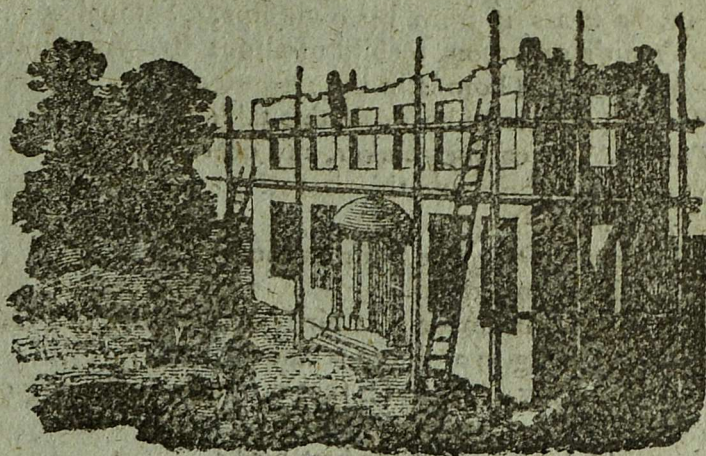


# FAMILY CONVERSATIONS,

ON THE

*BEING AND PROVIDENCE*

OF GOD.



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**M**R. CHRISTIAN is supposed to be a respectable merchant, who had retired from business. His youngest son, Thomas, lately come from school (his education being finished), had dropped several hints which discovered his mind to have been poisoned with the principles of Atheism, suggested to him by his French teacher. His father is informed of this, but defers charging him with it till, in the following conversation, he hears it from his own lips. Samuel is the old gentleman's grandson, a child of about five years old, who was alone with Thomas in the parlour.

*Samuel.* Uncle, who made this table?

*Thomas.* The cabinet-maker, my dear.

*Sam.* And who made this stove?

*Tho.* The smith.

*Sam.* And who made your clothes?

*Tho.* The tailor, child.

*Sam.* And who made that bird?—(pointing to a Canary-bird which hung in a cage just above them.)

*Tho.* Nobody, my dear: that came from the egg of another bird.

*Sam.* And who made the first bird?

*Tho.* How should I know, child? It sprung from an egg, I suppose.

*Sam.* And who made that egg?

*Tho.* And why all these impertinent questions?

*Sam.* Because when I ask mamma, she says God Almighty made birds, and every thing; but you don't say God Almighty made any thing.

*Tho.* No, child; I don't know that he did make any thing.



At this moment entered old Mr. Christian, and overheard the last words of the conversation, which fully confirmed his suspicions. "What, Thomas," said he, a little severely, "don't you know that God made any thing? And are you sowing your Atheistical principles in the young heart of my grandson?"

"Sir," said Thomas, rather confusedly, "he has been teasing me with his little questions till I was almost out of patience, and gave him the answer, which I suppose you heard."

"But, son," replied the old gentleman, "the subject is too serious for such excuses. To deny your Maker because of the innocent impertinence of a child, is shocking; and I am well persuaded such a sentiment could not have escaped your lips, if it had not been lodged in your heart.—But, Thomas," continued he, "sit down, and let us talk a little on this very important subject."—So drawing his own chair nearer the fire, and seating his little grandson on his knee, Thomas rather reluctantly sat down on the other side of the fire-place, and his father proceeded.

*Mr. Christian.* "I have heard, son Thomas, with much concern, several hints from different quarters, that you are tinctured with the French Atheistical philosophy:—tell me frankly—is it true, or is it not?"

*Tho.* Sir, I confess our French usher used sometimes to philosophize with us, and ridicule the vulgar notions on the subject.

*Mr. Chr.* He denied the being of a God, then?

*Tho.* He acknowledged no God but nature.

*Mr. Chr.* And did you agree with him?

*Tho.* I attempted to reason with him a little, at first; but finding he turned all my arguments to a jest, I let him have his own way.

*Mr. Chr.* And you began to think his way right?

*Tho.* Sometimes, I confess, I did.

*Mr. Chr.* And sometimes you made use of the same reasoning with others.

*Tho.* I believe I may have done so, to try my logical skill among my companions; but had no design to make confusion in my father's family.

*Mr. Chr.* It may be so, Thomas; but it grieves me to think that yourself should be infected with notions so dangerous and destructive.



*Tho.* What harm, Sir, can they do me? I have not renounced the principles of honour, patriotism, or morality.

*Mr. Chr.* Perhaps not, yet; but did you never feel the doctrine of a Deity a check upon your moral conduct?

*Tho.* Perhaps I may.

*Mr. Chr.* And since you have doubted his existence (to say the least), have you never in your vices, or what you may call your youthful foibles, found yourself pleased with the idea that there might be no God to see them?

*Tho.* I cannot altogether deny it.

*Mr. Chr.* Then you must own that the belief of a Divine Being is a restraint on vice.

*Tho.* I must confess it, in some degree.

*Mr. Chr.* Yes, in the degree in which you believe it.

*Tho.* But if there be no God, why should we be tormented with a nonentity?

*Mr. Chr.* You shock me, Thomas. God is no torment to a good man, but the source of all his happiness; but, as to his being, look at yonder house—(pointing through the window to a new-one, at some little distance)—how do you think it came there?

*Tho.* It was built, certainly.

*Mr. Chr.* Did you see it built?

*Tho.* No, Sir, it has been built since I was at school.

*Mr. Chr.* But how do you prove it was built?

*Tho.* Your question is singular, Sir; I cannot doubt it—all houses are built.

*Mr. Chr.* But how would you prove *that* was?

*Tho.* It is demonstrative from the work; there is the labour of the bricklayer, the mason, and the carpenter.

*Mr. Chr.* Then every house is built by some man?

*Tho.* Undoubtedly.

*Mr. Chr.* Look then above—beneath—around you. Is not the universe a palace of immense grandeur? The blue arch of heaven, how magnificent and sublime!—Every house you admit, is built by some one; then admit the reasoning of our Apostle, and own that “he that built all things is God.” Heb. iii. 4.

*Tho.* Sir, I am not insensible to this argument, but will you permit me to state a few objections?

*Mr. Chr.* Most readily, and state them with all their force. Let us hear the strong reasonings of your infidel French apostle.



*Tho.* You, doubtless, consider the Supreme as a perfect Being?

*Mr. Chr.* Certainly.

*Tho.* As is the author, so is his work.

*Mr. Chr.* Granted.

*Tho.* But do not you see, Sir, amidst all these splendid objects, a thousand errors and imperfections both natural and moral?

*Mr. Chr.* Thomas, look again at yonder house; what think you of it?

*Tho.* It is not finished, Sir,

*Mr. Chr.* How do you know that?

*Tho.* By its appearance, Sir.—One wing is higher than the other—there are no windows inserted—no floors,—no portico—and, besides, the scaffolding is not all pulled down, and there are a variety of building materials, stone, brick, and timber lying round about it.

*Mr. Chr.* But what think you of the skill of the architect?

*Tho.* I am no great judge of architecture, Sir, but I think the design seems noble; and I dare say, from what I can see of it, it will be finished in a style suitable to the general idea.

*Mr. Chr.* But do you not observe several imperfections and defects in the building, in its present state?

*Tho.* Sir, I anticipate your application, and stand self-condemned. I dare not criticise the unfinished work of an artist, and yet I have been rash enough to censure the unfinished work of God.

*Mr. Chr.* I am happy, son, that you comprehend my meaning.—The present world, you see, is in an unfinished and imperfect state—many evils and imperfections you may, indeed, observe; but, when the scheme of Providence is completed, things may have quite a different appearance. “Judge nothing, therefore, before the time;” but take the counsel of the poet—

“Wait the great teacher, Death, and God adore.”

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## PART II.

THOMAS reading alone in the parlour, Mr. Christian and his daughters enter, and the following conversation ensues between the two former.



*Mr. Chr.* Well, Thomas, I am glad to see your leisure time employed upon a book, and I hope it is a good one.

*Tho.* A favourite author with me, Sir—Cicero.

*Mr. Chr.* A celebrated writer indeed, Thomas, though a heathen. Favour us with a specimen.

Thomas reads the following passage:—

“ Does he merit the name of man, who, after having viewed the stated and invariable motions of the heavens, the regular arrangement and disposition of the stars, and the nice connection and harmony which reign throughout the universe, shall, notwithstanding, maintain that all this is the effect of blind chance, and not the work of reason; though the wisdom by which they are conducted, far exceeds the power of the human understanding to comprehend? When we see a sphere, a curious dial, or any other piece of machinery moving artificially, it is never questioned that they are the effects of design: and can we then contemplate that mighty power, whereby the heavens perform their revolutions with such amazing velocity, whence arise the regular vicissitudes of the seasons, so admirably contrived for promoting the happiness and preservation of the whole system; and yet doubt that the world is directed, I will not say simply by intelligence, but the most consummate and divine wisdom?”

*Mr. Chr.* Well, Thomas, what think you of Atheism now?

*Tho.* I confess I am satisfied as to the existence of a Supreme Being, and that it is most unreasonable to deny it.

*Mr. Chr.* Then I hope your heart glows with gratitude, and your tongue longs to praise him.

*Tho.* Alas, Sir! what can I do? What would my praise be to him that sits above the heavens, and looks down upon the stars? It would be as if the crawling maggots on a dung-heap were to look up at the sun, and say, “ O sun, thou art warm!”

*Mr. Chr.* True, my son—you have given a just idea of the highest praise of mortals; but suppose you had formed a generation of the most contemptible insects, if you endued them with power of intelligence to know that you was their author, and that the continuance of their being depended on



you, would you not expect them to pay you some acknowledgment?

*Tho.* I cannot tell what to say to such impossible suppositions; but I think I should not care about them.

*Mr. Chr.* But suppose you did care for them daily, so as to provide them with proper food, and convenient habitations, and yet they not only neglected to praise you, as they were able, but also disputed your existence, and denied their obligations to you?

*Tho.* I might be provoked to crush them with my foot; but I do not suppose the Supreme Being so interests himself in the trifling concerns of men. He is supremely happy in himself, without the existence of a creature; and made us, I conceive, not for his own sake, but to be partakers of his felicity. If we are virtuous and happy, it is well; if not, it can be no trouble to him.

*Mr. Chr.* Then you believe in a God without divine attributes.

*Tho.* How so, Sir?

*Mr. Chr.* Do you believe he is *infinitely wise*?

*Tho.* Certainly; that he knows all things, not by study or reflection, but by a simple view of them, as we see the objects which surround us.

*Mr. Chr.* Do you admit of his *omnipotence*?

*Tho.* Unquestionably. Nothing is impossible with him that is not a contradiction in itself.

*Mr. Chr.* Do you believe he is *infinitely good*?

*Tho.* I plead for it; too good to make any of his creatures unhappy.

*Mr. Chr.* A truce to your objections — You believe that God is infinitely wise, and knows all his creatures and all their concerns; you believe he is capable of doing every thing he pleases, not in itself impossible and absurd; you believe he is infinitely good, and made his creatures to be happy; and yet you think that he cares nothing about them, and never interferes in their behalf. How do you reconcile these things, Thomas?

*Tho.* I deny not, Sir, that God interferes in the government of the world; but I do not believe he troubles himself with the puny affairs of individuals.

*Mr. Chr.* Do you not consider God as the Father of his creatures?



*Tho.* Certainly, Sir: as the wisest, kindest, best of Fathers.

*Mr. Chr.* Can a father then discharge his duty to his family, without caring for the individuals that compose it?

*Tho.* No, Sir; but I conceive the cases are not sufficiently parallel, There is, indeed, no comparison between the small concerns of a private family, and the infinitely varied interests of the whole creation.

*Mr. Chr.* Neither is there any just comparison between a human father, like myself, and the infinite Creator. He is as much above me, as the concerns of the universe exceed mine. But suppose we consider him as the Supreme Governor of the World; a good King, you know, is the father of his people.

*Tho.* True, Sir; but a King, you know, does not stoop to the concerns of every individual subject, but governs them by common laws, and general equity:—so God,

“————— the universal cause,

“ Acts not by partial, but by gen’ral laws.”

*Mr. Chr.* I agree with your poet, taking the proposition generally, and with some exceptions; but the doctrine of a general Providence is very different from that of no Providence at all. It is one thing to say that God moves the machine of nature in an uniform manner, and quite another to suppose that he has abandoned it to itself.

*Tho.* I do not pretend that, Sir: I only think that the Almighty does not interfere in the common occurrences of the world, nor in the trifling concerns of individuals.

*Mr. Chr.* I am glad you agree with me so far, and I have no doubt of compelling you to go farther when we can pursue the subject; but, as tea is ready, we will postpone it for the present, and give your sisters an opportunity of conversing with us on subjects less intricate, and more agreeable to them.

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### PART III.

WE left Mr. Christian and his family, at the tea-table, where the conversation was suspended for the present.



The next evening Mr. Thomas entertained his sisters, and the younger branches of his brother's family, with some of the curiosities of his microscope. Old Mr. Christian himself made one of the party, and introduced a Mr. Field, a simple, honest, and industrious farmer, and one of his tenants in the country; to whom he rightly judged the sight would be as novel and entertaining as to the young folks. Thomas exerted himself with much affability, to please and inform the company. After he had exhibited a great variety of vegetable subjects, and of animalcules, with many scientific and philosophical observations, Mr. Christian thought it was time to give another turn to the conversation—to “rise, through nature's works, to nature's God;” and, in fact, that this was a favourable opportunity to resume the subject of Divine Providence. After expressing, therefore, his high satisfaction (as did all the company), with the conduct and observations of his son, he asked the following question:—

*Mr. Chr.* And now, Thomas, do you think that all these innumerable creatures, and systems of creatures, which your glasses discover, beyond the observation of a naked eye—do you think that all these are under the immediate government of God?

*Tho.* Sir, your question requires deliberation.

*Mr. Chr.* You are right: it does require some deliberation; for if you give it the negative, here are innumerable creatures, yea, worlds of creatures, exempted from the government of Deity. If you take the affirmative, then it appears the government of God extends to worms and butterflies; yea, to millions of millions, invisible to human eyes.

*Tho.* But may we not, Sir, take a middle course, and suppose that God, having made them under some fixed laws for their preservation and increase, they exist and multiply in consequence; not beyond the limits of his government and authority, but without his immediate concern and interference?

*Mr. Chr.* Let us not deceive ourselves with general terms without ideas. What are laws without government? And what is government without superintendence and inspection?



*Tho.* Your reasoning must be admitted as to the moral world; but in the natural world the case is different. Every creature obeys the laws of its creation.

*Mr. Chr.* Do you admit, then, that God interferes in the moral government of the world?

*Tho.* I believe that the dispositions of Providence are such as, on the whole, to punish vice, and to reward virtue; indeed the latter is, in many cases, its own reward, and very often, vice its own punishment.

*Mr. Chr.* But do you think that Providence ever interposes to effect this in particular instances?

*Tho.* In some extraordinary cases, I believe, even this must be admitted, as in the punishment of murderers and tyrants; but it does not therefore follow, that Providence interferes in the concerns of common individuals, much less of ravens and of sparrows.

*Mr. Chr.* But seeing you admit the doctrine of a general Providence, and even of a particular interference of the Deity in some extraordinary cases, what is your objection to admit it universally?

*Tho.* I think it unworthy the Divine Being.

*Mr. Chr.* Do you think it was unworthy of the Divine Being to create worms and animalcules?

*Tho.* No, Sir; because the creation of them discovers, I think, more of the Divine wisdom and skill than almost any other part of the animate creation.

*Mr. Chr.* And so doth their preservation and support. The larger the family of the Creator, the more apparent his wisdom, power, and goodness in providing for them. For my part, Thomas, I know not how you may feel upon the idea of being abandoned by the Creator to the hazard of time and chance; but perhaps your principles may not affect your feelings. I can conceive no hypothesis so honourable to God, or so comfortable to man, as the universal influence and superintendence of the Creator: a Providence that, extending to all worlds, and all creatures, condescends to me, to sparrows, and to worms; in fact, that we and they are every where surrounded with the Divine presence; and that, as your poet and our Apostle are agreed—"In Him we live, and move, and have our being."

*Tho.* It becomes me, Sir, to submit; but I confess the



idea you form of God is too great for me, and confounds my utmost attempt to grasp it. Nor do I at present conceive it either necessary or important to any of the purposes of practical religion. Here is our honest friend Field, who, I dare say, never extended his thoughts to such sublime speculations; and yet you consider him as an intelligent and good man.

*Mr. Chr.* I have no objection to your appeal, Thomas, and am willing that the debate shall close with him, if he can prevail over his natural timidity so far as to give us his opinion.

Our honest Farmer had listened with much attention to the preceding conversation. Upon being thus appealed to, he blushed, and hesitated, and pleaded his incapacity; but upon being urged by both parties, and promised that he should receive no interruption in expressing his sentiments in his own way, he began.

*Mr. Field.* I am, as you know, Sir (addressing Mr. Christian), not acquainted with book-learning. All my learning is to be able to read my Bible; and all my studies are to practise it. I know nothing of philosophy, or of logic; therefore you will excuse me—the little I know is what God and experience have taught me. When I first took your farm, Sir, you know I was a young man, and had a young family, which increased very fast; and some of them had a good deal of sickness, which, God knows, was very expensive to me. Beside that, I had but very small means to begin with, and some very bad crops. This lay very heavy on my heart, and I knew not what to do. In short, I was afraid I should be ruined, and my family be starved. This made me very melancholy and thoughtful, till one day I saw a good number of sparrows in the fields, and I thought on what our Lord said about the sparrows—“That not one of them can fall to the ground without our heavenly Father’s knowledge.” Then I thought of the ravens, and what David says about them, that God Almighty “feeds the young ravens when they cry.” Well, thought I, if God cares for sparrows, and feeds ravens, sure he can feed me, though my crops fail; so it comforted me, and I began to cheer up. Things took another face, and I began to say with one of the Prophets somewhere—“Although the fig-tree shall not blossom,



neither shall fruit be in the vine; the fields yield no meat, and there be no herd in the stalls; yet will I rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of my salvation."

Another time my poor children began to be ragged in their clothes; my wife and I too were very bare; we had a doctor's bill to pay, and an undertaker's for burying some of the children. Now I was at my doubts and fears again, and very down-hearted I was; but one day as I was walking in the fields, I noticed the wild flowers that grow there, some of them very fine and gay; and it brought to my mind our Lord's words again—"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say, Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore if God so clothe the grass of the field, will he not much more clothe ye, O ye of little faith?" *Little faith*, indeed! said I, and began to be ashamed, and pray for more faith—so went on working hard, and trusting God; and soon after a humane gentleman took notice we looked bare, and gave me a good piece of cloth that clothed me and the boys; and his lady was very kind to my wife. So then I recollected what our Lord says again—"Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of these things."—So now, young gentleman (addressing Mr Thomas Christian), you see that what seemed very absurd to you—that God should care for sparrows and such-like things, was very comfortable to me, and encouraging; and I could not bear the thought that any of God's creatures are shut out from his care and notice; but chiefly, I believe, he is careful for his own, because my Bible tells me—that "as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him;" and I am now taught, through grace, to cast all my burden on the Lord; believing that he careth for me.