

“No need of theology ... only of reason ...”

Baron d'Holbach

*Paul Henri Thiry, baron d'Holbach (1723-1789), was a philosophical materialist who unabashedly preached atheism. The following selection is from his Common Sense, or Natural Ideas Opposed to Supernatural, published in 1772.*

When we coolly examine the opinions of men, we are surprised to find, that in those, which they regard as the most essential, nothing is more uncommon than the use of common sense; or, in other words, a degree of judgment sufficient to discover the most simple truths, to reject the most striking absurdities, and to be shocked with palpable contradictions. We have an example of it in theology, a science revered in all times and countries, by the greatest number of men; an object they regard as the most important, the most useful, and the most indispensable to the happiness of societies. Indeed, with little examination of the principles, upon which this pretended science is founded, we are forced to acknowledge, that these principles, judged incontestable, are only hazardous suppositions, imagined by ignorance, propagated by enthusiasm or knavery, adopted by timid credulity, preserved by custom, which never reasons, and revered solely because not understood. *Some, says Montaigne, make the world think, that they believe what they do not; others, in greater number, make themselves think, that they believe what they do not, not knowing what belief is.*

In a word, whoever will deign to consult common sense upon religious opinions, and bestow in this inquiry the attention that is commonly given to objects, we presume interesting, will easily perceive, that these opinions have no foundation; that all religion is an edifice in the air; that theology is only the ignorance of natural causes reduced to system; that it is a long tissue of chimeras and contradictions. That it represents, in every country, to the different nations of the earth, only romances void of probability, the hero of which is himself composed of qualities impossible to combine; that his name, exciting in all hearts respect and fear, is only a vague word, which men have continually in their mouths, without being able to affix to it ideas or qualities, which are not contradicted by facts, or evidently inconsistent with one another.

The idea of this being, of whom we have no idea, or rather, the word by which he is designated, would be an indifferent thing, did it not cause innumerable ravages in the world. Prepossessed with the opinion, that this phantom is an interesting reality, men, instead of concluding wisely from its incomprehensibility, that they are not bound to regard it; on the contrary infer, that they cannot

sufficiently meditate upon it, that they must contemplate it without ceasing, reason upon it without end, and never lose sight of it. Their invincible ignorance, in this respect, far from discouraging them, irritates their curiosity; instead of putting them upon guard against their imagination, this ignorance renders them decisive, dogmatical, imperious, and even exasperates them against all, who oppose doubts to the reveries, which their brains have begotten.

What perplexity arises, when it is required to solve an insolvable problem! Restless meditations upon an object, impossible to understand, in which, however, he thinks himself much concerned, cannot but put man in a very ill humor, and produce in his head dangerous transports. Let interest, vanity and ambition, co-operate ever so little with these dispositions, and society must necessarily be disturbed. This is the reason that so many nations have often been the theaters of the extravagances of senseless dreamers, who, believing, or publishing their empty speculations as eternal truths, have kindled the enthusiasm of princes and people, and armed them for opinions, which they represented as essential to the glory of the Deity, and the happiness of empires. In all parts of our globe, intoxicated fanatics have been seen cutting each other's throats, lighting funeral piles, committing, without scruple and even as a duty, the greatest crimes, and shedding torrents of blood. For what? To strengthen, support, or propagate the impertinent conjectures of some enthusiasts, or to give validity to the cheats of some impostors, in the name and behalf of a being, who exists only in their imagination, and who has made himself known only by the ravages, disputes, and follies, he has caused upon the earth.

Fierce and uncultivated nations, perpetually at war, have in their origin, under divers names, adored some God, conformable to their ideas; that is to say, cruel, carnivorous, selfish, blood-thirsty. We find, in all religions of the earth, a *God of armies*, a *jealous God*, an *avenging God*, a *destroying God*, a *God*, who is pleased with carnage, and whom his worshippers, as a duty, serve to his taste. Lambs, bulls, children, men, heretics, infidels, kings, whole nations are sacrificed to him. Do not the zealous servants of this so barbarous God, even think it a duty to offer up themselves as a sacrifice to him? We every where see madmen, who, after dismal meditations upon their terrible God, imagine, that to please him, they must do themselves all possible injury, and inflict on themselves, for his honor, invented torments. In short, the gloomy ideas of the divinity, far from consoling men under the evils of life, have every where disquieted and confused their minds, and produced follies destructive to their happiness.

Infested with frightful phantoms, and guided by men, interested in perpetuating its ignorance and fears, how could the human mind have made any considerable progress? Man has been forced to vegetate in his primitive stupidity; nothing has been offered to his mind, but stories of invisible powers, upon whom his happiness was supposed to depend. Occupied solely by his fears, and unintelligible reveries, he has always been at the mercy of his priests, who have reserved to themselves the right of thinking for him, and directing his actions.

Thus man has been, and ever will remain, a child without experience, a slave

without courage, a stupid animal, who has feared to reason, and who has never known how to extricate himself from the labyrinth, where his ancestors had strayed. He has believed himself forced to groan under the yoke of his gods, whom he has known only by the fabulous accounts of his ministers, who, after having bound him with the chords of opinion, have remained his masters; or rather have abandoned him, defenseless, to the absolute power of tyrants, no less terrible than the gods, whose representatives they have been upon earth.

Crushed under the double yoke of spiritual and temporal power, it was impossible for the people to know and pursue their happiness. As religion, politics, and morality became sanctuaries, into which the ungodly were not permitted to enter, men had no other morality, than what their legislators and priests brought down from the unknown regions of the Empyrean. The human mind, confused with its theological opinions, forgot itself, doubted its own powers, mistrusted experience, feared truth, disdained its reason, and abandoned her direction, blindly to follow authority. Man was a mere machine in the hands of his tyrants and priests, who alone had the right of directing his actions; always led like a slave, he ever had his vices and character. These are the true causes of the corruption of morals, to which religion ever opposes only ideal barriers, and that without effect. Ignorance and servitude are calculated to make men wicked and unhappy. Knowledge, reason, and liberty can alone reform them, and make them happier; but every thing conspires to blind them, and confirm their errors. Priests cheat them, tyrants corrupt, the better to enslave them. Tyranny ever was, and ever will be, the true cause of the corruption of morals, and the habitual calamities of men; who, almost always fascinated with religious notions, and metaphysical fictions, instead of turning their eyes to the natural and obvious causes of their misery, attribute their vices to the imperfection of their nature, and their unhappiness to the anger of the gods. They offer up to heaven vows, sacrifices, and presents, to obtain the end of their sufferings, which, in reality, are chargeable only to the negligence, ignorance, and perversity of their guides, the folly of their institutions, their silly customs, false opinions, irrational laws, and above all, to the want of knowledge. Let men's minds be filled with true ideas; let their reason be cultivated; let justice govern them; and there will be no need of opposing to the passions, such a feeble barrier, as a fear of gods. Men will be good, when they are well instructed, well governed, and when they are punished or despised for the evil, and justly rewarded for the good, they do to their fellow-creatures.

In vain should we attempt to cure men of their vices, unless we begin by curing them of their prejudices. It is only by shewing them the truth, that they will know their dearest interests, and the motives that ought to incline them to do good. Instructors have long enough fixed men's eyes upon heaven, let them now turn them upon earth. Fatigued with an inconceivable theology, ridiculous fables, impenetrable mysteries, puerile ceremonies, let the human mind apply itself to the study of nature, to intelligible objects, sensible truths, and useful knowledge. Let the vain chimeras of men be removed, and reasonable opinions will soon come of themselves, into those heads, which were thought to be forever

destined to error.

Does it not suffice to annihilate or shake religious prejudices, to shew, that what is inconceivable to man, cannot be made for him? Does it then require any thing, but plain, common sense, to perceive, that a being incompatible with the most evident notions; that a cause continually opposed to the effects, which we attribute to it; that a being, of whom we can say nothing, without falling into contradiction; that a being, who, far from explaining the enigmas of the universe, only makes them more inexplicable; that a being, whom for so many ages men have so vainly addressed to obtain their happiness, and the end of their sufferings; does it require, I say, any thing but plain, common sense, to perceive, that the idea of such a being is an idea without model, and that it is evidently only a being of imagination? Is any thing necessary but common sense to perceive, at least, that it is madness and folly to hate and torment one another for unintelligible opinions upon a being of this kind? In short, does not every thing prove, that morality and virtue are totally incompatible with the notions of a God, whom his ministers and interpreters have described in every country, as the most capricious, unjust, and cruel of tyrants, whose pretended will, however, must serve as law and rule to the inhabitants of the earth?

To learn the true principles of morality, men have no need of theology, of revelation, or gods: They have need only of reason. They have only to enter into themselves, to reflect upon their own nature, consult their sensible interests, consider the object of society, and of the individuals, who compose it; and they will easily perceive, that virtue is the interest, and vice the unhappiness of beings of their kind. Let us persuade men to be just, beneficent, moderate, sociable; not because the gods demand it, but because they must please men. Let us advise them to abstain from vice and crimes; not because they will be punished in the other world, but because they will suffer for it in this.—*There are*, says a great man, *means to prevent crimes—these are punishments; there are those to reform manners—these are good examples.*

Truth is simple; error is complex, uncertain in its progress, and full of windings. The voice of nature is intelligible; that of falsehood is ambiguous, enigmatical, mysterious; the way of truth is straight; that of imposture is crooked and dark. Truth, forever necessary to man, must necessarily be felt by all upright minds; the lessons of reason are formed to be followed by all honest men. Men are unhappy only because they are ignorant; they are ignorant only because every thing conspires to prevent their being enlightened; they are so wicked only because their reason is not yet sufficiently unfolded.

By what fatality then, have the first founders of all sects given to their gods the most ferocious characters, at which nature recoils? Can we imagine a conduct more abominable, than that ascribed by Moses to his God, towards the Egyptians, where that assassin proceeds boldly to declare, in the name, and by the order of *his* God, that Egypt shall be afflicted with the greatest calamities, that can happen to man. Of all the different ideas, which they wish to give us of a supreme being, of a God, creator and preserver of men, there are none more

horrible, than those of these impostors, who believed themselves inspired by a divine spirit.

Why, O theologians! do you presume to rummage in the impenetrable mysteries of a first being, whom you call inconceivable to the human mind. You are the first blasphemers, in attributing to a being, perfect according to you, so many horrors, committed towards creatures, whom he has made out of nothing. Confess, with us, your ignorance of a creating God; and forbear, in your turn, to meddle with mysteries, which man seems unworthy of knowing....

Religion, especially with the moderns, has tried to identify itself with morality, the principles of which it has thereby totally obscured. It has rendered men unsociable by duty, and forced them to be inhuman to everyone who thought differently from themselves. Theological disputes, equally unintelligible to each of the enraged parties, have shaken empires, caused revolutions, been fatal to sovereigns and desolated all Europe. These contemptible quarrels have not been extinguished even in rivers of blood. Since the extinction of Paganism, the people have made it a religious principle to become outrageous, whenever any opinion is advanced which their priests think contrary to *sound doctrine*. The sectaries of a religion, which preaches, in appearance, nothing but charity, concord, and peace, have proved themselves more ferocious than cannibals or savages, whenever their divines excited them to destroy their brethren. There is no crime which men have not committed under the idea of pleasing the Divinity or appeasing his wrath....

A morality, which contradicts the nature of man, is not made for man. "But," say you, "the nature of man is depraved." In what consists this pretended depravity? In having passions? But, are not passions essential to man? Is he not obliged to seek, desire, and love what is, or what he thinks is conducive to his happiness? Is he not forced to fear and avoid what he judges disagreeable or fatal? Kindle his passions for useful objects; connect his welfare with those objects; divert him, by sensible and known motives, from what may injure either him or others, and you will make him a reasonable and virtuous being. A man without passions would be equally indifferent to vice and to virtue....

What is virtue according to theology? It is, we are told, *the conformity of the actions of men to the will of God*. But what is God? A being of whom nobody has the least conception, and whom everyone consequently modifies in his own way. What is the will of God? It is what men, who have seen God, or whom God has inspired, have declared to be the will of God. Who are those who have seen God? They are either fanatics or rogues, or ambitious men, whom we cannot readily believe upon their word.

To found morality upon a God, whom everyone paints to himself differently, composes in his way, and arranges according to his own temperament and interest, is evidently to found morality upon the caprice and imagination of men; it is to found it upon the whims of a sect, a faction, a party, who will believe they have the advantage to adore a true God to the exclusion of all others.

To establish morality of the duties of man upon the divine will, is to found it upon the will, the reveries and the interests of those who make God speak without ever fearing that he will contradict them. In every religion, priests alone have a right to decide what is pleasing or displeasing to their God; we are certain they will always decide that it is what pleases or displeases themselves....

A morality, connected with religion, is necessarily subordinate to it. In the mind of a devout man, God must be regarded more than his creatures; it is better to obey him than men. The interests of the celestial monarch must prevail over those of weak mortals. But the interests of heaven are obviously those of its ministers; whence it evidently follows, that in every religion, priests, under pretext of the interests of heaven or the glory of God, can dispense with the duties of human morality, when they clash with the duties which God has a right to impose. Besides, must not he, who has power to pardon crimes, have a right to command the commission of crimes?

We are perpetually told, that, without a God there would be no *moral obligation*; that the people and even the sovereigns require a legislator powerful enough to constrain them. Moral constraint supposes a law; but this law arises from eternal and necessary relations of things with one another; relations, which have nothing common with the existence of a God. The rules of man's conduct are derived from his own nature which he is capable of knowing, and not from the divine nature of which he has no idea. These rules constrain or oblige us; that is, we render ourselves estimable or contemptible, amiable or detestable, worthy of reward or of punishment, happy or unhappy, according as we conform to, or deviate from these rules. The law, which obliges man not to hurt himself, is founded upon the nature of a sensible being, who, in whatever way he came into the world, or whatever may be his fate in a future one, is forced by his actual essence to seek good and shun evil, to love pleasure and fear pain. The law, which obliges man not to injure, and even to do good to others, is founded upon the nature of sensible beings, living in society, whose essence compels them to despise those who are useless, and to detest those who oppose their felicity.

Whether there exists a God or not, whether this God has spoken or not, the moral duties of men will be always the same, so long as they retain their peculiar nature, that is, as long as they are sensible beings. Have men then need of a God whom they know not, of an invisible legislator, of a mysterious religion and of chimerical fears, in order to learn that every excess evidently tends to destroy them, that to preserve health they must be temperate; that to gain the love of others it is necessary to do them good, that, to do them evil is the sure means to incur their vengeance and hatred?

"Before the law there was no sin." Nothing is more false than this maxim. It suffices that man is what he is, or that he is a sensible being, in order to distinguish what gives him pleasure or displeasure. It suffices that one man knows that another man is a sensible being like himself, to perceive what is useful or hurtful to him. It suffices that man needs his fellow creature, in order to know that he must fear to excite in him sentiments unfavorable to himself. Thus

the feeling and thinking being has only to feel and think, in order to discover what he must do for himself and others. I feel, and another feels like me; this is the foundation of all morals....

We can judge of the goodness of a system of morals, only by its conformity to the nature of man. By this comparison, we have a right to reject it, if contrary to the welfare of our species. Whoever has seriously meditated upon religion and its supernatural morality; whoever has carefully weighed their advantages and disadvantages, will be fully convinced, that both are injurious to the interests of man, or directly opposite to his nature....

It is asserted, that the dogma of another life is of the utmost importance to the peace and happiness of societies; that without it, men would be destitute of motives to do good. What need is there of terrors and fables to make every rational man sensible how he ought to conduct himself upon earth? Does not everyone see, that he has the greatest interest in meriting the approbation, esteem, and benevolence of the beings who surround him, and in abstaining from everything, by which he may incur the censure, contempt, and resentment of society? However short an entertainment, a conversation, or visit, does not each desire to act his part decently, and agreeably to himself and others? If life is but a passage, let us strive to make it easy; which we cannot effect, if we fail in regard for those who travel with us.

Religion, occupied with its gloomy reveries, considers man merely as a pilgrim upon earth; and therefore supposes that, in order to travel the more securely, he must forsake company and deprive himself of the pleasures and amusements, which might console him for the tediousness and fatigue of the road. A stoical and morose philosopher sometimes gives us advice as irrational as that of religion. But a more rational philosophy invites us to spread flowers in the way of life, to dispel melancholy and panic terrors, to connect our interest with that of our fellow-travelers, and by gaiety and lawful pleasures, to divert our attention from the difficulties and cross accidents, to which we are often exposed; it teaches us, that, to travel agreeably, we should abstain from what might be injurious to ourselves, and carefully shun what might render us odious to our associates....

It is asked, what motives an Atheist can have to do good? The motive to please himself and his fellow-creatures; to live happily and peaceably; to gain the affection and esteem of men, whose existence and dispositions are much more sure and known, than those of a being impossible to be known. "Can he who fears not the gods, fear anything?" He can fear men; he can fear contempt, dishonor, the punishment and vengeance of the laws; in short, he can fear himself, and the remorse felt by all those who are conscious of having incurred or merited the hatred of their fellow-creatures.

Conscience is the internal testimony, which we bear to ourselves, of having acted so as to merit the esteem or blame of the beings, with whom we live; and it is founded upon the clear knowledge we have of men, and of the sentiments which our actions must produce in them. The conscience of the religious man consists

in imagining that he has pleased or displeased his God, of whom he has no idea, and whose obscure and doubtful intentions are explained to him only by men of doubtful veracity, who, like him, are utterly unacquainted with the essence of the Deity, and are little agreed upon what can please or displease him. In a word, the conscience of the credulous is directed by men, who have themselves an erroneous conscience, or whose interest stifles knowledge.

“Can an Atheist have a conscience? What are his motives to abstain from hidden vices and secret crimes, of which other men are ignorant, and which are beyond the reach of laws?” He may be assured by constant experience, that there is no vice, which by the nature of things, does not punish itself. Would he preserve this life? He will avoid every excess that may impair his health: he will not wish to lead a languishing life, which would render him a burden to himself and others. As for secret crimes, he will abstain from them, for fear he shall be forced to blush at himself, from whom he cannot fly. If he has any reason, he will know the value of the esteem which an honest man ought to have for himself. He will see that unforeseen circumstances may unveil the conduct which he feels interested in concealing from others. The other world furnishes the motives for doing good, to him who finds none here below....

A man of reflection cannot be incapable of his duties, of discovering the relations subsisting between men, of mediating his own nature, of discerning his own wants, propensities, and desires, and of perceiving what he owes to beings, who are necessary to his happiness. These reflections naturally lead him to a knowledge of the morality most essential to social beings. Dangerous passions seldom fall to the lot of man who loves to commune with himself, to study, and to investigate the principles of things. The strongest passion of such a man will be to know truth, and his ambition to teach it to others. Philosophy is proper to cultivate both the mind and the heart. On the score of morals and honesty, has not he who reflects and reasons, evidently an advantage over him, who makes it a principle never to reason?

If ignorance is useful to priests, and to the oppressors of mankind, it is fatal to society. Man, void of knowledge, does not enjoy his reason; without reason and knowledge, he is a savage, every instant liable to be hurried into crimes. Morality, or the science of duties, is acquired only by the study of man, and of what is relative to man. He who does not reflect, is unacquainted with true morality, and walks with precarious steps in the path of virtue. The less men reason, the more wicked they are. Savages, princes, nobles, and the dregs of the people, are commonly the worst of men, because they reason the least....