

CHEAP REPOSITORY.

Sunday Reading,

On the Religious Advantages of the present
Inhabitants of Great Britain.



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(PRINTER to the CHEAP REPOSITORY for Moral and
Religious Tracts) No. 17, Queen-Street, and No. 4,
Aldermary Church-Yard, and R. WHITE, Picca-
dilly, London.

By S. HAZARD,

(PRINTER to the CHEAP REPOSITORY) at Bath: and
by all Bookfellers, Newsmen, and Hawkers in Town
and Country.

Great Allowance will be made to Shopkeepers and Hawkers.

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5d. for 25.

OF THE RELIGIOUS ADVANTAGES
OF THE PRESENT
INHABITANTS of GREAT BRITAIN.

IT has often been observed by travellers that an Englishman can have no just idea of the superior comforts which he enjoys in his own country, until he has been abroad. A remark of the same kind may be applied to the subject of our religious advantages; for we are apt to undervalue these also in proportion as we see them to be common, and it may therefore be useful to let our imaginations carry us occasionally both into foreign countries and into distant ages of the world.

Reader! why was not your lot cast in some region of Africa, among some tribe of Savages, millions of whom at this time dwell on the earth, hunting in the woods, or crossing the desert in search of food, naked, and blinded, and destitute; many of them wild as their own beasts of prey, and some of them even devouring one another? you have in no wise deserved to be put on any better footing, as to your earthly existenc, than even the least favoured of your race. He who appointed to the African his place of birth, might with equal justice have assigned the same lot to you; and you ought therefore to thank that God who alone "hath made you to differ."

Or why, it may again be asked, are you not groping, as millions of others are, in Mahometan darkness; who are taught even by their religion, to indulge their pride and their passions, and to feign to themselves an earthly and sensual heaven, to be bestowed as the very reward of cruel rage and persecution?—Or, why it may still be added are you not passing your life as a slave to some European master, toiling for him with your body, while you are without instruction as to your mind? Again, even if born in Britain, yet why had you not your being in it in those days when the Gospel had not yet enlightened it; when the Priests, instead of preaching peace and good-will in the name of Christ, and teaching men the love of each other, dealt in human sacrifices, pretended to prophesy from the manner in which the blood flowed from the wounds, worshipped their native oak, and endeavoured to blind the people by the same superstition?—Or if indeed in some degree more favoured than they, why were you not born when christianity was corrupted in this land, as it was for many hundred years by Popery; when absolutions for sin were bought and sold, when a corrupt clergy possessed both the power and the wealth, and when high and low, Prince and people, were alike reduced into subjection to them?*

* It is not intended to imply that the present Papists resemble exactly those who are here spoken of: there is now a considerable distinction also between those who are merely called Catholics and the Papists.

once more it may be added, allowing you to have had your being since the days of the reformation, yet why was it not in the time of the civil wars, when political as well as religious hatred burnt even among Protestants; when the throne of this Realm was disputed, and when the blood of its inhabitants was flowing freely over *its own* plains.

We have been living indeed in happy times, when this hath been a favoured country: We have been born, perhaps it may be safely said, in one of the most favoured countries of the earth, and also in some of the most favoured times of that country.---Indeed so favoured, and so long favoured have we been, that we have almost learned to forget the general confusion and misery which prevail in the world; for this is not the usual course of God's dealings with it---We lose sight, amidst our own extraordinary blessings, of the common corruption of man, as well as of the common consequences of that corruption. We forget that "the world lieth in wickedness," and that He who made it hath ever had a controversy with it.

But let us now speak more directly of our own peculiar privileges. In the first place, We have been blessed in general with *great national prosperity*. The voice of war has been heard indeed, but it has been heard only at a distance; for even when our soldiers and sailors have been engaged in it, we ourselves have been living quietly at home, each of us sitting under his own vine and his
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own fig-tree, no one maketh him afraid; and surely it may be considered as one great mercy, in such a troubled world as this, and as no small advantage to religion also, to be thus placed at a distance from foreign enemies, and to be at the same time protected by wholesome laws from the terror of those violent and wicked men who may dwell among us.

This also is a land in which I will next observe that *religious liberty* has been enjoyed more than in most other nations: no Englishman has been hindered from worshipping God in such a manner as might seem best to his own conscience, and that spirit of persecution which formerly disgraced even the christian church is now both restrained by statute, and is generally disavowed by christians.

Here also let it in the next place be thankfully remembered that the sabbath is set apart peculiarly for religious uses. On this sacred day the poor man rests from his toil, and both the rich and the poor are invited to lay aside their cares and anxieties, their worldly conversation and employment, in order that they may improve their religious knowledge, and may repair that decay of their christian principles, which is apt to arise on other days even from our lawful commerce with the world.

But I proceed to name a further blessing. The *scriptures* have been published in the land, having been translated into our own language; and owing to the bounty of religious societies, or to the zeal of individuals, they have been freely given among

the poorer ranks, who have been also taught to read them in their infancy, through that abundance either of Sunday or weekly schools, which public charity has also set up.

I add lastly, that while the people, both high and low, have thus been enabled to examine the scriptures for themselves, that *gospel* which they contain has been also statedly preached, and even without expence to a great proportion of the hearers.

Let us here pause in order to make some reflections on the greatness of the last mentioned blessings, in doing which however I shall only speak shortly of christianity in general, and chiefly of that vast importance which every one who gives any credit to the sacred writings must necessarily ascribe to it.

In the representation which is there given of it, every circumstance is introduced which can raise our ideas on such a subject. In the very beginning of the world we find that prophecies were made concerning it: the general dispensations of providence, and in particular the establishment of the Jewish nation tended for some thousand years before to make way for the coming of Christ; all the Prophets are described in the New Testament as "inquiring and searching diligently before hand into the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow." When the time of his appearance draws near John the Baptist is sent to tell of his approach; and when he is born, a multitude of the heavenly host are heard "praising God, and saying, glory

to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will towards men." The wise men draw near to the infant Saviour and "rejoice with exceeding joy." Apostles count it an unspeakable honor to be permitted to lay out their lives in spreading his name over the earth, and the body of christians who lived either in the same days, or those immediately following, are described as "rejoicing even in him whom they had not seen, with joy unspeakable and full of glory." We read also that the surrounding heathens who are represented as "sitting" before this time "in darkness, and in the region of the shadow of death" are now congratulated that to them "the light had sprung up, and that the day-spring from on high had visited them," and every where in short christianity is spoken of in the loftiest terms, as the glorious gospel of the ever blessed God, and as the most precious blessing that was ever sent to the human race.

It is plain then that the gift of the gospel was considered as the greatest of all God's gifts in the days of which I have been speaking. It is also easy to prove that this blessing even in its largest extent, belongs just as much to us, if we are real christians, as to those who lived in the time of Christ: when our Saviour prayed for his disciples, he "prayed not for them only, but for all who should believe on him through their word *that they all might be one,*" and accordingly St. Peter in his first sermon declares to his hearers "for the promise is to you and to your children,

children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." I add another observation; it seems equally plain that they who now remain without the gospel must be considered as in much the same state with those who were formerly without it, and whom the Apostles laid out their lives in endeavouring to convert: let it be remembered therefore that as the Gospel is the same, so believers are the same, and unbelievers the same in all ages.

Indeed without appealing so particularly to scripture it appears even from the nature of man that he clearly stands in need of that very blessing which it is the object of christianity to hold out to him, and that he needs it now just as much as in any former time. For does he not continue to be a being that is naturally very dark and ignorant concerning his own future state? Is he not also full of wants and weaknesses, and of passions which need restraint? left to himself does he not corrupt himself as he did formerly? and is he not therefore in like manner a creature that is guilty before God? Thus blind and ignorant and prone to wander from his duty, and loaded with the burden of his guilt, he sinks down into the grave; it follows therefore that he needs the same gospel to remove his darkness, to restrain and direct his steps into life, to give him peace in his conscience, and a cheerful hope in his latter end.

This then is that great and superior privilege of
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the inhabitants of Great Britain, on which it becomes us to dwell, the privilege of having the gospel published among us with all its important doctrines, precepts, warnings, encouragements and consolations. Other blessings have been also named, each of them tending to promote our religious improvement, by which it has been further shewn, how remarkably we have been favoured as a nation.

And now let it be briefly and generally asked what are the returns which we have made for all that care and kindness of Providence, which we have experienced. The Prophet Isaiah speaking of that once favoured but now rejected nation the Jews, likens them to "a vineyard in a very fruitful hill, the owner of which had it fenced and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vines, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a wine press therein." It is added, "what could I have done more to my vineyard that I have not done to it? wherefore I looked that it should bring forth grapes, but when I looked for grapes, it brought forth wild grapes." What then are the fruits brought forth among us who are that vineyard, which the same hand of the Lord hath in these latter days of the world, both fenced, and digged, and planted.

Great Britain calls itself a Christian nation. Are Britons then distinguished every where over the earth by all the virtues and graces of that Christian religion? Are we spoken of abroad for instance as remarkable chiefly for the christian meekness,

meekness, and self-denial and purity, and humility, and piety of our national character. Are we known by the devout worship of God, which wherever Britons carry either their arms or their factories they are observed to set up. Does our name stand high in Africa as well as in Asia, and all the Isles of America, on account of our disinterested and holy zeal to extend our own gospel among the people of those benighted parts?

But it may be said perhaps that our foreign adventurers and distant settlers may not carry with them the most favourable sample of the religion of their own country, and that these are apt to be the more corrupt part of a community. What are we then at home? Is Christian baptism undertaken every where, in Great Britain with deep solemnity, and are the vows then entered into remembered and laid to heart in order that they may be scrupulously fulfilled. Again is the sabbath duly honoured and observed, and turned to a religious use? Are the churches and places of worship every where full of worshippers, and is the Sacrament of the Lord's supper, that appointed memorial of our faith in Christ, piously, constantly, and very generally, as well as worthily received? In a word, does that gospel which has been spoken of flourish every where within the land evidently warming every heart, regulating every life, and exciting the joyful praises of every tongue.

All indeed are not fervent in religion, it will perhaps

haps be admitted. But surely we may hope that our morals at least are every where pure, and that the grosser sins cannot have any place in a country so blessed with the gospel, as we are so reformed from all the errors of Popery, and now so eminently christian. Is there then no fraud or dishonesty practised in the land—No drunkenness known in it? Doth chastity distinguish both our male and our female youth? Is marriage that ordinance of God, the disuse of which is the reproach of even Heathen nations, duly regarded in every respect? Is profaneness also banished from the land. Is the name of God never trifled with nor blasphemed? Is there no swearing in our streets?

But then it is only the few, it may be hoped, who are actually vicious, while the many, as it should be charitably supposed, even if not religious are at least very moral people. But what are the proofs of this general morality. Is vice out of countenance? Are the vicious so few that they hide themselves in corners, and are evidently ashamed." When, for instance, a number of men happen to meet together in this land, do the bulk of them agree to allow of no unchristian jest, or toast or song. And again, to mention another test of general corruption when a corrupt book is published, will my readers all bear solemn witness that it finds no sale.

But perhaps it will be said and with some degree of justice, that the religious advantages which have been spoken of are not common to all, that the gospel is not fully known, or even preached among

us, and that we ought not to wonder at the wickedness of the land, since the means of our cure are so much neglected.

This is a subject which must be reserved for future consideration, being one which will naturally be treated of in the course of our further Sunday Reading.

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