice likewise, that no preposterous oath of office is required of the disciples when they assume the apostolic character, and are sent forth to preach the gospel to all nations. How unlike the spirit of the gospel are those human laws, which require oaths of fidelity, every year: and which appear to be founded in the absurd idea that men are at all times the guardians of their own virtue.

There can be no doubt of Christians having uniformly refused to take an oath in the first ages of the church: nor did they conform to this pagan custom, till after Christianity was corrupted by a mixture with many other parts of the pagan and Jewish religions.

There are two arguments in favour of oaths, which are derived from the new testament, and which remain to be refuted—1st. St. Paul uses several expressions in his epistles which amount to oaths, and even declares "an oath to be the end of strife." It was the character of St. Paul, that he became all things to all men. He circumcised as well as baptised Jews, and proves the truth of revelation by a quotation from a heathen poet. Oaths were a part of the Jewish and Pagan institutions—and, like several other ceremonies, for some time, continued to retain a strong hold of the prejudices of the new converts to Christianity. St. James, who was less accommodating to these prejudices, bears a testimony against oaths, nearly in the same words, which were before used by his master.

2d. It has been said, that the great Jehovah frequently swears, both in the old and new testament, and that the angel who is to sound the last trumpet will "swear that time shall be no more." Every expression of this kind should be considered as an accommodation to Jewish and Pagan customs, in order to render the truths of revelation more intelligible and acceptable. The Supreme Being, for the same reasons, often assumes to himself the violent passions, and even the features and senses of men: And yet who can suppose it proper to ascribe either of them to a Being, one of whose perfections consists in his existing as a pure unchangeable spirit.

If oaths are contrary to reason, and have a pernicious influence upon morals and the order of society; and above all, if they are contrary to the precepts and spirit of the gospel; it becomes legislators and ministers of the gospel, to consider how far they are responsible for all the falsehood, profane swearing and perjury that exist in society. It is in the power of legislators to abolish oaths, by expunging them from our laws; and it is in the power of ministers of the gospel, by their influence and example, to render truth so simple and obligatory, that human government shall be ashamed to ask any other mode of declaring it from CHRISTIANS, than by a bare affirmation.

The friends of virtue and freedom have beheld, with great pleasure a new Constitution established in the United States, whose objects are peace, union, and justice. It will be in the power of the first Congress that shall act under this Constitution, to set the world an example of enlightened policy, by framing laws that shall command obedience, without the absurd and improper obligation of oaths. By this means they will add the restoration and establishment of TRUTH, to the great and valuable objects of the Constitution that have been mentioned.

PRICE-CURRENT.

PHILADELPHIA.

Flour superfine,	37/6. pr. barrel.
— common,	32/6. do.
Bur-Middlings,	25/6. a 26/6. do.
Indian Meal,	15/6. do.
Tar,	10/6. do.
Pitch,	15/6. a 17/6. do.
Turpentine,	12/6. do.
Pork Burlington,	34/5. do.
Beef Irish,	21. 10/6. a 31. do.
— Country,	40/6. a 45/6. do.
Mackrel,	45/6. a 51/6. do.
Herring,	15/6. a 18/6. do.
Rice-Ituff,	7/6. a 9/6. pr. Cat.
Rice,	20/6. do.
Mulcovada Sugar,	52/6. a 67/6. do.
James-river,	30/6. a 40/6. do.
York,	30/6. a 40/6. do.
Rappahannock,	30/6. do.
Maryland, col'd,	45/6. do.
Western Shore, long leaf,	25/6. a 27/6. do.
Eastern Shore,	20/6. a 27/6. do.
Best Carol,	35/6. a 37/6. do.
Inferior ditto,	30/6. do.
Lead in pigs,	55/6. do.
Wheat,	7/6. pr. bushel.
Rye,	2/6. a 3/6. do.
Barley,	4/3. do.
Indian Corn,	2/9. do.
Oats,	1/8. a 2/6. do.
Flaxseed,	2/4. a 2/6. do.
Salt Allum,	3/6. do.
— Liverpool,	18d. do.
Rum, Jamaica,	4/3. a 4/6. pr. gallon.
— Windward,	3/6. a 4/6. do.
— French,	2/6. do.
— N. England,	2/9. do.
Brandy,	4/9. do.
Wine, Sherry,	6/6. a 8/6. do.

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