

A Discourse of Free-Thinking

Anthony Collins

A friend of John Locke, Anthony Collins (1676-1729) was perhaps England's most outspoken foe of religion in the eighteenth century. His recurring theme in this essay of 1713 is the inability of religious believers and priests to agree on creedal truth.

The Subjects of which Men are deny'd the Right to think by the *Enemys of Free-Thinking*, are of all others those of which Men have not only a Right to think, but of which they are oblig'd in duty to think; viz. such as of the Nature and Attributes of the *Eternal* Being or God, of the Truth and Authority of Books esteem'd Sacred, and of the Sense and Meaning of those Books; or, in one word, of Religious Questions.

1st. A right Opinion in these matters is suppos'd by the *Enemys of Free-Thinking* to be absolutely necessary to Mens Salvation, and some Errors or Mistakes about them are suppos'd to be damnable. Now where a right Opinion is so necessary, there Men have the greatest Concern imaginable to think for themselves, as the best means to take up with the right side of the Question. For if they will not think for themselves, it remains only for them to take the Opinions they have imbib'd from their Grandmothers, Mothers or Priests, or owe to such like Accident, for granted. But taking that method, they can only be in the right by chance; whereas by Thinking and Examination, they have not only the mere accident of being in the right, but have the Evidence of things to determine them to the side of Truth: unless it be suppos'd that Men are such absurd Animals, that the most unreasonable Opinion is as likely to be admitted for true as the most reasonable, when it is judg'd of by the Reason and Understanding of Men. In that case indeed it will follow, That Men can be under no Obligation to think of these matters. But then it will likewise follow, That they can be under no Obligation to concern themselves about Truth and Falshood in any Opinions. For if Men are so absurd, as not to be able to distinguish between Truth and Falshood, Evidence and no Evidence, what pretense is there for Mens having any Opinions at all? Which yet none judg so necessary as the *Enemys of Free-Thinking*.

2dly. If the surest and best means of arriving at Truth lies in *Free-Thinking*, then the whole Duty of Man with respect to Opinions lies only in *Free-Thinking*. Because he who thinks freely does his best towards being in the right, and consequently does all that God, who can require nothing more of any Man than

that he should do his best, can require of him. And should he prove mistaken in any Opinions, he must be as acceptable to God as if he receiv'd none but right Opinions....

On the other side, the whole Crime of Man, with respect to Opinions, must lie in his not thinking freely. He who is in the right by accident only, and does but suppose himself to be so without any Thinking, is really in a dangerous state, as having taken no pains and used no endeavors towards being in the right, and consequently as having no Merit; nay, as being on the same foot with the most stupid Papist and Heathen. For when once Men refuse or neglect to think, and take up their Opinions upon trust, they do in effect declare they would have been Papists or Heathens, had they had Popish or Heathen Priests for their Guides, or Popish or Heathen Grandmothers to have taught them their Catechisms.

3dly. Superstition is an Evil, which either by the means of Education, or the natural Weakness of Men, oppresses almost all Mankind. And how terrible an Evil it is, is well describ'd by the ancient Philosophers and Poets. TULLY says, *If you* give way to Superstition, it will ever haunt and plague you. *If you* go to a Prophet, or regard *Omens*; if you sacrifice or observe the Flight of Birds; if you *consult* an Astrologer or Haruspex; if it thunders *or* lightens, or any place is consum'd with Lightning, or such-like Prodigy happens (as it is necessary some such often should) all the Tranquillity of *the* Mind is destroy'd. And Sleep it *self*, which seems to be an Asylum and Refuge from all Trouble and Uneasiness, does by the aid of Superstition increase your Troubles and Fears.

Horace ranks Superstition with Vice; and as he makes the Happiness of Man in this Life to consist in the practice of Virtue and Freedom from Superstition, so he makes the greatest Misery of this Life to consist in being vicious and superstitious. *You* are not covetous, says he; that's well: But are you as free from all other Vices? Are *you free from* Ambition, excessive Anger, and the Fear of Death? Are you so much above Superstition, as to laugh at *all* Dreams, panick Fears, Miracles, Witches, Ghosts, and Prodigys?

This was the state of Superstition among the Antients; but since Uncharitableness and damning to all eternity for Trifles, has (in opposition both to Reason and Revelation) come into the World, the Evil of Superstition is much increas'd, and Men are now under greater Terrors and Uneasiness of Mind than they possibly could be when they thought they hazarded less.

Now there is no just Remedy to this universal Evil but *Free-Thinking*. By that alone can we understand the true Causes of things, and by consequence the Unreasonableness of all superstitious Fears. Happy is the Man, says the Divine VIRGIL, who has discover'd the Causes of Things, and *is thereby cured of all kind of Fears, even of Death it self, and all the Noise and Din of Hell*. For by *Free-Thinking* alone Men are capable of knowing, that a perfectly Good, Just, Wise and Powerful Being made and governs the World; and from this Principle they know, that he can require nothing of Men in any Country or Condition of Life, but that whereof he has given them an opportunity of being convinc'd

by Evidence and Reason in the Place where they are, and in that Condition of Life to which Birth or any other Chance has directed them; that an honest and rational Man can have no just reason to fear any thing from him: nay, on the contrary, must have so great a Delight and Satisfaction in believing such a Being exists, that he can much better be suppos'd to fear lest no such Being should exist, than to fear any harm from him. And lastly, That God being incapable of having any addition made either to his Power or Happiness, and wanting nothing, can require nothing of Men for his own sake, but only for Man's sake; and consequently, that all Actions and Speculations which are of no use to Mankind, [as for instance, Singing or Dancing, or wearing of Habits, or Observation of Days, or eating or drinking, or slaughtering of Beasts (in which things the greatest part of the Heathen Worship consisted) or the Belief of *Transubstantiation* or *Consubstantiation*, or of any Doctrines not taught by *the Church of England*] either signify nothing at all with God, or else displease him, but can never render a Man more acceptable to him.

By means of all this, a Man may possess his Soul in peace, as having an expectation of enjoying all the good things which God can bestow, and no fear of any future Misery or Evil from his hands; and the very worst of his State can only be, that he is pleasantly deceiv'd.

Whereas superstitious Men are incapable of believing in a perfectly just and good God. They make him talk to all Mankind from corners, and consequently require things of Men under the Sanction of Misery in the next World, of which they are incapable of having any convincing Evidence that they come from him. They make him (who equally beholds *all* the Dwellers upon earth) to have favorite Nations and People, without any Consideration of Merit. They make him put other Nations under Disadvantages without any Demerit. And so they are more properly to be stil'd Demonists than Theists. No wonder therefore if such Wretches should be so full of Fears of the Wrath of God, that they are sometimes tempted (with the Vicious) to wish there was no God at all; a Thought so unnatural and absurd, that even Speculative Atheists would abhor it. These Men have no quiet in their own Minds; they rove about in search of saving Truth thro the dark Corners of the Earth, and are so foolish as to hope to find it (if I may so say) hid under the Sands of Africa, where Cato scorn'd to look for it: and neglecting what God speaks plainly to the whole World, take up with what they suppose he has communicated to a few; and thereby believe and practice such things, in which they can never have Satisfaction. For suppose Men take up with a Religion which consists in Dancing or Musick, or such-like Ceremonys, or in useless and unintelligible Speculations; how can they be assur'd they believe and perform as they ought? What Rule can such Men have to know whether other Ceremonys, and useless and unintelligible Speculations, may not be requir'd of them instead of those they perform and believe? And how can they be sure that they believe rightly any unintelligible Speculations? Here is a foundation laid for nothing but endless Scruples, Doubts, and Fears. Wherefore I conclude, that every one, out of regard to his own Tranquility of Mind, which must be disturb'd as long as he has any Seeds of Superstition, is oblig'd to think

freely on Matters of Religion.

4thly. The infinite number of Pretenders in all Ages to Revelations from Heaven, supported by Miracles, containing new Notions of the Deity, new Doctrines, new Commands, new Ceremonys, and new Modes of Worship, make thinking on the foregoing Heads absolutely necessary, if a Man be under an obligation to listen to any Revelation at all. For how shall any Man distinguish between the true Messenger from Heaven and the Impostor, but by considering the Evidence produc' d by the one, as freely as of the other? ...

It is objected, That to allow and encourage Men to think freely, will produce endless Divisions in Opinion, and by consequence Disorder in Society. To which I answer,

1. Let any Man lay down a Rule to prevent Diversity of Opinions, which will not be as fertile of Diversity of Opinions as *Free-Thinking*; or if it prevents Diversity of Opinions, will not be a Remedy worse than the Disease; and I will yield up the Question.

2. Mere Diversity of Opinions has no tendency in nature to Confusion in Society. The Pythagoreans, Stoicks, Scepticks, Academicks, Cynicks, and *Stratonicks*, all existed in *Greece* at the same time, and differ'd from one another in the most important Points, viz. concerning the Freedom of human Actions, the Immortality and Immateriality of the Soul, the Being and Nature of the Gods, and their Government of the World: And yet no Confusion ever arose in Greece on account of this Diversity of Opinions. Nor did the infinite Variety of Religions and Worship among the Antients ever produce any Disorder or Confusion. Nay, so little Polemick Divinity was there among them, and so little mischief did the Heathen Priests do, that there are no Materials for that sort of History call'd *Ecclesiastical* History. And the true reason why no ill effect follow'd this Diversity of Opinions, was, because Men generally agreed in that mild and peaceable Principle of allowing one another to think freely, and to have different Opinions. Whereas had the common practice of Calumny us'd among us prevail'd among them, or had they condemn'd one another to Fire and Faggot, Imprisonment and Fines in this World, and Damnation in the next, and by these means have engag'd the Passions of the ignorant part of Mankind in their several Partys; then Confusion, Disorder, and every *evil* Work had follow'd, as it does at this day among those who allow no Liberty of Opinion. We may be convinc'd of this by our own Experience. How many Disputes are there every where among Philosophers, Physicians, and Divines; which, by the allowance of free Debate, produce no ill effects? Further, let any man look into the History and State of the Turks, and he will see the influence which their tolerating Principles and Temper have on the Peace of their Empire.... So that it is evident Matter of Fact, that a Restraint upon Thinking is the cause of all the Confusion which is pretended to arise from Diversity of Opinions, and that Liberty of Thinking is the Remedy for all the Disorders which are pretended to arise from Diversity of Opinions.