

**A LETTER TO ANDREWS  
NORTON, ON MIRACLES  
AS THE FOUNDATION OF  
RELIGIOUS FAITH**

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A Letter to Andrews Norton, on Miracles as the Foundation of Religious Faith by Richard Hildreth

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**RICHARD HILDRETH**

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LETTER

TO

ANDREWS NORTON,

ON MIRACLES

AS THE FOUNDATION OF RELIGIOUS FAITH.

*72. 7. 1840*

BOSTON:

WEEKS, JORDAN & COMPANY,

NO. 121 WASHINGTON STREET.

1840.



## LETTER.

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REVEREND SIR,

I have read with care and edification, the different pamphlets which go to make up the controversy now pending between yourself and the Reverend George Ripley, touching the true foundation of Religious Faith.

In recalling your attention to some paragraphs of your "Discourse on the latest Form of Infidelity," with which that controversy began, I wish the character in which I address you to be distinctly understood.

I do not present myself to your notice either as a dogmatist, or a mystic, a naturalist, or a pietist, a believer, or an unbeliever; but simply in the character of a rational man,—a rational man not in the German, but the English sense.

You have undertaken to strip Religion of the transcendental and supernatural character which

it has ever borne ; to reduce it to the rank of a natural, historical science ; to place it at the head of the natural sciences ; virtually to assert that it includes them all, or at least, that it well might supercede them all.

It is remarkable indeed, after the philosophers of the last three centuries, at the cost of such dreadful struggles, and through such terrible sufferings and persecutions, had vindicated to themselves, against the usurpations of popes, and bishops, and councils, and clergy, the sole and exclusive possession of the field of natural science, including material nature, and man in all his human relations,—it is remarkable indeed I say, to see a new attempt made, at this late day, under cover of what you choose to call Rational Christianity, to set up the bare text of the Scriptures as the sole source of all useful knowledge, and the science of scriptural interpretation as the only science worthy to be cultivated.

In the name of Galileo, of Bacon, of Grotius, of Newton, of Locke, of Bentham, and of all their followers and disciples, I protest against this new piece of clerical arrogance and pretension ; and not content with protesting, I intend to point out its futility and its danger.

The first passage of your "Discourse," to

which I would particularly call your attention, is the following.\*

—“ But we may have a deeper sense of the value of our faith, if we look abroad on the present state of the world, and see, all around, the waves heaving and the tempest rising. Every where is instability and uncertainty. But from the blind conflict between men, exasperated and degraded by injustice and suffering, and men corrupted and hardened by the abuse of power, from the mutual outrages of angry political parties, in which the most unprincipled and violent become the leaders, from the fierce collision of mere earthly passions and cravings, whatever changes may result, *no good is to be hoped. All improvement in the civilized world, all advance in human happiness, is identified with the spread of Christian principles, of Christian truth, of that FAITH, RESTING ON REASON*, which connects man with God, makes him feel that the good of others is his personal good, assures him of a future life of retribution, and, by revealing his immortality, calms his passions.”

The most remarkable part of this passage, I have taken the liberty to put into Italics. When you speak of a “faith resting on reason,” I

\* Discourse, pp. 35, 36.



suppose you to use the word Reason, in its common, English sense, as synonymous with the understanding. You are aware that the modern German writers on metaphysics and theology, have given to the word Reason or its German equivalent, a new sense ; for while they ascribe to what they denominate the lower faculty of the understanding, all those operations of the mind, which, in English books, are ordinarily described as operations of reason, they use the word Reason or its German equivalent, to signify a certain alleged intuitive capacity of perceiving transcendental truth, a kind of internal sense, a faculty in short, which Locke, whether rightly or wrongly, confounded with the imagination.

It is not, I apprehend, in this German sense, that you use the word Reason. It would be inconsistent with your system, and all the other parts of your Discourse. If I understand you aright, you rest the foundation of Religious faith, that is to say, the evidence of Religious truths, upon sensible facts, facts that is, perceived by the senses, or discovered by reflection,—the same foundation upon which rest Astronomy, Chemistry, Mechanics, Legislation, Politics, Political Economy, Ethics, and the other physical and moral sciences.

You hold, if I have not totally misapprehended

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the whole drift of your doctrine, that it is only by the exercise of the understanding in the investigation of certain specific facts, that we can ever arrive at any firm conviction of the truths of Religion. In fact, you make the truths of Religion, a mere civil question of the credibility of witnesses. It is impossible, in your view, that we should have any personal knowledge of the supernatural, the invisible, the future. Certain persons, however, endowed with peculiar powers and supernaturally enlightened, have, in former times, had that communication, and have recorded the results of it in the Old and New Testaments. The only questions for us to settle are,—First, are those books, or parts of them, and what parts, the productions of inspired and supernaturally enlightened authors?—Second, what is it, in point of fact, which those authors teach?

Notwithstanding however, your express declaration, that we can pretend to no assurance of the facts upon which Religion is founded “except that derived from the testimony of God, from the Christian revelation,”\* you do seem to admit in the second note to your Discourse,† that possibly the facts upon which the “assurance

\* Discourse, p. 35.

† Discourse, note II. p. 52.

of a Christian rests," might have been discovered by some process of mere human research; and if I have not altogether mistaken the general character of your Theological writings, however ready you may be to call in the aid of inspired witnesses to supply, by their testimony, the weakness or uncertainty of the human understanding,—you by no means receive the testimony of those witnesses with any very implicit submission. You subject their testimony to the same sort of scrutiny which uninspired witnesses would be obliged to undergo; and if, on any points, their testimony seems to conflict with the dictates of your understanding, you either deny that such portions are duly authenticated as parts of the inspired testimony, or that resource failing, you stoutly maintain that the witnesses, notwithstanding their inspiration, are still liable to mistakes, and in many things, reflect only the errors and prejudices of their age. Here seems to be an inconsistency in your system, which I merely suggest, but upon which it is not my present purpose to dwell.

Summing up your doctrine the best I can, it seems to be this. Religion consists in knowledge, which knowledge leads to certain feelings, called Religious feelings.\* This Religious knowledge

\* Discourse, note I. p. 50.