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ART. I.—*A Discussion of the question, Is the Roman Catholic Religion, in any or in all its Principles or Doctrines, inimical to Civil or Religious Liberty? And of the question, Is the Presbyterian Religion, in any or in all its Principles or Doctrines, inimical to Civil or Religious Liberty?* By the Reverend John Hughes of the Roman Catholic Church, and the Reverend John Breckinridge of the Presbyterian Church. Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard. 1836.  
(Concluded.)

WE have been reluctantly compelled, for want of room, to extend our review of this subject to a third number. But we hope that the intrinsic importance, and (to American citizens) the peculiar interest of the question discussed, will plead our apology.

Now it cannot (to repeat a remark already made)—it cannot be said that the language which describes the church as a commonwealth, and her ministers as governors and magistrates—her members as subjects—heretics as rebels and enemies, is *figurative*; because the figure cannot be carried out. The punishment of heresy required by the laws of the church is in fact capital; and Luther was condemned by Leo

Samuel Miller

ART. VII.—*Decline of Religion, and its Causes; a Sermon preached before the Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the State of New York, in Trinity Church, in the city of New York, October 6th, 1836. By Evan M. Johnson, Rector of St. John's Church, Brooklyn.* Brooklyn, Svo. pp. 16. 1836.

THIS is one of the most weak and ill-considered discourses we have read for a long time. Indeed it is, in itself, utterly unworthy of notice. But as it affords us an opportunity of making some remarks on subjects which it discusses, and which we deem seasonable, we think proper to place its title at the head of this article, and to make some of its contents a text on which to found our comments.

The author assumes, as a conceded point, that religion, in our country in general, is on the decline; that infidelity and moral profligacy are evidently gaining ground; and that Christian and moral influence is now at a lower ebb than it has at any time been within the last quarter of a century. He assumes, too, that the fault, in regard to this state of things, cannot lie with the church; because this would be to charge the Master with forming an imperfect institution, which fails of effecting its intended benefits. He forgets that there was a deplorable state of things in several of the churches to which the apostle Paul sent inspired epistles, particularly in the churches of Corinth and Galatia: that both doctrinal error and moral delinquency prevailed within them to a distressing degree. And yet the apostle, in remonstrating with those churches on the state of things among them, does not ascribe it to the surrounding heathen, but to themselves. He addresses the members of those churches in terms of severe rebuke. He charges them with having embraced "another gospel;" with being "foolish" and "bewitched;" with having "not obeyed the truth;" with having "begun in the Spirit, and ended in the flesh;" insomuch that he declares he "stood in doubt of them." Were the apostolic churches true churches of Christ, or were they not? Were they less perfect, and less efficacious *then* than they are at the present day? We had thought that the state of the visible church had been marked with imperfection in all ages; that its antediluvian period was distinguished by deplorable degeneracy; that on various occasions, under the Old Testament economy, it was brought very low—nay, to the verge of ruin; that

since the New Testament church was set up, its periods of darkness and corruption, both in principle and practice, had been frequent, long and mournful. And yet we never thought of inferring, from all this, that the church of Christ, as a divine institution, was a failure; that it had ever ceased to exist; or that it was not the product of infinite wisdom and benignity. We had thought that the corruption of the church, from time to time, was to be set down to the same melancholy account, as the perversion of the Bible, and the ungrateful abuse of all the means of grace, of which, alas! the church is full.

Are there not thousands of members of the purest and best church in the world, who are ignorant, erroneous in doctrine, or chargeable with moral aberrations by no means creditable to the Christian character? We think we could point out some such among the multitudes who call themselves Presbyterians. And we are greatly deceived if we could not point out an equal number, of the same character, in regular connexion with the Protestant Episcopal Church. Yet we never imagined that this fact would justify the inference that Christianity was a faulty "scheme;" or that the church, as a moral machine, was ill-adapted to answer the great purpose for which it was designed. We have rather ascribed it to the depravity and infatuation of man, who is capable of perverting the best gifts of heaven, and who never profits as he ought by the choicest blessings of a merciful God. The gospel ought to win to its affectionate reception *all* who hear its joyful sound: but was this desirable object ever realized? All those who unite themselves with the professing people of God, ought to "let their light shine before men," and to "adorn the doctrine of God their Saviour in all things." But was this ever seen to be really the case with all professing Christians? Were there not heretical, immoral, worldly-minded church members, even under the eyes of the apostles themselves, who gave great trouble, and divided and agitated the body of Christ?

Mr. Johnson, however, it would appear, can admit nothing of this. The true cause of the "decline of religion," he thinks to be in no wise, and in no degree, in the church itself—that is, in the *Episcopal Church*—for he thinks no protestant denomination but his *own sect* is entitled to the name of a *Church*. He sincerely speaks of the body of Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians as "*calling themselves churches,*" but utterly disallows the name as applicable to

them. And he feels bound, on principle, to go out of his own denomination for all the sources of that mischief, which he so pathetically describes, and professes so feelingly to lament. He is confident that, if the Episcopal Church had been the predominant sect in the United States; if the gospel had been published, and its pure morality preached from ten thousand pulpits of that sect throughout the length and breadth of our land, the "decline of religion," of which he complains, would never have occurred. How does this matter stand in *England*, where the Episcopal church is actually established "throughout the length and breadth of the land;" where, from more than "ten thousand pulpits," Episcopal preachers are ministering continually? Is there no infidelity there? Is there less moral profligacy there than in our country? Is it not well known that there is *more* rather than *less*? Is there not to be found in the bosom of that Church, reigning as it is with undisputed sway—as much difference of opinion; as much absurdity and fanatical delusion; as much profaneness and contempt of things sacred, to the full, as we have to mourn over in our own beloved country? If these facts are well known to every one on this side of the Atlantic, excepting the author of the sermon before us, we ask, what becomes of his argument? We can readily acquit his integrity in this matter, for we have no doubt that he really believes all that he alleges; but it can only be at the expense of his information and his understanding.

But our readers will, perhaps, be curious to know to what specific sources of moral mischief Mr. J. ascribes the "decline of religion" of which he speaks. The *first* is *Religious Controversy*; in treating which the author does not fail to hold up to public view, as constituting no small part of the corroding materials now at work, the controversy between the Old and New School in the Presbyterian church; and also the public debates on infidelity which have taken place in our principal cities. In regard to the former, we have only to say, in this connection, that, not long since, when the Episcopal church was torn with strife and division; when the appearance of one angry pamphlet after another seemed, for a while, to threaten even a schism in the body, we have no recollection that any Presbyterian writer was guilty of the undignified and childish indelicacy of meddling with the controversy on either side. If such an one were to be pointed out, we should be glad to disown him as unworthy of the name. With respect to the latter controversy, we do not



choose, at present, to express an opinion; as we have so little specific information; as we have heard directly opposite statements on the subject; and as our author, by the contents of the present discourse, and by the character of a preceding one, with which we had something to do, has inspired us with so little respect for either his opinions or his information.

We cannot think, however, that controversy, as such, and however conducted, is necessarily injurious to the interests of religion. We believe that truth and order have been maintained, in all ages, by means of "contending earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints." In the Epistles of Paul to the churches of *Corinth* and *Galatia*, we see an "Old School" Presbyterian warmly opposing error and innovation, and zealously maintaining the truth. Did the inspired and venerable apostle do no good by those Epistles?

The *second* source of the evil of which our author complains, is what he calls, "*the combined effort to suppress Popery in our country.*" On this subject we have little to say, as we expressed our opinion upon it, somewhat at length, in our notice of a former discourse from the same pen. So far as improper weapons have been resorted to in exposing the errors and acts of Popery, we shall always be among the first to reprobate them. But to maintain that it is wrong in itself to expose those errors and acts; to warn our children and the public against them; and in doing this, to depict in appropriate colours the profligacy of many of the Romish ecclesiastics; to denounce all this as sinful, and as contributing to the "decline of religion," is to abandon the principles of the glorious Reformation, and to condemn those illustrious and devoted men who, taking their lives in their hands, came out from the Church of Rome, and left a faithful testimony against her enormous corruptions. If a fearful proportion of the Romish clergy are morally corrupt, as well as deplorably ignorant and superstitious; if they are engaged, with consummate art and address, in a system adapted to deceive and destroy;—it is, surely, due to truth, as well as to the purity of the gospel, to let their real character be known. He who would cover it up is a murderer of souls. It is far more adapted to make infidels, to let such a miserable system of corruption pass for real Christianity, than to tear off the mask, and expose it in all its native deformity, in contrast with the spirit of real religion. So thought the venerable reformers of the Church of England, and acted

accordingly. We cannot but wish that the author of this sermon had more knowledge of their works; more veneration for their character; and a larger participation in their spirit. If all American Protestants were of his way of thinking, Popery might be left to go on in every part of the country, "eating as doth a canker," and our children become an un-instructed and unwarned prey to Popish allurements.

Our author next ascribes the decline of religion to the influence of *temperance societies*. He complains, first, that efforts in behalf of this cause have been made by *voluntary associations*, instead of being left to the "Church;" and, secondly, that these efforts have been carried to a *length* which has brought reproach on the cause of enlightened piety. With regard to the *first*, we are as much disposed as any of our neighbours to guard against the encroachments of voluntary societies, and to honour the authority of the church in its appropriate sphere. But we would ask Mr. Johnson *what the church was doing in this matter*, when voluntary associations took it up? We would further ask him, whether more has not been actually done, within the last ten years, through the instrumentality of temperance societies, to diminish the use of intoxicating drinks, and to reform drunkards, than had ever been done, by all other means, for any like period, or for ten times that period, before? And we would once more ask him, what the church, in her proper sphere, *could be expected to do* more than to visit drunkards with her discipline? Nay, is it in the *power* of the church, in her ecclesiastical character, to do more than discipline offenders against the law of temperance? Can she officially apply those prophylactic means which, in this case, are of all others by far the most effectual? What have even those portions of the church which claim the sole privilege of acting in this matter, and which have criminated temperance societies as meddling with that which does not belong to them—*what have they done*, even since the temperance movement began, and while rebuking those who are ready and willing to exert themselves in this great cause? We are really ashamed to ask these questions; and wonder that Mr. Johnson was not awed into silence on this subject by the consciousness that they might be asked, and that they could not fail to place him and his argument in a most awkward position. The fact is, there is, perhaps, no vice, in regard to which the most important means of reformation, to wit, the *preventive*,—are less within the power of the visible church,

and which more imperiously call for the efforts of voluntary associations. Organized ecclesiastical bodies bear some resemblance, in regard to such matters, to civil courts. A court of civil law is authorized to try persons charged with crimes, and to acquit or condemn; but could scarcely, with propriety, employ itself in banding the community to prevent crime. So the church, in the exercise of that authority, with which she is vested for edification, and not for destruction, not only has the power, but is bound, to instruct the people in their duty, and to exclude from her privileges all who openly violate the laws of Christ; but it does not appear to be her appropriate duty, as a judicial body, privately to prevail on her individual members to bind themselves to abstain from practices in their own nature lawful, for the sake of opposing particular vices, and begetting a strong public sentiment and habit in favour of particular virtues. We really do not see how the *preventive* system of which we speak—and which it would seem, ought, under God, to be mainly relied on,—could be advantageously prosecuted, by either civil or ecclesiastical bodies, in an authoritative form. We consider the whole objection, then, that “a few years ago it was discovered in *New England* that the cause of temperance could be much better advanced by the establishment of special associations, than through the instrumentality of the church of Christ”—as at once childish and preposterous. Of all the plans of benevolence which distinguish the present day, we would say, that the temperance reformation more indispensably calls for the action of voluntary societies, rather than ecclesiastical boards or bodies, than any other.

With respect to the *length* to which some of the advocates of temperance have carried their principles—while we concur in the severest censure that can be pronounced upon it, as both extravagant and unscriptural; we cannot think it wise, on account of this extravagance, to denounce the whole system as mischievous. Upon the same principle that the inspired apostle Paul said, “neither if we eat meat are we the worse, nor if we eat not are we the better; nevertheless, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no meat while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend,”—may the enlightened and zealous friend of temperance now say—“Since the use of wine, as a common drink, is, confessedly, so injurious to thousands; since it deceives the young and unwary, and destroys multitudes who consider tipping on ardent spirits as vulgar;—I will deny myself this indulgence,

and drink no wine as long as I live (excepting at the sacramental table), that I may discourage the use of that which is every day destroying the lives, the character, and the usefulness of thousands."

For ourselves, we are not ashamed of such a principle or practice as this. We can have no doubt that intemperance is a more fearful destroyer than sword, famine and pestilence combined. We have quite as little doubt that in this immense field of reform, so infinitely important to our children, and to all the best interests of society, according to the old homely proverb, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure;" and it appears to us that, in this field, the church, precious as her agency is, cannot, by her discipline, accomplish *all* that it is desirable and important to have done. In these circumstances, to frown on the agency of voluntary societies, when they attempt to do what the church never *did* attempt, is not *now* doing, and cannot possibly do, is something worse than ungracious. When such societies are arrogant, let us reprove them; when they become extravagant, let us restrain and rebuke them; but let us not refuse to accept their services because their mode of rendering them is marked with human imperfection.

Mr. Johnson further alleges, that "the *revival system* has done injury to the cause of religion." We have no doubt that there is much foundation for this charge. Some of those who have vaunted themselves as the peculiar friends and only skilful promoters of revivals of religion, have, unquestionably, disgraced the cause which they professed to honour, and have done more to promote fanaticism, than real religion. Yet we are quite sure that those who denounce the most sober, scriptural and benign effusions of the Holy Spirit which have ever adorned the church of God, and deny much of what enters essentially into the evangelical system, are at least as unfriendly to the great interests of pure and undefiled religion as those whom our author stigmatizes with so much severity. On this whole subject we think Mr. Johnson might derive profit from reading an excellent letter on Revivals of Religion, written by a minister of his own church, once a brother rector at Brooklyn, and now bishop of the Protestant Episcopal church in Ohio. He will find this letter, the eleventh in order, in the Appendix to Dr. Sprague's admirable "Lectures on Revivals of Religion." We recommend it to his careful and serious perusal.



We cannot forbear recurring again to the marked contrast between the spirit of the inspired apostles and that of Mr. Johnson. When *they* were called to mourn over a declining state of religion, we never find them uttering their complaints against the surrounding population, out of the church, as the cause of the evil:—but they address themselves directly to the members of the church, charging them with want of soundness in the faith; with want of fidelity in preaching the truth; and with want of exemplary holiness of heart and life. These solemn charges are pressed with warmth and faithfulness; and no hope of redress intimated but from a return of the church to truth and duty.

But, in the view of Mr. Johnson, as we understand him, all this is misapprehension and erroneous teaching. Defection and corruption cannot lie with the church. This would be to pronounce an institution of Christ a “failure.” The church is not to be inculpated without nullifying her character. All sources of delinquency and corruption are to be found *without*. Hence, if the visible church could be found rearing her temples, and planting her ministrations in every part of the land, the decline of religion would be out of the question. We suppose that nothing more than the mere statement of this opinion is necessary for its refutation. We think that the man who can undertake to maintain it, surrounded with the light of ecclesiastical history, and particularly in view of the single fact, that the apostolic church, as all grant, with a regular ministry, and pure worship, gradually apostatized into the deplorable corruptions of the Papacy—must have placed a lock and key on his understanding.

We should be truly sorry to see these sentiments adopted, or this practice imitated by Presbyterians. We hope they will never allow themselves, as some other denominations seem to be doing, to set up a particular form of ecclesiastical order as an object of idolatrous worship,—which must occupy the foreground of every statement, and every exhortation, whatever else may be left doubtful or obscure; and be ready to make every thing bow down to this idol. So far from *preventing* the decline of religion, this is the very error which, in all ages, has *led* to that deplorable result. Whenever professing Christians begin to lay more stress on rites and forms than on the religion of the heart; whenever they are disposed to make a particular form of ecclesiastical order no where found in the Bible, a more prominent and precious

object than the essential elements of Christian character, the decline of the church in genuine prosperity is inevitable. Let any one contemplate the degeneracy of the church under the claims and the superstition of the bishop of Rome, and then entertain a doubt, if he can, of the truth and importance of this statement.