

**A CATECHISM OF
NATURAL
THEOLOGY**

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A Catechism of Natural Theology by I. Nichols

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I. NICHOLS

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CATECHISM
OF
NATURAL THEOLOGY.

INTRODUCTION.

Teacher. What do you understand by Natural Theology?

A. Theology, derived from two Greek words employed to signify our knowledge of God, is divided into two parts, natural and revealed. Revealed theology embraces those extraordinary discoveries which God has made to mankind in the holy scriptures. Natural theology teaches what may be known of God, from the manifestations of his existence and perfections in the natural world.

T. What do the scriptures observe respecting natural theology?

A. While the scriptures principally require us to know God, as he has revealed himself to us in his di-

vine word, they also require us to contemplate his being and providence, as they are manifested in the objects of nature. *Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things.* They speak of the works of creation as presenting the plainest proofs of an all-powerful and divine Author. *The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things which are made, even his eternal power and Godhead.*— They invite our attention to the wonders of creation, as a most noble and delightful study. *The works of the Lord are great, sought out of all them who have pleasure therein.* They call upon the heavens and earth, the seas and mountains, the animal, the herb, and every thing which exists, to celebrate the praises of the Creator; that is, they require of us to study his providence ourselves, as exhibited in these various forms, and elevate our souls to him, in the contemplation of that almighty power and munificence, which are displayed in every part of the universe. It was a common practice with our Saviour, in teaching his disciples, to make use of the works of nature in leading them to reflect on heavenly and spiritual things. *Behold the fowls of the air. Consider the lillies of the field.*

T. What other reasons recommend this study?

A. While it is adapted to cultivate our devout feelings, and render the universe a perpetual temple for the worship of its infinite Author, the study of nature is most worthy of a rational curiosity. It is suited to every capacity. It may be enjoyed in every

situation. Its field is boundless; its novelty inexhaustible. If the eminence of an artist attach a higher interest to his productions; if we should crowd to see the works of a Phidias, a Praxiteles, or a Raphael, with what emotions should those objects be surveyed, which lead up our thoughts to an Almighty Author. Shall we reserve our curiosity for the imperfect exhibitions of our own limited powers, and be indifferent to the study which reveals in every form the hand of Infinite Wisdom? Whatever reason we can imagine for the study of human inventions, a far higher, surely, may be adduced for directing our attention to those Divine contrivances which immeasurably surpass them. There is scarcely an art but has its more simple and admirable parallel in some natural provision. Nature either furnishes the pattern, or exemplifies the result in a more perfect manner. The telescope was improved, and the first idea of it probably suggested, from an examination of the *Eye*. What is the most finished statue, compared with the living form? The works of art are soon exhausted; and by a critical inspection we can easily discover blemishes and imperfections in them. But the more closely we examine their great originals in the vast kingdom of nature, the more proofs do they afford us of the perfection of the works of God, in comparison with the highest efforts of human skill. Shall our interest then be excited at hearing of any new engine or piece of machinery which some one has invented? shall novelty be attractive and almost irresistible, when.

there are these imperfect objects to call it forth? and shall we be indifferent to the innumerable wonders of nature around us, the examination of which would prove a sure mean of enlightening our minds, exalting our thoughts, and advancing our piety?

T. How do we arrive at the knowledge of an Almighty Creator, from contemplating the spectacle of the universe?

A. The countless manifestations of design, and the continued display of bountiful provisions through all nature, are a proof of some designing power, and of a power beneficent and good, that is, of the Being whom we denominate God. If we should deem it absurd to suggest that a watch was an accidental combination of wheels and springs, not intended for any purpose, how much more irrational to suppose that so many manifestations of design, in the universe, exist without design! When the humblest appearances of order, arrangement, and adaptation to use, in any object, even in a bird's nest, would lead us to pronounce it not a casual formation, but the production of some animal, shall the infinite spectacle of subserviency, proportion and harmony, which the universe presents, impress no conviction of design or of a designing cause? Shall design cease to be deducible when once we have ascended from the mysterious operations of animal instinct and human reason? We know there is designing intelligence in animals or men, only from what they perform. We call them intelligent, only because they act as if they were so. This is our only evidence. If they were destitute of interior faculties,

they would still preserve the same outward appearance. It is only, in any case, the existence of intelligent acts that proves the existence of an intelligent principle. And shall the work evince the workman in every instance but where the work is an exhibition of *infinite* contrivance? Must he be pronounced intelligent, who has written a book concerning the wonders of nature, and those wonders themselves not be equal to sustain a similar conclusion? What incredible blindness, to have suggested such a presumptuous absurdity!

T. If we should see the most superb palace in the world, or the most magnificent production of human art, should we not be delighted and amazed? Why then, are we not daily and hourly filled with rapturous emotions, in contemplating that infinitely nobler spectacle which is continually open to our inspection?

A. "The miracles of nature are exposed to our eye, (as a celebrated French writer beautifully expresses it), long before we have reason enough to derive any light from them. If we entered the world, with the same *reason* which a spectator carries with him to an *opera*, the first time he enters a theatre,—and if the curtain of the universe, if we may so term it, were to be rapidly drawn up, struck with the grandeur of every thing which we saw, and all the obvious contrivances exhibited, we should not be capable of refusing our homage to the Eternal Power, which had prepared for us such a spectacle." But we do not think of marvelling at objects we have seen for

so many years, or we think of them less, because they have so often been before us.

T. Is this an argument in favor of those studies which are adapted to awaken an attention to the works of God?

A. It is. We ought, if possible, to be always *extending* our acquaintance with the wonders with which we are surrounded, which proclaim an all-wise and beneficent Creator, so that we may *pause and suspend our thoughts*, and feel more sensibly the demonstrations of Providence, by observing them continually displayed in some *new* form.

T. It is for this reason, in part, we shall particularly examine the human structure, which has not probably been much attended to by most of you. But I intended to ask you, whether it is requisite to the evidence of design, that we should at once perceive the architect himself?

A. By no means. I do not require to see the maker of a machine, to be convinced that a maker was originally employed in the construction. If I should find a palace in a desolate wild—with not a human being to be seen, this would not lead me to suppose that it never had an architect. It does not, therefore weaken the demonstration of a creative Intelligence, that the Architect of the universe is unseen. In truth, when I come to reflect, I am sensible I never beheld *any* architect, in reality,—not even a human one. The outward form, which is all I ever perceived is not the architect. The real architect is the thinking, contriving mind; and this was never seen