

Alciphron  
or: The Minute Philosopher  
A Defence of the Christian Religion against the So-called Free-thinkers

George Berkeley

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth.—Some longer bits are replaced by brief accounts of what happens in them, between square brackets in normal-sized type. —The small black numbers are Berkeley's.

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## **Contents**

<b>First Dialogue: Free-thinking and the general good</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Second dialogue: The ethics of Mandeville</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Third dialogue: The ethics of Shaftesbury</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Fourth dialogue: The truth of theism</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Fifth dialogue: The utility of Christianity</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Sixth dialogue: The truth of Christianity</b>	<b>88</b>

## Fifth dialogue (Saturday)

1. [Dion reports that on the next morning (Friday) the group walked to a charming spot in the countryside and were settling down for an all-day conversation when they were interrupted by a clamour, including the barking of hounds and ‘the roaring of country squires’. It was a fox-hunt, in which one of the hunters had fallen from his horse and broken a rib. The day was spent in getting him to Crito’s home and caring for him there, sending for a ‘surgeon’, feeding the fox-hunters, who with ‘loud rustic mirth gave proof of their religion and loyalty by the healths they drank’, and so on. The following morning the discussion-group returned to the place where they had been when the hunt and accident interrupted them.]

Now Lysicles, being a fastidiously elegant man and a witty one, was utterly contemptuous of the rough manners and conversation of the fox-hunters, and was angry that he had ‘lost’ so many hours in their company. ‘I cheered myself up’, he said, ‘by the thought that there were no longer any of this species among us [meaning, presumably, ‘moving in the social circles in which I move’]. It’s strange that men should be entertained by such uncouth noise and hurry, or find pleasure in the society of dogs and horses! How much more elegant the diversions of the town are!’

‘Fox-hunters’, replied Euphranor, ‘in a certain way resemble free-thinkers. The fox-hunters employ their animal faculties in pursuit of game, and you gentlemen employ your intellectual faculties in the pursuit of truth. It’s the same sort of pastime, though the objects are different.’

**Lysicles:** I would rather be compared to any brute on earth than a rational brute. [In this context, ‘rational’ is code for ‘human’. Lysicles is saying that he would rather be compared to sub-human

animal than to a brutish human being such as a fox-hunter.]

**Crito:** That means that you’d have been less displeased with my friend Pythocles, whom I have heard compare the common sort of •minute philosophers not to the •hunters but to the •hounds. He gave this reason: ‘You’ll often see among the dogs a loud babbler with a bad nose lead the unskilful part of the pack, who all rush after him without following any scent of their own, any more than the herd of free-thinkers follow their own reason.’

2. But Pythocles was a blunt man; and he can’t ever have encountered such reasoners among the free-thinkers as you gentlemen, who can sit so long at an argument, dispute every inch of ground, and yet know when to make a reasonable concession.

**Lysicles:** I don’t know how it happened, but it seems that Alciphron has been making concessions for me as well as for himself. Speaking for myself, I’m not quite so ready to concede things; but I don’t want to be a stand-out either.

**Crito:** Truly, Alciphron, when I consider how far we have come and how far we are agreed, I think it’s likely that we’ll eventually come to be in complete agreement. You have granted that a life of virtue is to be preferred, as the kind of life most conducive both to the general good of mankind and to the good of individuals; and you allow that the beauty of virtue isn’t by itself a strong enough motive to get mankind to live virtuously. This led you to agree that the belief in a God would be very useful in the world, and that therefore you would be disposed to accept any reasonable proof of his existence; such a proof has been given, and you have accepted it.

Well, then, if we admit a Divinity, why not divine worship? And if worship, why not religion to teach this worship? And if some religion, why not the Christian one, if we can't find a better one and Christianity is already established by the laws of our country and handed down to us from our forefathers? Are we to believe in a God yet not pray to him for future benefits or thank him for past ones? Not trust in his protection, or love his goodness, or praise his wisdom, or marvel at his power? And if these things *are* to be done, can we do them in any way that is more suitable to the dignity of God and man than the way laid down by the Christian religion?

**Alciphron:** I am not perhaps altogether sure that religion must be absolutely bad for the public; but I hate to see religion walk hand in hand with considerations of government and social order. I don't like to see human rights tied to religion. I am not in favour of any kind of *governing* high priest [he reels off a list of countries that have had such].

**3.** I knew a witty free-thinker (he's dead now) who was a great admirer of the ancient Druids! He detested the present established religion, but used to say that he would like to see the Druids and their religion restored, as it flourished in Gaul and Britain in ancient times. It would be a good thing, he thought, that there should be a number of thoughtful men set apart to preserve knowledge of arts and sciences, to educate youth, and to teach men the immortality of the soul and the moral virtues. 'That is what the ancient Druids did,' he said, 'and I'd be glad to see them once more established among us.'

**Crito:** How would you like it, Alciphron, •that priests should have power to decide all controversies, settle disputes about property, distribute rewards and punishments; •that anyone who didn't submit to their decrees should be excommuni-

cated, regarded with disgust, excluded from all honours and privileges, and deprived of the common benefit of the laws; and •that from time to time a number of laymen should be crammed together in a wicker-work idol and burned •to death• as an offering to their pagan gods? How would you like living under such priests and such a religion?

**Alciphron:** Not at all. Such a state of affairs would be utterly unacceptable to free-thinkers.

**Crito:** But that's what the Druids and their religion were like, if we can trust Cæsar's account of them.

**Lysicles:** I'm now more than ever convinced that there ought to be no such thing as an established religion of any kind. Certainly all the nations of the world have until now been out of their wits. Even the Athenians—the wisest and freest people on earth—had who-knows-*what* foolish attachment to their established church. They offered, it seems, a monetary reward to whoever would kill Diagoras of Melos, a free-thinking contemporary who laughed at their mysteries: and Protagoras, another of the same sort, narrowly escaped being put to death for writing something that seemed to contradict their accepted notions of the gods. That's how *our* noble sect was treated in ancient Athens. And I have no doubt that your Druids would have sacrificed many a holocaust [Berkeley's word] of free-thinkers! I wouldn't give a farthing to exchange one religion for another. Away with them all together, root and branch! Anything less than that isn't worth doing. No Druids or priests of any sort for me: I see no place in the world for any of them.

**4. Euphranor:** This reminds me of how we ended our last philosophical conversation. We agreed that next time we would return to the point we had then just begun on, namely the use or benefit of the Christian religion, which Alciphron challenged Crito to show.

**Crito:** I'm all the readier to take this up because I don't think it is hard to do. One great mark of Christianity's truth is, in my view, its tendency to do good. It seems to be the north star [a principal guide to navigation at sea] that guides all our judgments about practical matters, including moral ones, because these are always connected with universal benefit. But to think straight about this matter we should try to do what Lysicles did in an earlier conversation [see pages 23–24], taking account of things as a whole, going as far as we possibly can in seeing how principles branch out into consequences. [In its four occurrences in this paragraph, 'principle' means 'source' or 'seed' (see Euphranor on pages 36–37).] We needn't pay much attention to •the moods or whims or imaginary distresses of a few idle men, whose ideas may be offended though their conscience can't be wounded. What we have to do is to consider fairly •the true interests of individuals as well as of human society. Now, as is evident to anyone who gets his notion of it from the Gospel, the Christian religion is a fountain of light, joy and peace, a source of faith, hope and charity; so it has to be a principle of happiness and virtue. You'd have to be *blind* not to see that destroying •the principles of good actions must destroy •good actions. As for someone who sees this and yet persists in trying to destroy the principles—if *he* isn't wicked, who is?

5. It seems to me that any man who can see in some depth and some breadth must

- be aware of his own misery, sinfulness and dependence;
- perceive that this present world is not designed or adapted to make rational souls happy;
- welcome the chance to get into a better state; and
- be overjoyed to find that the road leading to that better state involves loving God and man, practising every virtue, living reasonably while we are here on

earth, proportioning the value we put on things to the value they actually have, and using this world without misusing it.

That's what Christianity requires. It doesn't require the Cynic's nastiness or the numbness of the Stoic. Can there be a higher ambition than to •overcome the world, or a wiser ambition than to •subdue ourselves, or a more comfortable doctrine than •the forgiveness of sins, or a more joyful prospect than that of •having our low nature renovated and assimilated to the Deity, our being made fellow-citizens with angels, and sons of God? Did Pythagoreans or Platonists or Stoics ever propose to the mind of man •purer means or •a nobler end? How much of our happiness depends on hope! How totally is hope extinguished by the minute philosophy! On the other hand, how it is cherished and raised by the Gospel! Let anyone who thinks seriously consider these things and then say which he thinks deserves better of mankind—he who recommends Christianity or he who runs it down? Which does he think is likelier to lead a happy life, to be a hopeful son, an honest dealer, a worthy patriot—he who sincerely believes the Gospel, or he who doesn't believe a word of it?—he who aims at being a child of God, or he who is content to be known as one of Epicurus's hogs? Just look at the characters and behaviour of average examples of the two sorts of men, and then say which sort live in a way that accords best with the dictates of reason! [The preparer of this text asked Anthony Long (UC Berkeley) for help with 'Epicurus's hogs', and this was part of his reply (included with permission): 'In the last verse of Horace's little *Epistle to Tibullus* he describes himself to his fellow poet as "a hog from Epicurus's herd". In his self-mocking context Horace says that he has been observing the Epicurean rule of living care-free for the day: "When you want to laugh, you will see me sleek and fat, in fine shape, a hog..." Horace knows that the true Epicurean is not a voluptuary, but he ironically echoes that stock prejudice.']

**6. Alciphron:** It's amazing to see how different things look when they are viewed in different lights, or by different eyes. The picture I have of religion is very unlike yours, Crito, when I consider how it unmans the soul, filling it with absurd dreams and slavish fears; how it extinguishes the gentle passions, inspiring a spirit of malice and rage and persecution; when I see bitter resentments and unholy wrath in the very men who preach meekness and charity to others.

**Crito:** Perhaps gentlemen of your sect think that religion is a subject beneath their attention; but it seems to me that someone who sets about opposing any doctrine ought to know *what* he is opposing. So I'll tell you: religion is the virtuous mean between disbelief and superstition. We don't defend superstitious follies, or the rage of bigots. What we plead for is

- religion against irreligion,
- law against confusion,
- virtue against vice,
- the hope of a Christian against the despondency of an atheist.

I won't defend 'bitter resentments and unholy wrath' in any man, much less in a Christian, and least of all in a clergyman. But if even the best Christians sometimes produce outbursts of ·angry· emotion, that won't surprise anyone who reflects on the sarcasms and rudeness with which Christians are treated by the minute philosophers. For, as Cicero remarks somewhere, 'an insult has a sting that a wise and good man will find it hard to bear' [he says it in Latin]. But even if you sometimes see particular self-professed Christians going to faulty extremes of any kind, through passion and weakness, while unbelievers of a calmer and cooler temperament sometimes behave better, this contrast proves nothing in favour of disbelief or against Christianity. If a believer acts badly, that is because of the man, not of his

belief. And if an unbeliever does good, that is because of the man, not of his unbelief.

**7. Lysicles:** . . . You won't deny that the clergy are regarded as physicians of the soul, and that religion is a sort of medicine that they deal in and administer. Well, now, if very many souls are diseased and lost, how can we think that their the physician is skillful or that his medicine is good? It's a common complaint that vice increases, and men grow more wicked by the day. If a shepherd's flock is diseased or unsound, who is to blame but the shepherd, for neglecting them or not knowing how to cure them? I have nothing but contempt for such shepherds, such medicine, and such physicians, who do what all hucksters do—use grave and elaborate speeches to peddle their pills to the people, who are never the better for them.

**Euphranor:** It seems utterly reasonable to say that we should base our judgment of a physician and his medicine on the medicine's effect on the sick. But tell me, Lysicles, would you judge a physician by •the sick who take his medicine and follow his prescriptions, or by •those who don't?

**Lysicles:** Doubtless by those who do.

**Euphranor:** Well, then, what are we to say if great numbers of sick people refuse to take the medicine, and instead of it take poison of a directly opposite nature that has been prescribed by others whose concern it is to discredit the physician and his medicines, to block men from using them, and to destroy their effect by drugs of their own? Is the physician to blame for the health troubles of those people?

**Lysicles:** By no means.

**Euphranor:** By the same line of argument, doesn't it follow that the tendency of religious doctrines should be judged by the effects they produce, not on all who hear them, but only on those who accept or believe them?

**Lysicles:** It seems so.

**Euphranor:** If we are to be fair, then, shouldn't we judge the effects of religion by the religious, of faith by believers, of Christianity by Christians?

**8. Lysicles:** But I suspect there are very few of these sincere believers.

**Euphranor:** Still, won't it suffice to justify our principles if, in proportion to the numbers who accept them, and the strength of the faith with which they are accepted, they produce good effects? There may be more such believers than you think; and if there aren't, isn't that the fault of those who make it their proclaimed purpose to lessen that number? And who are those but the minute philosophers?

**Lysicles:** I say it is owing to the clergy themselves, to the wickedness and corruption of clergymen.

**Euphranor:** And who denies that there may be minute philosophers even among the clergy?

**Crito:** In such a numerous a body there are bound to be men of all sorts. But despite the cruel reproaches flung at the clergy by their enemies, I think that any fair-minded observer of men and things will be inclined to regard those reproaches as revealing faults in those who fling them as much as in the clergy at whom they are flung—especially if he takes into account the strident tone of those who censure the clergy.

**Euphranor:** I don't know enough of the world to claim to judge the virtue, merit and wide-ranging accomplishments of men in the various professions; and anyway I don't like the odious work of comparison. But I'm willing to say this: the clergy in this region where I live are by no means a disgrace to it; on the contrary, the people seem to profit greatly from their example and doctrine. But supposing the clergy to be sinners and faulty (as of course all men certainly are);

supposing you could detect here and there among them great crimes and vices; what inference can you draw against the profession itself from its unworthy practitioners, any more than the pride, pedantry and bad lives of some philosophers creates a case against philosophy, or those of lawyers a case against law?

**9. Crito:** It is certainly right to judge principles from their effects; but then we must know them to *be* effects of those principles. It's precisely the method I have followed with respect to religion and the minute philosophy. I can honestly say that I •never knew any man or family become worse in proportion as they became religious; but I have •often observed that minute philosophy is the worst thing that can get into a family, the easiest way to impoverish, divide and disgrace it.

**Alciphron:** What *I* have observed, by this same method of tracing causes from their effects, is that the love of truth, virtue and the happiness of mankind are good stuff for speeches but they aren't what drive the clergy in their work. If they were, why would clergymen be—as they all *are*—so fond of abusing human reason, disparaging natural religion, and trashing the philosophers and scientists?

**Crito:** Not *all*. It's true that a Christian favours confining reason within its proper bounds, but so does every reasonable man. If we are forbidden to get involved with unprofitable questions, empty philosophy, and 'science' that isn't really science, it doesn't follow that all inquiries into profitable questions, useful philosophy, and real science are unlawful. . . . No man of good sense will make those inferences. . . . It is generally acknowledged that there is a natural religion that can be discovered and proved by the light of reason, to those who are capable of such proofs. But still it has to be admitted that precepts and oracles from

heaven are incomparably better suited to the improvement of ordinary folk and the good of society than are the reasonings of philosophers. That's why we don't find that natural or rational religion ever became the popular national religion of any country.

**10. Alciphron:** It can't be denied that in all heathen countries a world of fables and superstitious rites have been accepted under the colour of religion. But I question whether they were as absurd and harmful as they are vulgarly said to have been, because their respective legislators and magistrates [see note on page 5] must surely have thought them useful. . . .

**Crito:** We don't deny that there was something useful in the old religions of Rome and Greece and some other pagan countries. On the contrary, we freely admit that they had some good effects on the people. But these good effects came from the truths contained in those false religions—the more truth a religion contained, therefore, the more useful it was. I think you'll have difficulty producing any useful truth, any moral precept, any healthy principle or notion in any non-Christian system of religion or philosophy, that isn't included in the Christian religion, where it is either enforced by stronger motives, or supported by better authority, or carried to a higher point of perfection.

**11. Alciphron:** So you want us to think ourselves a finer people than the ancient Greeks or Romans.

**Crito:** If by 'finer' you mean better, perhaps we are; and if we aren't, it's not because we have the Christian religion but because too many of us don't.

[Alciphron protests that Crito's 'Perhaps we are' is indefensible. He contrasts Cicero and Brutus with 'an English patriot', and Seneca with 'one of our parsons'. Crito replies that 'those great men were not the minute philosophers of

their times', and that the best of their principles were also Christian ones. He adds that the current standing of some of the great men of the ancient world is partly due to their undeniable personal merits, partly to favourable publicity, and not at all to their not being Christian. As for more recent times, a careful look shows a great deal of moral improvement in Europe, under the influence of Christianity. For a start, he says, let's take a look at England.]

**Alciphron:** I have heard much of the glorious light of the Gospel, and would be glad to see some effects of it in my own dear country—which is, incidentally, one of the most corrupt and profligate on earth, despite the boasted purity of our religion. But you wouldn't be showing much confidence in your religion if you compared it only with that of the barbarous heathen from whom we are derived. If you want to honour your religion, have the courage to make your comparison with the most renowned heathens of antiquity.

**Crito:** It is a common prejudice to despise the present and over-rate remote times and things. There's a touch of this in the judgments men make concerning the ancient Greeks and Romans. Those nations certainly did produce some noble spirits and great patterns of virtue, but over-all they seem to me to have been much inferior in real virtue and good morals to our 'corrupt and profligate' nation. (So you called it, to bring dishonour to our religion. I wonder how you would choose to describe it when you wanted to do honour to the minute philosophy!) [Crito backs up his statement about the Greeks and Romans by citing examples: the treatment of slaves and prisoners of war, killing of unwanted children, gladiators; and also 'bacchanals and unbridled lusts of every kind'. These don't have parallels in contemporary England, he says, largely because of Christianity. Alciphron replies that Crito is overlooking facts that don't fit his views, citing

‘the inhumanity of that barbarous custom of duelling’. Crito agrees that duelling is bad: ‘I shan’t make an apology for every Goth that walks the streets with a determined purpose to murder any man who spits in his face or calls him a liar.’ He goes on to say that Christianity isn’t responsible for this; and Alciphron says that that’s irrelevant to the immediate present topic, which is just a comparison of contemporary England with ancient Greece and Rome. Crito accepts this, and returns to the comparison they were making, saying that duelling isn’t as bad as the common Roman practice of *poisoning*.]

**Lysicles:** That’s very true. Duelling is not as *general* a nuisance as poisoning, and it’s not so *low* either. This crime (if it is a crime) has a good chance of holding on despite the law and the Gospel. **(1)** The clergy never preach against it because **(2)** they don’t suffer from it personally; and a man of honour mustn’t appear to oppose the means of vindicating honour, which is what duelling is.

**Crito:** You aren’t the first free-thinker to say that **(1)** the clergy are not given to preaching against duelling; but in my view **(1)** that remark itself is unfair, and so is **(2)** your statement about why the clergy stay away from this topic. **(1)** In effect, half of their sermons—all that is said about charity, brotherly love, forbearance, meekness, and forgiving injuries—is *directly* against this wicked custom of duelling. As for the claim that **(2)** they •never suffer from it themselves, that is so far from true that one can make a case for saying that they suffer from it •oftener than other men.

**Lysicles:** How can you make good on that claim?

**Crito:** [The ferocity of this passage suggests that it reflects Berkeley’s own personal experiences of being ‘bullied’ by cowards.] There are two kinds of bully, the fighting and the tame, both public nuisances. The fighting bully is the more dangerous animal,

but there are far fewer of them than of tame bullies. The tame bully exerts his talents against clergymen, which the fighting bully never does. The qualities of a man that make him count as a tame bully are •natural rudeness combined with a •delicate sense of danger—meaning danger *to himself*. You see, the fashionable custom of calling men to account for their behaviour (i.e. challenging them to a duel) has not lessened the force of inbred insolence and bad manners; it has merely turned that force in a new direction. So you can often see one of these tame bullies nearly bursting with offended pride and bad temper that he dares not express openly because he is afraid of being challenged to a duel, until a parson comes his way, providing relief—i.e. giving his angry state a *safe* outlet. . . .

**14. Alciphron:** But to return to our topic, can you deny that the ancient Romans were as famous for justice and integrity as today’s men are for the opposite qualities?

**Crito:** You can’t get the character of the Romans from the opinions of Cicero, the actions of Cato, or a few shining episodes scattered through their history. What you need to consider is the prevailing tenor of their lives and notions. [And then, he says, the picture changes; and he goes on to cite examples of atrocious publicly approved conduct by the Romans. Then:] I venture to say that if you take Roman history from one end to the other, and impartially compare it with our own, you won’t find the Romans to be as good as you imagine, or your countrymen to be as bad. On the contrary, I really do think that an unbiased eye will detect a vein of charity and justice—an effect of Christian principles—running through England today. . . .

**15.** Crito paused, and Alciphron spoke up, addressing himself to Euphranor and me: ‘It is natural for men, according to their various upbringings and prejudices, to form

opposite judgments about the same things. . . . Crito, for instance, imagines that religion has only salutary effects, but if you appeal to the general experience and observation of other men, you'll find that the statement *Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum* has grown into a proverb which says that *religion is the root of evil*. [It was said by Lucretius, and wasn't a *generalization* about religion. Speaking of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter to a goddess in the hope of getting favourable winds for his attack on Troy, Lucretius wrote 'So greatly was religion able to persuade ·a man· to do evil'.] Not just among Epicureans or other ancient heathens, but among moderns speaking of the Christian religion. I think it is unreasonable to set up against •the general concurring opinion of the world •the observation of a particular person, or a particular set of zealots, whose prejudice sticks close to them and keeps mixing in with their judgments—zealots who read, draw conclusions, and observe with an eye not to discovering the truth but to defending their prejudice.' [Notice how nasty the tone has become. This is said *about* Crito, in his presence, but not addressed to him directly.]

**Crito:** Although I can't share Alciphron's views, I admire his skill and dexterity in argument. Sometimes he represents an opinion's acceptance by people in general as a sure sign of its being wrong; but when that doesn't suit his purposes he just as easily makes it a sure sign of truth! But the fact •that an irreligious proverb is used by the friends and admired authors of a minute philosopher doesn't imply •that the proverb is something generally accepted, still less that it is a truth based on the experience and observation of mankind. . . . ·And this one *isn't* a truth·. It would be as reasonable to think that darkness is a natural effect of sunshine as to think that sullen and furious passions come from the glad tidings and divine precepts of the Gospel. The sum and substance, the scope and end, of Christ's religion is *the love of God and man*. All other doctrines and duties

(whether legal or moral) are subordinate to this, as  
 parts of it,  
 means to it,  
 signs of it,  
 principles arising from it,  
 motives to adhere to it, or  
 effects of it.

Tell me, now, how *could* evil or wickedness of any kind comes from such a source? I don't say that there are no evil qualities in Christians, or that there are no good ones in minute philosophers. But I do say this: whatever evil there is in us, our principles certainly lead to good; and whatever good there may be in you, it is most certain that your principles lead to evil.

**16. Alciphron:** It must be admitted that Christianity looks handsome on the outside, and many plausible things can be said in favour of the Christian religion taken simply as we find it in the Gospel.

[He goes on to report the view of 'one of our great writers' [Shaftesbury] that the first Christian preachers sneakily made Christianity look good—'all love, charity, meekness, patience, and so forth'—until they had •converted much of the world and •come to have political power, and then 'they soon changed their appearance, and showed cruelty, ambition, avarice, and every bad quality'. Crito responds that this is very stupid: the first Christian preachers *died* for their faith.]

**Alciphron:** And yet ever since this religion has appeared in the world we have had eternal feuds, factions, massacres, and wars, the very reverse of that hymn with which it is introduced in the Gospel: 'Glory be to God on high, on earth peace, good-will towards men.'

[Crito accepts this, adds that Christianity was often the 'pretext' for these evils, but insists that this doesn't mean it

was their cause. He then says that the evils of the Christian era were matched and outnumbered by evils in pre-Christian times. All these evils, early and late, were] the common product of the passions and vices of mankind, which are sometimes covered with the mask of religion by wicked men who have the •form of godliness without the •power of it. This is so obviously true that I'm surprised that any man of sense, knowledge, and candour can doubt it.

**17.** [He returns to ancient Rome, with more examples of horrors. Alciphron agrees that the Romans 'had a high and fierce spirit, which produced. . . .very bloody catastrophes'. But the ancient Greeks, he says, 'were a civilized and gentle sort of men, softened by arts and philosophy'. Crito replies that 'the little states and cities of Greece' (as Alciphron calls them) had their factions 'which persecuted each other with such treachery, rage and malice that *our* factious folk are mere lambs by comparison; for evidence of this he refers to Thucydides' history of the war between Athens and Sparta; and he expresses contempt for] free-thinkers, divers to the bottom of things, fair inquirers, and openers of eyes, who are capable of such a gross mistake ·as sentimentalising ancient Greece·.

**18. Alciphron:** The rest of mankind we could more easily give up; but as for the Greeks, men of the most refined genius express a high esteem of them, not only on account of •the qualities that *you* think fit to allow them but also for •their virtues.

**Crito:** . . . .On ·the basis of· the fullest and fairest observation I can make, I think that if 'virtue' stands for truth, justice and gratitude, there is incomparably more virtue right now in England than could ever be found in ancient Greece. [He goes on about the ingratitude that some Greek states showed to some of their citizens who had been benefactors, and then

moves on to this:] As for the source of the chief advantage of the Greeks and Romans and other nations that have made the greatest figure in the world, I'm inclined to think it was their special reverence for the laws and institutions of their countries. These inspired them with steadiness and courage, and with the heartfelt and noble love of their country; and what they understood to be *their country* was not confined by language or ethnic origin, still less by geographical location; their notion of *their country* also took in a certain system of manners, customs, notions, rites, and civil and religious laws.

**Alciphron:** I can see your drift! You want *us* to revere the laws and religious institutions of *our* country. Well, excuse us if we don't see fit to imitate the Greeks, or to be governed by any authority whatsoever.

**Crito:** I'm sure you don't. If Islam were established by law, I don't doubt that the free-thinkers—the very ones who applaud Turkish maxims and manners so loudly that you'd think they were ready to turn Turkish—would be the first to protest against them.

**Alciphron:** But to return ·to our topic·: I agree that there always *have been* wars and factions in the world, and that there always *will be* on some pretext or other, as long as men are men.

**19.** But there's a specifically Christian *sort* of •war and *sort* of •warrior, one that the heathens had no notion of. [The noun 'divine' has been replaced by 'theologian' in this version; but its occurrence in this paragraph and the next is left unaltered, for reasons that you'll see.] I'm talking about •disputes in theology (·the wars·) and •polemical divines (·the warriors·), which the world has been amazingly pestered with. If you take their word for it, they are teaching peace, meekness, harmony and whatnot, but even a cursory look at how they behave shows them to

have been, all through the centuries, the most contentious, quarrelsome, disagreeing crew that ever appeared on earth. The skill and trickery, the zeal and eagerness, with which the scholastic divines (those barbarians!) split hairs and quarrel over non-existent *imagined* things is more absurd and a greater scandal to human reason than all the ambitious intrigues, plots and politics of the court of ancient Rome, and makes me even angrier than those do.

**Crito:** If divines are quarrelsome, it's not because they are divine but because they are *undivine* and *unChristian*. Justice is a good thing, and so is the art of healing; yet men can be wronged in the administering of justice or poisoned in the giving of medicine. But just as wrong can't be justice or an effect of justice, and poison can't be medicine or an effect of medicine, so also pride or strife can't be religion or an effect of religion. Having said that, I agree that you can often see hot-headed bigots signing up with religious parties as well as political ones, without being of credit or service to either. [For the next bit, you need to remember that the scholastics were *Roman Catholic* philosophical theologians, while Berkeley was an Anglican.] As for the scholastics in particular, I don't think the Christian religion has *any* need to defend them, their doctrines, or their method of handling them. Still, however futile their views may be and however clumsy their language, it's simply not true that they sneer and scold and rant in their writings; and they are so far from showing fury or passion that an impartial judge might rate them far ahead of the minute philosophers in •keeping close to the point, and in their •tone and good manners. But, anyway, if men are puzzled, tangle with one another, talk nonsense and quarrel about religion, they do the same about law, medicine, politics, and everything else that matters. It's not just in •divinity that men run into disputes, trickery, nonsense and contradictions; it also happens in •the other professions I

have mentioned, and indeed in •any pursuit where men have created abstract theory. But this doesn't stop there being many excellent rules, sound ideas and useful truths in all those professions. In all disputes, human emotions too often get stirred into the mix in proportion as the subject is thought to be more or less important. But we oughtn't to confuse the cause of man with the cause of God, or make human follies an objection to divine truths. It's *easy* to distinguish •what looks like wisdom from above from •what comes from the passion and weakness of men. The distinction is so obvious that when someone doesn't draw it one might be tempted to think that this is a result not of ignorance but of something worse. [The hostile tone isn't improving!]

**20.** The conduct we cite in objections to minute philosophers is a natural consequence of their principles. Anything they can cite in objections to us is an effect not of our principles but of human passion and frailty.

**Alciphron:** Oh, terrific! So we must no longer cite, in objections against Christians, the absurd contentions of Councils, the cruelty of Inquisitions, the ambition and power-grabbing of churchmen?

**Crito:** You can cite them as objections against Christians, but not against Christianity. If the divine author of our religion and his disciples have sowed a good seed, and if together with this good seed the enemies of his gospel (including the minute philosophers of all ages) have sowed bad seeds from which weeds and thistles grow, isn't it obvious that these bad weeds can't be blamed on the good seed or on those who sowed it? [He develops this point at considerable and not very interesting length. Alciphron responds by shifting to a different complaint: the triviality and unimportance of much theological writing.]

**Crito:** I shan't undertake to vindicate theological writings as such; a general defence of them would be as needless as a general accusation is groundless. But let them speak for themselves, and don't condemn them on the word of a minute philosopher! Anyway, let's look at the worst case. Imagine a quarrelsome pedant in divinity who disputes and ruminates and writes on some refined point that is as useless and unintelligible as you please. But then ask yourself what would have become of this man if he had been brought up to be a layman rather than a cleric. Mightn't he have employed himself in shifty business deals, harassing law-suits, factions, seditions, and such like amusements, doing much more harm to the public than he actually does with his useless theological studies? . . .

[The two pages between here and 27 occupy five pages in the original. They aren't of much philosophical interest.] [Alciphron complains that in theological disputes 'what men lack in light they commonly make up in heat'. Crito replies that in *any* branch of study, when some isolated point is being looked into with great care, that tends to generate an inflated sense of its importance; but this is routine stuff, and not special to theology. Alciphron complains that trivial theological squabbles are regarded as 'learning', and the public takes an interest in them as though they were sporting events. He objects to theological writings on stylistic grounds. . . ]

**Alciphron:** . . . What man of sense or breeding would not detest the infection of long-winded pulpit eloquence; or of that dry, formal, pedantic, stiff and clumsy style that smells of the lamp and the college?

21. Those who are foolish enough to admire the universities as centres of learning must think that my reproach ('smells of the college') is a strange one; but it is perfectly fair. These days, the ablest men agree that the universities

are merely hot-beds of prejudice, corruption, barbarism, and pedantry.

**Lysicles:** Speaking for myself, I find no fault with universities. All I know is that I had three hundred pounds a year to spend in one of them, and it was the happiest time of my life. As for their books and style of writing—I didn't have time to pay any attention to them.

**Crito:** Whoever wants to pull weeds will never lack work—there's no shortage of bad books on every subject. I don't know what theological writings Alciphron and his friends are familiar with, but I venture to say that our English theologians include many writers who, for breadth of learning, solidity of content, strength of argument and purity of style are not inferior to any writers in our language. . . . As for our universities, which are (of course) imperfect, any *impartial* observer will find that with all their flaws they are better than universities in other countries, and *much* better than the mean picture that minute philosophers draw of them. It's natural that the loudest complaints against places of education come from those who have profited least by them. . . .

**Alciphron:** Crito mistakes the point. I am relying on the authority not of a dunce or a rake or an absurd parent [examples that Crito has used], but of the most accomplished critic this age has produced. This great man characterizes men of the church and universities with the finest touches and most masterly pencil. What do you think he calls them?

**Euphranor:** What?

**Alciphron:** Why, 'the black tribe', 'magicians', 'formalists', 'pedants', 'bearded boys'; and after having sufficiently derided and exploded them and their mean and crude learning, he provides the most admirable models of good writing, namely his own writings. They have to be acknowledged as

the finest things in our language—as I could easily convince you, for I also have with me something by that noble writer.

[After an exchange about a noble writer who is also a nobleman (in fact, Shaftesbury), Alciphron takes a book from his pocket and starts to read a long, flowery, unclear passage in which idleness is praised as being better than busy greed. It is quoted verbatim from Shaftesbury's book *Characteristics of...* etc., except that Berkeley mischievously puts it on the page as fifty lines blank verse, of which this is typical:]

But here a busy form solicits us,  
Active, industrious, watchful, and despising  
Pains and labour. She wears the serious  
Countenance of Virtue, but with features  
Of anxiety and disquiet.  
What is't she mutters? What looks she on  
with such admiration and astonishment?

[And so on, until Euphranor interrupts with a protest: 'Why should we interrupt our discussion to read a play?' It isn't a play or poetry, Alciphron replies, 'but a famous modern critic moralizing in prose'. He goes on about this great man's discoveries and his writings. Euphranor comments sarcastically on the kind of man who 'offers to reform the style and taste of the age'; and Alciphron, not hearing the sarcasm, continues enthusiastically about 'the admired critic of our times' who has, among other things, argued that Shakespeare, Milton and others have been greatly over-rated. Euphranor asks what effect 'this great man' has had on the public. 'Do they aspire to his sublimity, or imitate his chaste unaffected style?' Alciphron, still naively enthusiastic, says that 'the taste of the age is much mended'. Crito gets in a slap at the writing-style of minute philosophers, and then shifts the conversation back towards where it was a few minutes ago. 'When your great man tells us that ignorance

and ill taste are due to the Christian religion or the clergy, I can't just take his word for it.' The truth is the opposite of that, Crito says, in a speech that is summed up in this: 'Everyone who knows anything knows that we are indebted for our learning to the Greek and Latin tongues, . . . and that we are indebted for those tongues to our religion. What else could have made foreign and dead languages in such demand among us?' Alciphron speaks harshly of 'one sort of learning that is undoubtedly of Christian origin, and special to the universities'—he deplores the years that young people waste 'in acquiring the mysterious jargon of scholasticism' and the further years they have to spend being *untaught* it by the world.]

**Crito:** But what if this scholastic learning was not of Christian but of Moslem origin, being derived from the Arabs? And what if this complaint about gentlemen's spending several years in learning and unlearning this jargon is just a sham, and [this is said sarcastically] a specimen of the truth and candour of certain minute philosophers? Surely it wouldn't be such a deplorable loss of time if a young gentleman spent a few months on the much despised and decried art of Logic—a surplus of logic is by no means the prevailing nuisance of this age! It is one thing to •waste one's time learning and unlearning the barbarous terms, ultra-fine distinctions, and long-winded sophistry of the scholastics; it's another to •attain some exactness in defining and arguing—things that may be not altogether beneath the dignity even of a minute philosopher. Logic used to be regarded as its own object—i.e. a self-sufficient subject all on its own—so that the art of reasoning, instead of being transferred to •things, was aimed only at •words and •abstractions, which produced a sort of leprosy in all branches of knowledge. . . . But those times are past, and logic—once cultivated as the chief branch of knowledge—is now considered in another light; it doesn't

play anything like the part in the studies of young gentlemen at the universities that is attributed to it by those admirable reformers of religion and learning, the minute philosophers.

**25.** [Crito goes on to say that ‘the restoration of arts and civilized learning’ has been due to the influence of Christians, whom he names at length. In the course of this, he speaks of the great scholars ‘who flourished on the other side of the Alps in the Golden Age (as the Italians call it) of ·Pope· Leo the tenth’; and Alciphron challenges this, saying that the ‘noble critic’ from whom he quoted a few minutes ago regards the Italians as ‘corrupters of true learning and erudition’. Crito replies with some slighting remarks about the noble critic, and surprisingly Lysicles backs him up, saying in effect that someone who writes so much about ‘art and taste and critical skill’ oughtn’t to write as badly as that man (Shaftesbury) does. In the course of some further skirmishing between Alciphron and Crito about whether and to what extent English culture is indebted ‘to church or universities or ancient languages’, Crito speaks of Christianity as a generator of arts and sciences and also of ‘the general sense of virtue and humanity, and the belief in a providence and after-life, which all the argumentation of minute philosophers has not yet been able to abolish’. That remark brings the topic of Christianity-and-culture to an end, because Alciphron replies:]

**27. Alciphron:** It is strange that you still persist in arguing as though all the gentlemen of our sect were enemies to virtue and downright atheists, when I have assured you •that, on the contrary, we have among us a number of people who announce their support for virtue and natural religion, and I have also assured you •that I myself now argue on that basis.

**Crito:** How can you claim to support natural religion, and yet be open enemies of Christianity, which is the only established religion that includes whatever is excellent in natural religion, and which is the only means of making those precepts, duties and notions become revered throughout the world? Suppose someone tried to persuade people that he was greatly in support of a particular earthly monarch, that he loved and admired his government; while at the same time he took every opportunity to express himself as a most bitter enemy of the very persons and methods that contributed most to •the monarch’s service, and to •making his dignity known and revered, his laws observed, or his dominion extended—wouldn’t such a person be thought weak or insincere? And isn’t this just what minute philosophers ·like you· do: announce themselves as advocates of God and religion, and yet do all they can to discredit Christians and their worship? Admittedly, you argue against Christianity ·in one way that doesn’t necessarily express hostility to religion as such, namely· by representing Christianity as the cause of evil and wickedness in the world; but that line of argument could be used with equal force against civil government, food and drink, every faculty and profession, learning, eloquence, and even against human reason itself. And even those of your sect who allow themselves to be called Deists, if their views are thoroughly examined, will be found to include little religion in them. As for

- God’s providence watching over our conduct and dispensing blessings or hardships,
- the immortality of the soul,
- the last judgment, and an after-life with rewards and punishments

—those are great points of natural religion, but how few (if any) of your free-thinkers have tried to get men to have a serious sense of them! How many go the opposite way, trying

to make the belief in them shaky or ridiculous! . . . When a man's declared principles and personal beliefs are utterly subversive of the things listed above, anything he says about virtue, piety and religion will be understood as merely playing safe and not being conspicuous.

**Lysicles:** Frankly, I have never had any liking for religion of any kind, revealed or unrevealed [what's 'unrevealed' is 'natural religion']; and I venture to say the same for any gentlemen of our sect that I am acquainted with, having never known any of them do anything as *low* as •use the word 'God' with reverence, or •express respect for piety or for any sort of worship. [He adds details about ways in which a minute philosopher may talk as though he had respect for Christianity, explaining that this is never to be taken seriously and literally. Then:]

**28.** After all these arguments and ideas that beget one another without end, here is my view in a nutshell: My friends and I can't for the life of us see why man mightn't do very well and govern himself without any religion at all. Brutes do it, and they are thought to be less capable than men. You say that brutes have instincts, senses, appetites and passions to steer and conduct them? Well, men have all those and also have *reason* that they can consult when they need to. From these premises my friends and I conclude the road of human life is well enough lit without religion.

**Crito:** Brutes don't have much power of thought, and it is confined to particular things that are present to the animal; so they are sufficiently restrained and kept in order by the force or faculties of other animals and by the skill of man; and conscience and religion don't come into this. In contrast with that, human reason is a faculty of vast extent and power, especially power to do mischief; and conscience is a necessary balance to it. And another point: By the

law of their nature, non-human animals are pushed to one particular end or manner of existence, without inclination or means either to deviate from that or to go beyond it. But man has in him a will and higher principle through which he can pursue different or even contrary ends, and he can fall short of or exceed the perfection natural to his species in this world, just as he can either

hand over control to his sensual appetites, thereby degrading himself into the condition of brutes, or else,

well-order and improve his mind, thereby upgrading himself into something resembling an angel.

Man is the only animal with enough understanding to know his God. What's the use of this knowledge if it isn't to ennoble man, to raise him to a level where he is more like God and more in touch with God? And what would the good of such ennoblement be if it ended with this life? And how can these things happen without religion? But we have already discussed at great length the topics of vice and virtue, man and beast, sense and intellect. Lysicles, surely you don't want us to go back to where we were three or four days ago?

**Lysicles:** By no means. I would much rather go forward, and make an end as soon as possible. But to save us all trouble, let me tell you once for all that whatever you say you'll never persuade me that so many able and agreeable men are in the wrong, and a pack of snarling sour bigots in the right.

**29. Crito:** O Lysicles! I don't look for religion among •bigots, or for reason among •libertines. Each kind disgrace their respective positions—•the bigot exerting an angry zeal for things that hardly matter, and •the libertine paying no attention to even the plainest and most important truths. And surely whatever there is that's silly, narrow and uncharitable in the bigot, the same is in great measure to be

attributed to the conceited ignorance and petulant irreligion of the libertine. . . .

Lysicles ignored this, and rounded on Alciphron. 'I have always thought', he said, 'that nothing could be sillier than to think of destroying Christianity by praising natural religion. You can't consistently think well of one and poorly of the other, because it's obvious that natural religion needs the help of revealed religion if it is ever to be established and accepted anywhere except in the brains of a few idle speculative men. I knew what your concessions would come to. Anyone with half an eye can see that the belief in God, virtue, an after-life and such fine notions are the very basis and corner-stone of the Christian religion. Give them this foundation to build on, and you'll soon see what superstructures our theologians will raise from it. Admit the truth and importance of those doctrines and you don't have to be a conjurer to prove from that the excellence and usefulness of the Christian religion. And then of course there must be priests to teach and propagate this useful religion. And if there are priests, . . . provision will have to be made for their maintenance, enabling them to perform all their rites and ceremonies in a decent fashion and to keep their sacred character respected. And the plain upshot of all this is that the monarch will ally himself with the priesthood in order to subdue the people; so we have opened the gates to a long procession of ecclesiastical evils, priestcraft, hierarchy, inquisition. We have lost our liberty and property; the nation has been put to vast expense simply to purchase bridles for our mouths and saddles for our backs.'

**30.** He said this with some sharpness of tone, and a scolding manner. Alciphron was upset, but said nothing, and showed confusion in his looks.

Crito looked at Euphranor and me with a smile. Then, looking over at the two philosophers, he said: 'If you'll allow

me to intervene to prevent a rupture between old friends and brethren in opinion, I would remark that in what Lysicles has just said there is something right and something wrong. It seems right to assert, as he does, that a real belief in natural religion will lead a man to approve of revealed religion; but it is wrong to say that inquisitions, tyranny, and ruin must follow from this. Your free-thinkers—no offence meant!—seem to mistake where their strength lies. They *imagine* strongly, but *reason* weakly; they are mighty in exaggeration, but thin in argument! Isn't there some way to relieve them from the terror of that fierce and bloody animal an English parson? Won't it be enough to trim his talons without chopping off his fingers? Then they are such wonderful defenders of •liberty and •property! [He tells an anti-Pope story to illustrate his thesis that] we may see every day both things and notions being attributed to liberty and property that in fact don't have, and aren't meant to have, anything to do with either of them. Really! Is it impossible for a man to be a Christian without being a slave; or to be a clergyman without having the principles of an Inquisitor? I am far from shielding and justifying the greed for domination or tyrannical power in ecclesiastics. Some who have been guilty of that have paid dearly for it, and it is to be hoped they always will. But once we have calmed the fury and folly of the ambitious bishop, isn't it time to look see whether some evil mightn't come to the State from a different source—the overflowing zeal of an independent Whig [i.e. a believer in primitive Christianity who is opposed to the established Church of England]? I'll tell you this, without bothering to prove it: the worst tyranny this nation ever felt was from the hands of 'patriots' of that kind.'

**31. Lysicles:** I don't know. 'Tyranny' is a harsh word and is sometimes misapplied. When spirited men with independent views create a ferment, or make a change in the State, those who lose by the changes are apt to consider

things in one light, and those who win to consider them in another. In the mean time, this is certainly good policy: we should be sparing with our money, and keep it for better uses than to spend on the church and religion.

[What follows is a longish discussion of property-rights, the legal basis for the ownership of land by the church, and so on. Then:]

**32. Lysicles:** I can never hope, Crito, to make you think that my schemes are reasonable. You and I each argue correctly on our own principles, and we'll never agree until we drop our principles, and that can't be done by reasoning. We all talk of 'just', and 'right', and 'wrong', and 'public good', and so on. We use the same names, but our notions and conclusions are very different, perhaps diametrically opposite; and yet the conclusions on each side may admit of clear proofs, and be inferred by the same method of reasoning. For instance, the members of a club I belong to define *man* as *sociable animal*, and so we don't count as *men* the human creatures of whom it can be said that we prefer their absence to their presence. . . . By this standard it's clear that men of pleasure, good-humoured men, and men of wit are the only human creatures who properly and truly count as men. Therefore, whatever is conducive to good incomes for *them* is for the good of mankind, and consequently very just and lawful, even though it seems to bring loss or harm to other creatures; ·I say *seems*· because no *real* harm can be done in respect of life or property to those who don't know how to enjoy life and property. We hold this on the basis of clear and well connected reasoning. But others may view things in another light, give different definitions, draw different conclusions, and perhaps regard as a wart or tumour of human nature what we think to be the top and flower of the creation. From all which there must

arise a very different system of morals, politics, rights, and notions.

[Lysicles then swing into a jokey classification of men that someone invented, in which kinds of men at given the names of kinds of animals, thus:] According to this system, the fishes are the men who swim in pleasure. . . . The beasts are dry, drudging, covetous, rapacious folk and all those addicted to trouble and business, like oxen and other dry land animals, which spend their lives in labour and fatigue. The birds are airy notional men, enthusiasts, projectors, poets, philosophers and such like. . . . If you ask me which species of mankind I like best, I answer, the flying fish, i.e. a man of animal enjoyment with a mixture of whim! Thus you see we have our creeds and our systems, just as more solemn folk do; with this difference, that our systems are not strait-laced [= 'not strapped on tightly'], but sit easy, to be slipped off or on as the mood takes us or the occasion serves. And now I can listen, with the greatest equanimity imaginable, to my opinions being argued against or refuted.

**34. Alciphron:** I wish all men were like that. But you'll find a sort of men—I needn't name the sort—that can't endure having their opinions examined or their faults criticized. They are against reason, because reason is against them. We free-thinkers are all for liberty of conscience. If our tenets are absurd, we allow them to be freely argued against and inspected; and by parity of reasoning we might hope to be allowed the same privilege regarding the opinions of other men.

**Crito:** O Alciphron! wares that can't stand the light are indeed suspect. So whatever moves you to make this complaint, I promise you that *I* never will. Up to now I have allowed your reason its full scope, and I'll always do so in the future. . . . But for the love of truth, be candid

and don't spend your strength and our time on matters that aren't significant or are irrelevant to our topic or have been agreed between us. We allow that tyranny and slavery are bad things; but why should we fear them from the clergy at this time? We agree that rites and ceremonies aren't of central importance in religion: but why should we ridicule things that in their own nature are not bad and may be good, and that bear the stamp of supreme authority? I freely admit that men in theology as well as other subjects get tangled in useless disputes, and will probably go on doing so till the end of the world; but why must all the human weakness and mistakes of clergymen be attributed to wicked designs? Why indiscriminately abuse their character and their beliefs? Is *this* like candour, love of truth, and free-thinking? Granted, bad temper and ill-breeding can occasionally be found in the clergy; but aren't the same faults found in English laymen who have spent their lives in a secluded rural environment. I grant that there's endless futility in the works of the scholastics, but I deny that a volume of that does as much harm as a page of minute philosophy. That weak or wicked men should by favour of the world creep into power and high positions in the church—there's nothing surprising in that, and it is natural to suppose that once they are in those positions they will behave like themselves. But through all this it is obvious that what drives them in their unworthy achievements is not the Gospel but the world, not the spirit but the flesh, not God but the devil. We don't shrink from agreeing that nothing is more infamous than vice and ignorance in a clergyman, nothing lower than a hypocrite, more trivial than a pedant, more cruel than an Inquisitor. But you should agree in your turn, gentlemen, that nothing is more ridiculous and absurd than for pedantic, ignorant and corrupt men to throw the first stone at every shadow of their own defects and vices in other men.

**35. Alciphron:** When I think about the detestable state of slavery and superstition, I feel my heart swelling to take in the utter blessing of independent liberty. This is the sacred and high privilege, the very life and health of our English constitution. So you mustn't be surprised if we, with a vigilant and searching eye, guard it against the minutest appearance of evil. You must even allow us to cut around it, going deep and using a magnifying glass so as better to see and extirpate every least speck that appears in the freedom that we are careful to preserve and angry to see threatened.

**Crito:** As for unrestricted liberty, I leave that to savages, who I think are the only ones who have it. But as for the reasonable legal liberty of our constitution, I most heartily and sincerely wish it may to survive and flourish among us for ever. [He says that any amount of vigilance is justified if it stops attempts 'to change our free and gentle government into a slavish or severe one'; but how, he demands, can one get out of *this* any basis for an attack on religion? There follows an discussion of rights of suppression. Alciphron reports a magistrate who was so hard-pressed by free-thinkers that he couldn't find anything to say in defence of his religion except that if ten million people inhabiting the same island wanted to have laws establishing religion in certain ways, and ten thousand able men publicly sneered at those laws, the ten million would be entitled to expel the ten thousand out of the island.]

**Euphranor:** And what answer would you make to this remark of the magistrate?

**Alciphron:** The answer is obvious. By the law of nature, which is superior to any human institutions, intelligence and knowledge have a right to command folly and ignorance. I say that able men have by natural right a dominion over

fools. . . . This doctrine, however, was never thoroughly understood until quite recently. [After conversation about a hard-pressed individual magistrate, Alciphron will now revert to using 'the magistrate' in the manner described in a note on page 5, as a kind of short-hand for 'the law-making and law-enforcing authorities of the country'.] A generation back, Hobbes and his followers—though otherwise very great men—declared in favour of the religion of the magistrate, probably because they were afraid of the magistrate; but times have changed, and the magistrate may now be afraid of us!

[Crito briefly comments on this, and then launches into an anecdote that starts a brief and inconclusive discussion of the legal requirement that only professed Christians could serve on juries. Then:]

**Crito:** . . . This much is certain: the Christian reformed religion is a principal part and corner-stone of our free constitution; and I really think it is the only thing that makes us deserve freedom and makes us able to enjoy it. Freedom is either a blessing or a curse, depending on how men use it. If our religion were wiped out among us, and the ideas that are regarded by free-thinkers as prejudices of a Christian education were erased from the minds of Britons, it seems to me that the best thing that could then happen would be the loss of our freedom. A people who have such restless ambition, such strength of feeling, such enmity between factions, so much at stake in contests, such unrestricted licence of speech and press, amid so much wealth and luxury—the only thing that has so far kept them from ruin are the 'hoary old wives' tales [he uses a Latin phrase, quoting Persius, as on page 6] that you claim to be wiping out.

**36.** Under the Christian religion this nation has been greatly improved. From being a sort of savages, we have become civilized, polished, and learned. We have made a

decent and noble figure both at home and abroad. And, as our religion decreases, I am afraid *we* shall be found to have declined. So why should we persist in that dangerous experiment?

**Alciphron:** One would think, Crito, that you had forgotten the many calamities caused by churchmen and religion.

**Crito:** And one would think that *you* had forgotten what we said this very day in answer to that objection. I don't want to go on for ever saying the same things, so I'll make just three points. •If we reflect on the past state of the Christian world, and especially of our country with our feuds and factions that existed while we all had the same religion—e.g. the War of the Roses, so violent and bloody and *long*—we may well suspect that the nastiness that has more recently shown up under the mask of religion would have broken out under some other pretext if religion hadn't been available. •It doesn't follow from anything you can say about our history that the evils accidentally arising from religion bear any proportion to the good effects it has really produced or to the evils it has prevented. •The best things can accidentally give rise to evil; and such an accidental effect is not strictly speaking produced by the good thing itself but by some evil thing—not a part, property, or effect of it—that happens to coincide with it. . . .

**Alciphron:** I think we have given enough discussion to the topic of today's session. I must acknowledge that there's something in what Crito has said about the usefulness of the Christian religion. (Lysicles may not like this, but I owe it to my status as a fair impartial adversary to say this.) I'll even admit that some of our sect are in favour of tolerating Christianity. I remember a meeting of a number of able men where, after much debate, we passed three resolutions. •The first was that no religion ought to be tolerated in the State:

but this on more mature thought was judged impracticable. •The second was that all religions should be tolerated, but none looked on with favour except atheism: but it was feared that this might make trouble among the lower sort of people. •The third resolution was that some religion or other should be established for the use of the vulgar. After a long dispute

about which religion this should be, it was proposed that the present religion might be tolerated until a better one was found. But while I grant that Christianity is •expedient, I can never think it •true while there are unanswerable objections to it. Is it all right if I present those at our next meeting?

To which we all agreed.

### Sixth dialogue (Monday)

[In the original work, this is by a considerable margin the longest of the dialogues; but not in this version, from which much of the philosophically uninteresting material has been cut.]

[Dion reports that on the Sunday the various people spent the day in their characteristic ways. Then:] The next morning we assembled at the same place as on Saturday; and when we were all seated I remarked that during the preceding week our discussion had been longer and less interrupted than I had ever known in town, where men's hours are broken by visits, business, and amusements—so much so that anyone who settles for forming his ideas wholly from conversation must end up with ideas that are very shattered and incomplete.

'And what have we achieved', replied Alciphron, 'through all these continued discussions? For my part, I think that with regard to the **main point** that divides us, *the truth of the Christian religion*, I'm just where I was at the outset.'

I answered that so many points had been examined,

discussed and agreed between him and his adversaries that I hoped to see them eventually agreeing on everything. 'For, in the first place,' I said, 'the principles and opinions of those who are called free-thinkers, or minute philosophers, have been pretty clearly explained. It has been also agreed that vice isn't beneficial to the nation in the way that some men imagine it is; that virtue is highly useful to mankind; but that the beauty of virtue is not enough, on its own, to get men to be virtuous; that therefore the belief in a God and providence ought to be encouraged in the State, and tolerated in good company, as a useful notion. *And* it has been proved that there is a God, that it is reasonable to worship him, and that the worship, faith and principles prescribed by the Christian religion are a good influence.'

Alciphron's reply was addressed to Crito: 'Even if everything that Dion has just said is true,' he said, 'that doesn't move me an inch from where I was at the outset regarding the **main point**. That's because nothing in all this

proves the truth of the Christian religion, though each of the details Dion has listed might create a *prejudice* in its favour. So I must be on my guard against being a prejudiced person—prejudiced *in favour of* Christianity. As a lover of truth, I must look sharp, and consider carefully every step I take.

**2. Crito:** You may remember, Alciphron, that you suggested as today's topic certain difficulties and objections that you had to offer against the Christian religion. We are now ready to hear and consider anything of that kind that you think fit to produce. Atheism, and the wrong idea of Christianity as something harmful to mankind, are great prejudices, and a man's losing them may make him more apt to argue with candour and submit to reasonable proof; but losing prejudices against an opinion (·as you have done·) isn't the same as acquiring a prejudice in its favour (·as you fear you may have done·). So we have reason to hope that you'll be able to do justice to your cause without being uncritically in love with it.

**Alciphron:** [After a self-congratulatory opening, Alciphron says that he will do his best to share with 'those who are wandering lower down in the narrow dark paths of error' the view of things that he has achieved from his 'lofty stand above the reach of prejudice'. Then:] Know then that each of the various groups of men has a faith and a religious system that sprouts from the common grain of *enthusiasm* that they all have—a grain that is a basic ingredient in the mix of human nature. Each group tells of •communication with the invisible world, •revelations from heaven, •divine oracles, and the like. When I consider all these claims with an impartial eye, I can't possibly assent to them all, and I find within myself something that restrains me from assenting to any of them. I'm willing to go where I am led by common sense

and the light of nature; but the same reason that tells me to yield to rational proof forbids me to accept opinions without proof. This holds in general against all revelations—all. Let this be counted as my first objection against the Christian religion in particular.

**Crito:** This objection presupposes that there's no proof or reason for believing the Christian revelation, so if good reason *can* be assigned for such a belief, the objection comes to nothing. Now, I presume you'll agree that a true and proper reason for believing a report is the authority of the person who makes it; and the better his authority, the sounder the claim his report has to our assent. Well, now, the authority of God is on all accounts the best; so it is most reasonable to believe anything that comes from God, ·meaning anything that is told to us by God·.

**3. Alciphron:** I agree; but then you have to prove that it *does* come from God.

**Crito:** And aren't •miracles, and the •fulfilment of prophecies, joined with •the excellence of its doctrine, a sufficient proof that the Christian religion came from God?

**Alciphron:** Miracles would indeed prove something. But what proof have we of these miracles?

**Crito:** Proof of the same kind that we do have—the only kind we *can* have—of events that occurred long ago and far away. We have authentic accounts passed down to us from eye-witnesses whom we can't conceive to have been tempted to deceive us by any human motive whatsoever. ·Why can't we?· Because in giving these accounts they were acting contrary to their interests, their prejudices, and the very principles in which they had been nursed and brought up. These accounts were confirmed by the unparalleled razing of the city of Jerusalem, and the scattering of the Jewish nation, which is an enduring testimony to the truth of the

Gospel, particularly of the predictions of our blessed saviour. [For example: 'And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh.' Luke 21:20] Within less than a century these accounts were spread throughout the world, and believed by great numbers of people. They were also written down, translated into numerous languages, and handed down with the same respect and consent of Christians in the most distant churches.

'Don't you see', said Alciphron, staring straight at Crito, 'that all this depends on tradition? And tradition, believe me, gives only a weak hold: it is a chain whose first links may be stronger than steel and yet the last ones weak as wax and brittle as glass. Imagine a picture copied successively by a hundred painters, each copying from the one before; how **like** the original will the last copy be? How **lively** and clear will an image be after a hundred reflections between two parallel mirrors? That's how **like** and **lively** I think a faint vanishing tradition will be at the end of sixteen or seventeen centuries. Some men have a false heart, others a wrong head; and even when heart and head are both good, memory may be treacherous. Something gets added, something omitted, something varied from the truth; and the •cumulative result of many such additions, deductions and alterations through the centuries—the •bottom line—is quite different from what the tradition started with.'

**Crito:** We can know ancient facts by •oral tradition or written tradition; and a written tradition may be either •private (kept in the hands of particular men) or •public (recorded in public archives). Now, as far as I can see all these three sorts of tradition agree in attesting to the genuine antiquity of the Gospels. And they are strengthened by supplementary evidence from rites instituted, festivals observed, and buildings—churches, baptistries and sepulchres—put up by ancient Christians. Granting that your objection holds

against oral tradition *on its own*, I can't think it is so difficult to transcribe faithfully. And once something has been put in writing, it is secure against slips of memory, and can with reasonable care be preserved intact for as long as the manuscript lasts—which we know from experience can be more than a thousand years. . . . A tradition of more than sixteen hundred years needs only two or three links in its chain [he gives an example]; and despite the great length of time, those links may be very sound and unbroken. And no reasonable man will deny that an ancient manuscript may be as credible now as when it was first written. We have it on good authority—and anyway it seems probable—that •the first Christians were careful to transcribe copies of the Gospels and Epistles for their private use; and that •other copies were preserved as public records in many churches throughout the world; and that •portions of them were constantly read in their assemblies. What more could be said to prove the authenticity of the writings of classic authors, or ancient records of any kind?

Alciphron turned to Euphranor and said: 'Silencing an adversary is different from convincing him—don't you agree, Euphranor?'

**Euphranor:** Oh yes, they are different.

**Alciphron:** But what I want is to be convinced.

**Euphranor:** It's not so clear to me that you do!

**Alciphron:** Look, however willing a man is to be convinced, he *can't* be convinced by •probable arguments when there is a •demonstration going the other way.

**Euphranor:** I agree that he can't.

**4. Alciphron:** Well, it is as obvious as demonstration can make it that *no divine faith can possibly be built on tradition*. Take the case of an honest credulous farmer who is drilled and lectured every Sunday by his parish priest. Clearly it's

the parson he believes in, not God. *All* he knows about revelations, doctrines and miracles is what the priest tells him. He believes all this, and his faith is purely human. If you say he has the liturgy and the Bible as foundation for his faith, the difficulty still recurs. As regards the liturgy, he pins his faith on the civil magistrate as well as the ecclesiastic one, and neither of those can claim divine inspiration. As for the Bible, he takes both that and his prayer-book on trust from the printer, who he believes made true editions from true copies. So faith is at work here, but faith in what? Faith in the priest, in the magistrate, in the printer, editor, transcriber, none of whom can possibly be claimed to be divine. I had the hint for this argument from Cratylus; it's an arrow out of his quiver—a sharp one.

**Euphranor:** Let me get hold of this arrow and try it out for myself. Suppose that your farmer hears a magistrate declare the law from the bench, or suppose he reads it in a statute book. Do you think that the magistrate or the printer is the true and proper object of his faith and submission? Or do you acknowledge a higher authority on which their official actions are based? Again, if you read a passage in the Roman historian Tacitus that you believe to be true, would you say you assented to it on the authority of the printer or transcriber rather than the historian?

**Alciphron:** Maybe, maybe not. I don't think I'm obliged to answer these questions. All you are doing is to transfer the question from one subject to another. What we were discussing was not law or non-religious history, but religious tradition and divine faith. I can see well enough which way you are heading, but I'll never accept that you can solve one difficulty by starting up another.

**Crito:** O Alciphron! You expect others to 'stay fair and stand firm' (as you chose to express it [on page 6]) while you

pluck out their prejudices; but you elude our grasp at every turn. How can Euphranor argue with you if not from your concessions, and how can he know what *they* are unless you tell him?

**Euphranor:** . . . My question admits of only two answers: take your pick. (1) From one of the answers it will follow that by a parity of reason we can easily conceive how a man can have divine faith without ever feeling inspiration or seeing a miracle. That is because it is equally possible for a mind to which divine revelation has come by some channel—oral or scriptural—to carry its thought and submission back up that channel to the source, ending up with faith not in •human but in •divine authority, its proper and true object being not •the mechanisms and agents of the channel but rather •the great origin itself. (2) From the other answer it will follow that you're introducing a general scepticism into human knowledge, and smashing the hinges on which civil government, and all the affairs of the world turn; in short, you'll destroy •human faith in order to get rid of •divine. I leave it to you to consider how well this goes with your announcement that you want to be convinced.

**5. Alciphron:** I really would be glad to be convinced one way or other—to come to some conclusion. But I have so many objections in store that you shouldn't attach much weight to your dealing with one of them. Depend on it, you'll find me behaving like a gentleman and a lover of truth. I'll state my objections briefly and plainly, and accept reasonable answers as fast as you can give them. Come on, Euphranor, make the best case you can for your tradition. You can never present as a constant and universal tradition one that is admitted to have been unknown, or at best disputed, in the Church for several centuries; and this is the case with the New Testament. For though we now

have a settled 'canon'—meaning that the church hierarchy eventually decided which books should be included in the New Testament and which should not—everyone must see and admit that a tradition can't grow stronger by age; and that anything that was uncertain in the earliest Christian times can't be undoubted later on. What do you say to this, Euphranor?

**Euphranor:** I'd like to get clearer about your meaning before I give an answer. This objection of yours *seems* to presuppose that a tradition that has been constant and undisputed may be admitted as a proof, but that where the tradition is defective the proof must be so too. Is this your meaning?

**Alciphron:** It is.

**Euphranor:** So the Gospels and the Epistles of St. Paul, which were universally accepted from the start and have never since been doubted of by the Church, must be accepted as genuine. And since these books contain all those points that are in controversy between you and me, I don't need to argue with you about the authority of *other* books of the New Testament that didn't come to be generally known and accepted in the Church until later? Someone who assents to the undisputed books is no longer an unbeliever, even if he doesn't regard the book of Revelation or the Epistles of St. James or St. Jude or St. Peter, or the last two Epistles of St. John as deserving to be in the canon. The additional authority of these portions of the Bible may carry weight in particular controversies between Christians, but it can't add anything to arguments against an unbeliever as such. . . . When you are a Christian it will be time enough to argue about •the status of those books. And you'll be nearer to being Christian if your way there is shortened by the omission of •that question for the present.

**Alciphron:** Not as near as you may think! Despite all the

fair and plausible things you may say about tradition, when I consider •the spirit of forgery that reigned in primitive times, and reflect on •the many Gospels, Acts, and Epistles that were attributed to the apostles and then came to be recognized as spurious, I confess that I can't help suspecting the whole Bible.

**Euphranor:** Tell me, Alciphron, do you suspect that all Plato's writings are spurious because the Dialogue on Death is agreed to be so? Won't you accept any of Cicero's writings as genuine because Sigonius passed off a book that he had written as Cicero's *De Consolatione*, and the deception succeeded for some time?

**Alciphron:** Suppose I admit as genuine the works of Cicero and Plato that are commonly accepted as genuine. What then?

**Euphranor:** Why *then* I would want to know whether it's balanced and impartial in a free-thinker to measure the credibility non-religious and sacred books by different standards. Let us know what we Christians are allowed to work with when we argue with minute philosophers; are we allowed the benefit of common maxims in logic and criticism? If so, then please give a reason why

writings which in the style and manner and matter bear visible signs of being fraudulent, and have accordingly been rejected by the Church  
can be used as an argument against

writings that have been universally accepted, and handed down by a unanimous constant tradition.  
I don't know of anything truly valuable that hasn't been counterfeited; so your argument has a universal scope; but something that tells against *everything* doesn't hold against *anything*. . . . It would seem as •silly to reject the genuine writings of non-religious authors because of the fakes as it

would be •unreasonable to suppose that the heretics and the many sects of Christians wouldn't have included anyone capable of that kind of deceit.

**Alciphron:** I see no way of judging this: at such a great distance of time it is all dark and doubtful—mere guess-work.

[Crito intervenes with a list of the reasons there are to trust the judgments of the Church Councils about what is spurious and what genuine. Alciphron then moves to a new point: the Bible is not well enough written to have been divinely inspired. Euphranor says that that's not decisive; even an earthly monarch leaves the detailed wording of his laws and proclamations 'to his secretaries and clerks to express his sense in their own words'. Also, some roughness of style matches the roughness we find in •large-scale nature—for example there is never a really straight shore-line—though we do find geometrically exact shapes 'in the •works of insects'. So it seems that a 'scrupulous attention to what men call the rules of art is not observed in the big productions of the author of nature'. Alciphron replies that that's all right as regards niceties of grammar and expression, but he still counts it against the 'divine inspiration' idea that so much of the Bible is written in a flat, characterless, boring way. Euphranor explodes:]

**Euphranor:** O Alciphron, if I dared to follow my own judgment I would be apt to think there are noble beauties in the style of the Bible: in the narrative parts a simple and unaffected manner; in the devotional and prophetic parts an animated and sublime style; and in the doctrinal parts such an air of dignity and authority as seems to declare that their origin is divine. But I shan't. . . . set up my judgment on such a delicate matter against that of the wits and men of genius who are so plentiful in your sect. Nor am I tempted to do so, because it seems to me that ·this latest argument of yours is

worthless anyway·: something isn't shown not be the oracle of God by being delivered in a plain dress rather than in the enticing words of man's wisdom.

**Alciphron:** This may perhaps work as a defence of some simplicity and carelessness in writing.

7. But what defence can there be for nonsense, crude nonsense? I could easily give many examples, because I once read the Bible the whole way through looking for them. Look at the 49th Psalm in this Bible that I have here: the author begins very grandly, calling on all the inhabitants of the earth to listen, and assuring them that his mouth will speak of wisdom, and the meditation of his heart will be of understanding. . . . But he has no sooner finished this preface than he puts this senseless question, 'Wherefore should I fear in the days of evil, when the wickedness of my heels shall compass me about?' The wickedness of my *heels!* What nonsense after such a solemn introduction!

**Euphranor:** I have naturally weak eyes, and many things that I can't see are clearly seen by others. So I don't conclude that a thing is absolutely invisible because I can't see it. Well, it may be with my understanding the way it is with my eyes; so I don't venture to declare a thing to be nonsense because I don't understand it. [He then goes through several interpretations that have been suggested for the passage—treating it as some kind of metaphor, or as involving a Hebrew idiom that we don't have in English. Crito chimes in with boring anecdotes about foreigners who have been misled by English idioms. Then Euphranor resumes:] In this very psalm that you have picked on, I should have thought that the good sense and morality contained in what follows ·the obscure bit· would make a fair-minded reader judge favorably concerning the original sense of the author in the part that he couldn't understand. Tell me, Alciphron,

when you are reading the classics and encounter something that you can't make sense of, do you immediately conclude that it is nonsense?

**Alciphron:** By no means; we have to expect difficulties to arise from different idioms, old customs, hints and allusions that may be clear at one time or place and obscure at another.

**Euphranor:** Then why won't you judge passages of the Bible by the same rule? The sources of obscurity that you mention are all common both to religious and non-religious writings; and there's no doubt that in both sorts of writing the difficulties would vanish if we had a more detailed knowledge of the languages and circumstances. [He gives an example—a phrase in the book of Jeremiah that looks odd unless one knows certain things about life near the river Jordan.]

**Alciphron:** Here and there a difficult passage may be cleared up; but there are many that can't be explained away by any exercise of human skill or ingenuity. What do you say you about the discoveries that some of our learned writers have made, of false citations from the Old Testament found in the New Testament?

**Euphranor:** Some New Testament citations of passages in the Old Testament aren't exactly accurate; this has been known for centuries by Christian writers—it isn't a new discovery by minute philosophers. It can be explained by errors of transcription, and is of no great importance. [He develops this reply at some length, concluding:] What can you infer from all this, except that the design of the Bible was not to give us exact knowledge of every detail, and that the Holy Spirit didn't dictate every particle and syllable, and miraculously preserve them from even the slightest alteration? [Alciphron renews his attack on the Bible's style, and Euphranor renews his defence. Then:]

**Alciphron:** It wouldn't be a problem for me to admit that a popular incorrect style might serve the general ends of revelation as well as a more precise and exact one. But I can't get over the *obscurity*. If the supreme Being had spoken to man, it seems to me, he would have spoken clearly, and the Word of God wouldn't need commentaries.

**8. Euphranor:** [See Q&A note on page 17.] (i) You seem to think that obscurity is a defect; but if it turns out not to be one, that will be the end of this objection of yours. (ii) Now, speech and style are instrumental in the conveying of thoughts and notions, in getting knowledge, opinion, and assent. (iii) And the perfection of an instrument should be measured by the use for which it is intended. (iv) So something that is a defect in one instrument may be no defect in another. For instance, edged tools are in general designed to cut; but because the uses of an axe and a razor are different, it's not a defect in an axe that it isn't as sharp as a razor, or in the razor that it isn't as strong and heavy as an axe. (v) So we can say in general that any instrument is perfect if it suits the purpose or intention of the person who uses it. (vi) From which it seems to follow that no man's speech is defective in clearness if

- it isn't intelligible to all men, but is intelligible enough to the ones the speaker intended should understand it; or if
- it isn't equally clear in all parts, or doesn't convey perfect knowledge all through, but does convey an imperfect hint, which is all the speaker intended.

(vii) So we need to know the intention of the speaker if we are to know whether his style is obscure through defect or design. (viii) But no one man can possibly know all the ends and purposes of God's revelations.

So for all you know to the contrary, the obscurity of some

parts of the Bible may fit quite well with a purpose that you don't know, in which case they aren't evidence that the Bible doesn't come from God. The books of the Bible were written in ancient languages, at distant times, on various occasions, and on very different subjects. Doesn't that make it reasonable to think that some parts or passages might have been clearly enough understood by those for whose use they were principally designed, and yet seem obscure to us, who speak another language and live at another time? Is it at all absurd or unsuitable to our ideas of God and man to suppose that God may reveal, but be reserved about how much he reveals on certain remote and sublime subjects, content to give us hints and glimpses rather than clear views? May we not also suppose, as something reasonable and suggested by the analogy of nature, that some points that could have been more clearly explained were left obscure merely to encourage our diligence and modesty?—two virtues which, if it wouldn't seem disrespectful to such great men, I would recommend to the minute philosophers.

Lysicles replied, 'This indeed is excellent! You expect that men of sense and spirit should in great humility put out their eyes, and blindly swallow all the absurdities and nonsense that are offered to them as divine revelation.'

**Euphranor:** On the contrary, I want them to open their eyes, look sharply, and try the spirit [Berkeley's phrase] to see whether it is of God; rather than passively and ignorantly condemning all religions together. . . . If they would

- compare the Christian system. . . .with other claimants to divine revelation,
- consider impartially the doctrines, precepts, and events contained in Christianity,
- weigh them in the balance against any other religious, natural, moral or historical accounts, and
- examine diligently all the proofs, internal and external,

that for so many ages have been able to influence and persuade so many wise, learned, and inquiring men, they might find in Christianity certain special features that sufficiently distinguish it from all other religions and supposed revelations, as a basis for a reasonable faith. If that happened, I leave it to the minute philosophers to consider whether they are right to take a revelation so distinguished and attested and dismiss it with impatient scorn because some parts of it are obscure. [He returns to the topic of obscurity in texts written in an ancient foreign language, the likelihood that we won't know all the idioms and so on, and repeats his plea for judging religious writings in the same manner as non-religious ones.]

**Alciphron:** You may lecture and expound, but nothing you have said or can say alters the fact that 'a revelation that doesn't reveal' is a mere contradiction in terms.

**Euphranor:** Tell me, Alciphron, don't you accept that the light of the sun is the most glorious production of Providence in this natural world?

**Alciphron:** Suppose I do.

**Euphranor:** Well, this light that you can't deny was made by God •shines only on the surface of things, •doesn't shine in the night, •shines imperfectly in the twilight, •is often interrupted, refracted and obscured, •represents distant things and small things dubiously, imperfectly, or not at all. Isn't all this true?

**Alciphron:** It is.

**Euphranor:** Doesn't it follow that to expect in this world a constant, uniform light from God, without any mixture of shade or mystery, would be to depart from the rule and analogy of the creation? and that therefore it's wrong to argue that the light of revelation is not divine because it's

not as so clear and full as you expect, or because it doesn't shine equally at all times and in all places?

**Alciphron:** Because I claim to be fair and unbiased in this debate, I have to admit that you say some plausible things—as a man of argument will always be able to do in vindication of his prejudices.

9. But I should come into the open and tell you, once for all, that however much you question and answer, illustrate and enlarge, you won't convince me that the Christian religion is divinely revealed. In support of this attitude I have said several things, and have many more to say, that carry weight not only with myself but with many great men who are good friends of mine; and they won't stop carrying weight, no matter what Euphranor says on the other side.

**Euphranor:** I envy you the happiness of knowing such people! I can't have that advantage, living as I do in this out-of-the-way place; so I have to make the most of this opportunity that you and Lysicles have put into my hands. I regard you as two able physicians, and you were pleased to consider me as a patient whom you have generously undertaken to cure. Now, a patient must be completely free to explain his case and report all his symptoms, because concealing a symptom might prevent a perfect cure. So please understand me not as objecting to or arguing against either your skill or your medicines, but only as reporting on my condition and on the effects your medicines have on me. Alciphron, didn't you give me to understand that you would wipe out my prejudices?

**Alciphron:** It is true: a good physician eradicates every fibre of the disease. Come, you shall have a patient hearing.

**Euphranor:** Tell me, didn't Plato believe that God inspired particular men, as organs or trumpets, to proclaim and sound forth his oracles to the world? And wasn't the same opinion also embraced by other great writers of antiquity?

**Crito:** Socrates seems to have thought that all true poets spoke by inspiration; and Cicero held that there was no extraordinary genius without it. . . .

**Alciphron:** What would you infer from this?

**Euphranor:** I would infer that inspiration shouldn't seem impossible or absurd, but rather agreeable to the light of reason and the notions of mankind. You'll agree with this, I suppose, because you have made it an objection against one particular revelation that there are so many claims to revelation throughout the world.

[Alciphron replies with a dig at the word 'inspire'. It comes, he rightly says, from Latin meaning 'to breathe or blow in', so it should be applied to mere 'wind or vapour' and not to big truths. Euphranor sharply takes this up, pointing out that Alciphron is willing to say that he 'discourses' while sitting down, and yet 'discourse' comes from Latin meaning 'run about'. Alciphron defends his use of 'discourse' in the obvious way, and Euphranor cashes in on that:]

**Euphranor:** May we not as well conceive that the term 'inspiration' might be borrowed from sensible things, to stand for God's action when in an extraordinary manner he influences, arouses and enlightens the mind of a prophet or an apostle? . . . Let's drop the silly point about 'blowing in', and get back to our real topic. When we look into our own minds, it seems to me, we plainly perceive certain instincts, impulses and tendencies that from time to time spring up unaccountably in our souls. . . . This is ordinary and natural; but why can't we conceive it possible for the human mind, for an extraordinary reason, to be moved in an extraordinary manner, having its faculties stirred up and kicked into action by a supernatural power? [He admits that there have been and will be wild visions and morbid ravings, but that doesn't mean that there aren't also genuine

inspirations. We can't rule out the possibility that a true prophet or inspired person can distinguish divine inspiration from mentally unbalanced imagination as easily as we can distinguish sleeping from waking. He quotes the book of Jeremiah to that effect.]

**10. Alciphron:** I see no need to deny that inspirations and revelations are possible. Make the best you can of this concession.

**Euphranor:** Well, if something is allowed as possible, we are entitled to *suppose* that it is fact.

**Alciphron:** We are.

**Euphranor:** Let us then suppose that God chose to make a revelation to men, and that he inspired some men as a means to instruct others. Having supposed this, can you deny that their inspired discourses and revelations might have been committed to writing, or that the written versions might in the course of time become obscure in many places, that some of them might even have been less clear than others at the outset, or that they might get altered by frequent transcribing, as other writings are known to have done? Isn't it even *very probable* that all these things would happen?

**Alciphron:** I grant it.

**Euphranor:** Well, then, how can you defend your claim that the Bible is not divine because of facts about it that you now acknowledge would probably accompany any divine revelation transmitted down to us through so many centuries?

**Alciphron:** [He concedes the point about small blemishes that might arise from copying errors etc. But:] I defy the wit of man to invent anything more extravagant than the accounts the Bible gives of

- 1 apparitions,
- 2 devils,
- 3 miracles,

4 God manifest in the flesh,

5 being born again,

6 grace,

7 self-denial,

8 resurrection of the dead,

and such-like sick dreams—things so odd, unaccountable, and remote from human understanding that you have no more chance of clearing them of the charge of absurdity than you have of making a black man white by washing him. No critical skill can justify them, no tradition can recommend them—even as inventions of competent men, let alone as divine revelations.

**Euphranor:** I always had a great opinion of your wisdom, Alciphron, but now I consider you as something more than man; how otherwise could you know what it may be proper for God to reveal? [This is, of course, a sneer.] I don't think it is insulting to the greatest of human understandings to suppose that they are ignorant of many things that aren't suited to their faculties or lie out of their reach. Even the plans of princes often lie beyond the ken of their subjects, who can only know what is revealed to them by those at the helm, and are often unqualified to judge concerning the usefulness and likely consequences even of what they *are* allowed to know, until in due course the scheme unfolds and is explained by the course of events. Of course many things contained in the Bible are remote from the common understanding of mankind; but I don't see that it follows from this that they didn't come from divine revelation. On the contrary, doesn't it seem reasonable to suppose that a revelation from God *would* contain something different in kind, or more excellent in degree, than anything that lies within the grasp of humans, even of the wisest philosopher? Accounts of separate spirits (good or bad), prophecies, miracles etc. are undoubtedly strange; but I don't see how you

can prove them to be impossible or absurd.

**Alciphron:** Some things are so evidently absurd that it would be almost as silly to disprove them as to believe them; and I take these—the ones I listed a moment ago—to be of that sort.

**11. Euphranor:** Isn't it possible that some men show as much •prejudice and narrowness in •rejecting all such accounts as others might show •slackness and credulity in •accepting them? . . . I can't understand why anyone who admits the union of the soul with the body should declare it impossible for (4) the human nature to be united to the divine in some way that can't be described or grasped by reason. Nor can I see any absurdity in (5) the idea that sinful man may be born again, may become a new creature, by (6) the grace of God reclaiming him from a carnal life to a spiritual life of virtue and holiness. And since being governed by sense and appetite is contrary to the happiness and perfection of a rational creature, I don't in the least wonder that we are told to exercise (7) self-denial. As for (8) the resurrection of the dead, I don't regard that as so very contrary to the analogy of nature, when I see •plants that have been left to rot in the earth rise up again with new life and vigour, or •a worm that appears to be dead change its nature so that something that at first crawled on the earth becomes a new species and flies around with wings. And when I consider that the soul and body are things of such utterly different kinds, I can't see any reason to be positive that the soul must necessarily be extinguished when the body falls to pieces; especially since I find in myself a strong natural desire for immortality, and I haven't observed that natural appetites are given in vain, given merely to be frustrated. You regard certain things as extravagant and absurd, but I shan't agree with that until I see good reason for it.

**12. Crito:** No, Alciphron, your positive airs mustn't be regarded as proofs; and we won't think things are contrary to common sense just because you say so. By 'common sense' we ought to mean either •the general sense of mankind or •the improved reason of thinking men. Now, I believe that all those articles you have so powerfully and vividly summed up and exploded can be shown to be consistent with, and even in harmony with, 'common sense' in one or other of these senses. That the gods might (1) appear and converse among men and that (4) the Divinity might inhabit human nature were things that the heathens believed. . . . And though (2) the notion of a Devil may not be so obvious or so fully described, there are plain traces of it in several traditions. [He cites ancient Greeks, Chaldeans, and Egyptians; and reports that a text as early as Homer contains something that Cardinal Bessarion has identified as an allusion to the fall of Satan. Then many more classical references, in connection with the 'other articles' on Alciphron's list, apparently with (6) grace uppermost, though it isn't mentioned by name. Winding up:] Any man who really *thinks* has only to look at what other thinking men have thought—men who can't be supposed to be prejudiced in favour of revealed religion—and he'll see cause, if not •to think with reverence of the Christian doctrines of grace, self-denial, rebirth, sanctification and the rest, at least •to judge more modestly and cautiously than someone who confidently declares them absurd and in conflict with the reason of mankind. . . .

[Lysicles says that none of this has the slightest appeal him, and that if this makes anyone think he is ignorant 'I am happy and safe in my ignorance'. Crito says 'Perhaps not so safe', which he and backs up thus:]

**Crito:** Mere ignorance isn't a crime. But willful ignorance,

deliberate ignorance, ignorance from laziness, or conceited ignorance is a fault—we have the testimony of heathen writers as proof of that; and it doesn't need *proof* to show that if ignorance is a fault then we can't be secure in ignorance as an excuse.

**Lysicles:** Honest Crito seems to hint that man should take care to inform himself while alive, so that his neglect to do so won't be punished when he is dead. . . . The *best* way to get a gentleman to keep on with something is to try to *frighten* him out of it. This is the stale and absurd tactic that priests use, making them and their religion more odious and contemptible to me than all the other items put together. . . . That hell-and-eternal-punishment thing is the most absurd as well as the nastiest thought that ever entered into the head of mortal man.

**Crito:** But you must admit that it isn't an exclusively Christian absurdity, because Socrates, that great free-thinker of Athens, thought it probable that impious men are punished for ever in hell. It is reported of this same Socrates that he was often known to think for twenty-four hours at a stretch, fixed in the same position and wrapped up in meditation.

**Lysicles:** Our modern free-thinkers are men of a more lively sort. Those old philosophers were most of them insecure. I think they had a narrow, timid way of thinking that falls far short of the frank spirit of our times.

**Crito:** But if a man doesn't know the nature of the soul, how can reason give him any assurance about whether it is mortal or immortal? . . .

**Lysicles:** But what if I *do* know the nature of the soul? I have been taught that whole secret by a modern free-thinker, a man of science who discovered the nature of the soul not by •a tiresome looking into himself, or by •getting himself confused in a labyrinth of notions, or by •stupidly thinking

for whole days and nights together, but by looking into things and observing the analogy of nature.

**14.** This great man is a tried and tested scientist who has conducted many experiments on plants. He holds that men and plants are really of the same species; that animals are moving plants, and plants are fixed animals; that the mouths of animals have the same use as the roots of plants; that blossoms and flowers correspond to the private parts of the human body; that plant and animal bodies are both organic, and both have life, which is a certain motion and circulation of juices through the appropriate tubes or vessels. . . . The soul, he says, is the specific form or source from which come the distinct qualities or properties of things. We start with plants, because they are simpler than animals and thus easier to analyse. The soul of any plant—rosemary, for example—is nothing more or less than its *essential oil*. This is the source of its special fragrance, taste, and medicinal virtues—i.e. its life and operations. Use chemical techniques to separate or extract this essential oil and you get the •soul of the plant, what's left behind being a •dead carcass that doesn't have a single property or power of the plant. . . . This essential oil is an oily substance with a fine subtle element or volatile salt imprisoned in it. Strictly speaking, this volatile salt is the essence of the plant's soul, containing all its powers; and the oil is the vehicle of this most subtle part of the soul, the part that fixes and individuates it. And just as the plant dies when separated from this oil, so the soul dies when this essential oil is split up into its elements, as you can see by leaving it exposed for some time to the open air, so that the volatile salt or spirit can fly off; after which the oil remains dead and tasteless, not perceptibly weighing any less but having lost that volatile essence of the soul, that ethereal aura, that spark of existence, which returns and mixes with the solar light, the universal soul of the world,

and the only source of life. I'm talking about *all* life—of plants, lower animals, and thinking animals, which differ only according to the fineness of organization of their bodies.

This chemical system lets you at once into the nature of the soul, and accounts for all its phenomena. In the compound that is called 'man', the soul or essential oil is what commonly goes by the name of 'animal spirit' [see note on page 53]; for chemists do now agree that 'animal' spirits are nothing but the more subtle oils. Now, in proportion as the essential oil of the plant we call 'man' is •more subtle than that of other plants, the volatile salt that impregnates it is •more free to act; and that explains the properties and actions of humans that distinguish them from lower creatures. [He gives some examples.]

**Euphranor:** O Lysicles! your ingenious friend has opened up a new scene, and explained the most obscure and difficult points in the clearest and easiest manner.

**Lysicles:** This account of things struck my fancy, I must admit. I'm no great lover of creeds or systems; but when a notion is reasonable and based on experience I know how to value it.

**Crito:** Really seriously, Lysicles, do you believe this account to be true?

[In the next exchange, 'the artist' and 'his art' mean, roughly, 'the expert' and 'the field in which he is an expert'.]

**Lysicles:** Really seriously I don't know whether I do or not. But I can assure you that the ingenious artist himself hasn't the least doubt about it. And *Believe an artist in his art* is a sound bit of advice and a short way to knowledge.

**Crito:** But what does the soul of man have to do with the chemical art? The same reason that tells me to trust a skillful artist •in his art inclines me to suspect him when he is •out of his art. Men are too apt to reduce unknown things

to the standard of what they know, and bring a prejudice or slant from things they have been familiar with in making judgments about things with which they have not been familiar. I have known a violinist solemnly teach that the soul is harmony; a geometrician very positive that the soul must be extended; and a physician, who, having pickled half a dozen embryos and dissected a few rats and frogs, became very sure of himself and affirmed that there is no soul at all.

[Lysicles declines to argue, saying in effect 'There's the theory, take it or leave it', which Euphranor ironically describes as 'said like a gentleman'. Then he asks whether the maxim about believing an artist in his art applies to clergymen. Lysicles says No. Why not? Because he (Lysicles) knows as much about religious matters as the clergy do. All men of good sense are competent judges of those matters.]

**Euphranor:** What! are •God's attributes and his treatment of mankind, •the true end and happiness of rational creatures, and •the means of improving and perfecting their beings—are these more easy and obvious matters than the ones to which ordinary 'secular' studies are devoted?

**Lysicles:** Perhaps not; but I do know this—some things are so obviously absurd that no authority will make me give in to them. For instance, if *all mankind* tried to convince me that

the Son of God was born on earth in a poor family, was spat upon, beaten and crucified, lived like a beggar and died like a thief,

I wouldn't believe a word of it. Common sense shows everyone how an *earthly* prince or ambassador can decently appear; and the *Son of God* coming as an ambassador from heaven must make an appearance that is much greater than that, and is in all respects the very reverse of that which Jesus Christ is reported—even by his own historians—to

have made. . . .

**Crito:** Do you think, Lysicles, that if a man entered London in a rich suit of clothes, with a hundred gilt coaches and a thousand laced footmen, this would be a more divine and truly grand appearance than if he had power with a word to heal all kinds of diseases, to raise the dead to life, and calm storms at sea?

**Lysicles:** Oh, I'm sure it is *very* agreeable to common sense to suppose that he could restore others to life but couldn't save his own! You tell us of course that he rose again from the dead; but what was the point of his dying in the first place—the just dying for the unjust, the Son of God dying for wicked men? And why precisely *there*? Why exactly *then*? Why didn't he appear earlier, and preach in all parts of the world, so that the benefit was spread wider and more evenly? Account for all these points, and reconcile them, if you can, to the common notions and plain sense of mankind.

[Crito replies with two points. •One is that some of Lysicles' questions are boorish and ill-mannered. Benevolent acts aren't usually scrutinized as carefully as other acts: 'Who but a minute philosopher would, on a gratuitous distribution of favours, ask "Why *now* rather than earlier?"' •Lysicles should face the fact that he is out of his depth; none of us know nearly enough to be entitled to form judgments on what it would have been reasonable for God to do. There are several pages of this. •You can't judge the parts of a machine without knowing how the whole thing works. •Lysicles says that some things can be seen at first glance to be so cruel and unjust that they are obviously unworthy of God; to which Crito replies that we should take into account (à propos of how badly God treated the Egyptians) how badly the Egyptians had treated the Israelites, and also (repeated) that caution in judgment is appropriate when we

know that we don't have all the facts. •Euphranor has a Q&A argument making the point that children often don't understand—and may even resent—actions by their parents that are entirely for their own good. He likens this to Lysicles' attitude to actions by God. •The topic of the ancients versus the free-thinking moderns comes up again. In the course of it, Alciphron says that 'the present times, gray and hoary with age and experience, have a manifest advantage over those that are falsely called "ancient"' (the point being that in 'ancient' times the world was younger than it is now). He continues:] I tell you in plain English, Euphranor, we don't want your revelations, for this plain reason: those that are clear were already known to everyone, and no-one gets any benefit from those that are obscure.

**Euphranor:** Just as it's impossible for anyone to believe the practical principles of the Christian religion and not be the better for them, so it is obvious that those principles may be much more easily •taught as articles of faith than •demonstrated or discovered as doctrines of science [here = 'high-grade theoretical knowledge']. . . . We see all the time that many are instructed in matters of faith, few are taught by scientific demonstration, and fewer still can discover truth for themselves. I wish that minute philosophers would reflect on some facts relating to the natural or civil concerns of the world (-with religion not coming into it-), namely:

- how rarely men are swayed or governed by mere reasoning, and how often by faith;
- how little they know, and how much they believe;
- how uncommon it is to meet with a man who argues soundly, who really is a master of reason, or walks by that rule;
- how much better qualified men are to judge concerning facts than concerning reasonings, to receive truth on testimony than to deduce it from principles;

- how general a spirit of trust or reliance runs through the whole system of life and opinion; and at the same time
- how seldom the dry light of unprejudiced nature is followed or to be found!

If our thinking men would only give thought to *these* things, they might find it hard to produce a good reason why faith, which has so great a share in everything else, should have no place in religion. [Re 'dry light', see note on page ??.]

[He then replies to the 'were already known to everyone' part of what Alciphron has just said, by saying that obviously they *weren't*. Perhaps they *could* have been known, but revelation is useful if it reveals something that men haven't taken the trouble to know, even if they could have known it. Alciphron then moves to a complaint against prophecies, namely that they are very obscure. Euphranor replies that some are obscure while some are not; which is pretty much what should be expected, given the way the world is and the way men are. Alciphron in reply refers to the scepticism about prophecies of free-thinking experts on these matter, and Euphranor responds to that somewhat sneeringly, and remarks that the Christians have their experts too. After a further exchange of insults, Euphranor offers some explanations of why certain prophecies are unclear—to *us* at *this* time. Looking back in time, we can see 'a certain progress from darker to lighter' in religious matters, so we can reasonably expect that 'future events will clear up such points as at present exercise the faith of believers'. Alciphron now drops prophecies and turns to something else:]

**21. Alciphron:** . . . I want now to examine your religion by. . . comparing the system of revelation with collateral accounts of ancient heathen writers, and showing how much it clashes with them. The Christian revelation presupposes the Jewish religion, so if the Jewish one is destroyed the

Christian one must of course fall to the ground with it. I am going to go the short way, by attacking this Jewish revelation head-on.

Tell me, if we believe the Mosaic account of things [i.e. the first five books of the Old Testament], don't we have to hold that the world was created not quite six thousand years ago?

**Euphranor:** Yes, we do.

**Alciphron:** What will you say now if other ancient records carry the history of the world back many thousand years beyond this period? What if the Egyptians and Chinese have accounts extending to thirty or forty thousand years? What if the Egyptians have observed twelve hundred eclipses during the space of forty-eight thousand years? What if the Chinese have also many observations antecedent to the Jewish account of the creation? What if the Chaldeans had been observing the stars for more than four hundred thousand years? And what shall we say if we have successions of kings and their reigns, marked for several thousand years before the beginning of the world assigned by Moses? Shall we reject the accounts and records of all other nations—the most famous, ancient and learned in the world—and preserve a blind reverence for ·Moses·, the legislator of the Jews?

[If they deserve to be rejected,' Euphranor replies, 'why shouldn't we reject them?' This introduces an attack on the 'accounts and records' that Alciphron has mentioned. The only reliable ones don't go as far back as Moses' time for the beginning of the world; the writers of the records that stretch further back are 'unknown or unregarded by ancient astronomers'; modern scholars have uncovered inconsistencies in the Chinese accounts. Alciphron remarks that the modern scholars in question are mostly Roman Catholic missionaries, and Euphranor replies that they are our only source of information about the Chinese, and that

in any case it makes sense to trust them: 'The same persons who tell us of these accounts refute them! If we reject their authority in one case, what right have we to build upon it in another?' Alciphron praises the Chinese generally, as 'a learned, able and acute people' who are 'addicted to arts and sciences'. Euphranor replies at length that on the contrary the Chinese are superstitious, credulous, and absurd. Then he turns to the Egyptian records purporting to make the world older than Moses did, and gets Alciphron to admit that he doesn't know where those records were found, when they were written, how they were preserved, and so on. They aren't mentioned by any ancient Greek writers, though some of them visited Egypt. Euphranor comments again, at even greater length, on the credulity of any modern person, like Alciphron, who believes such stuff. Alciphron replies with a challenge: 'How can you account for the work that the great Joseph Scaliger and Sir John Marsham have put in on those records?' Euphranor declines to account for it, and deplores the fact that such substantial scholars as Scaliger and Marsham should waste time on that rubbishy stuff.]

**22. Alciphron:** After all, it's hard to see *why* those Egyptian priests should have set up ·spurious 'records' supporting· such great claims to antiquity—records that differ one from another but are alike in one thing, namely that they overthrow Moses' history. How can this be accounted for if there was no real foundation for the records? What pleasure, profit or power could motivate men to forge successions of ancient names and periods of time for ages before the world began?

**Euphranor:** Really, Alciphron, is there anything so strange or unprecedented in this empty wish to extend the antiquity of nations beyond the truth? Hasn't it been seen in most parts of the world? Doesn't it appear even in our own times,

especially among dependent and subdued people who have little else to boast of? [He then launches into masses of detail, first about the Irish and then about the Sicilians, these being dependent and subdued people who invented long histories for themselves as a way of feeling important. Then:] Why isn't it likely that the Egyptians, a subdued people, invented fabulous accounts from the same motive, and like others valued themselves because of extravagant claims to antiquity, when in all other respects they were so much inferior to their masters? . . . And it is no less certain that the Phoenicians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans were each a conquered and reduced people before the rest of the world appear to have heard anything of their claims to such remote antiquity.

**Crito:** But what need is there to work at accounting for the motivations of fabulous writers? Isn't it sufficient to see that they •relate absurdities, •aren't supported by any independent evidence, •seem not to have been believed even by their own countrymen, and •are inconsistent one with another? There's nothing strange in the fact that men should have the stupidity to create false accounts so as to deceive the world; what *is* strange is the fact that, after so many learned critics have done so much towards *undeceiving* the world, there should still be men who are capable of being taken in by the paltry scraps of. . . .fabulous or counterfeit writers.

**Alciphron:** Let me point out that those learned critics may prove to be clergymen, perhaps some of them Roman Catholics.

**Crito:** What about Sir Isaac Newton: was he either Catholic or clergyman? You may not grant that he was as wise and intellectually powerful as the great men of the minute philosophy; but it you can't deny that he had read and

thought a great deal on this subject, ending his inquiry with a perfect contempt for all those celebrated rivals to Moses.

**Alciphron:** It has been observed by able men that Sir Isaac Newton, though a layman, was deeply prejudiced—as we can from his great regard for the Bible.

**Crito:** And the same holds for Mr. Locke, Mr. Boyle, Lord Bacon and other famous laymen who, however knowledgeable on some matters, can't be thought to have achieved the keen discernment that is the special distinction of your sect!

**23.** But perhaps there are reasons other than prejudice to incline a man to give Moses the preference. •The government, manners and religion of his country were based on the truth of his history. •There are clear traces of that history in the most ancient books and traditions of the gentiles, particularly of the Brahmins and Parsees. •His account of the great flood is confirmed by signs in nature as well as by writings of antiquity. •His history is confirmed by

- the relatively recent invention of arts and sciences,
- the gradual peopling of the world,
- the very names of ancient nations, and even by
- the authority and arguments of that renowned philosopher Lucretius

—who is so much admired and followed by the free-thinkers when he writes on other subjects. •The continual decrease of fluids, the sinking of hills, and the slowing of planetary motion provide **natural** evidence that this world had a beginning, just as the **civil or historical** proofs that I have mentioned plainly indicate that this beginning occurred at about the time assigned to it in the Bible. And after all that, let me add one more remark. People digging into the earth have found quantities of shells and (in some places) bones and horns of animals, complete and unbroken, that have probably lain there for thousands of years. That makes it

seem probable that gems, medals, and metal or stone implements might have remained buried, complete and unbroken, for forty or fifty thousand years, if the world had been that old. So how does it come about that no such remains are found; no remnants of all those centuries preceding the Biblical account of time; no fragments of buildings, no public monuments, no intaglios, cameos, statues, reliefs, medals, inscriptions, utensils, or manufactured things of any kind are ever discovered, to testify to the existence of those mighty empires, those successions of monarchs, heroes and demi-gods, for so many thousand years? Let us look forward in time, and think about

a time twenty thousand years into the future, with the intervening time having involved plagues, famines, wars and earthquakes, all of which will have made great havoc in the world.

Isn't it highly probable that pillars, vases, and statues that now exist would still exist at that future time, and testify to our time and all the time between now and then. (I'm thinking of pillars etc. made of granite, porphyry or jasper—stones that are so hard that we know them to have lasted for two thousand years above ground, without any considerable alteration.) Isn't it also probable that some of our current coins might be dug up at that time far in the future, or that old walls and the foundations of buildings might show themselves, just as the shells and stones of the primeval world are preserved down to our times?

These are matters that anyone can form a judgment about, using common sense and ordinary experience. They give us good reason to conclude that the world was created at about the time recorded in the Bible. . . .

**24.** Alciphron sat musing and made no answer.

Whereupon Lysicles spoke up, harking back to Crito's remark that Lucretius supported the Mosaic dating of the

start of the world: 'I must admit that I would rather suppose with Lucretius that the world was made by chance and that men grew out of the earth like pumpkins than pin my faith on those wretched fable-spinning fragments of Oriental history that Alciphron had used as evidence against Moses' dating of the start of that world. As for the learned men who have taken pains to clarify them and piece them together, they strike me as being no better than so many musty pedants. An able free-thinker may now and then make some use of their laborious output, and play off one absurdity against another—e.g. an Egyptian absurdity against a Jewish one. But don't infer from this that he has any real respect for the authority of such apocryphal writers, or believes one syllable of the Chinese, Babylonian or Egyptian traditions. If we seem to give them preference over the Bible, that's only because they are not established by law! This is my plain sense of the matter, and I dare say it's the general sense of our sect: they are too rational to take such trifles seriously, though they sometimes give hints of deep learning and put on a grave face, just to have fun at the expense of bigots.

**Alciphron:** Since Lysicles will have it so, I am content not to build on accounts of time preceding the Mosaic. [He then talks about historians of about Moses' own time: they should be regarded as on a par with Moses, he says, and some of them give accounts that utterly clash with his—e.g. one that says that the 'Jews' were really Egyptians who had leprosy and were driven out of the country for that reason. On this account, the religion that they said had been given to them on Mount Sinai was really something which they, as Egyptians, brought with them from Egypt.]

[Crito replies that those other accounts aren't evidence against the Mosaic one because they are in such conflict with one another. And that linguistic considerations show

that the Jews weren't Egyptians. And that a religion whose 'fundamental principle' was monotheism, and whose 'principal design' was to abolish idolatry, couldn't have come from 'Egypt, the most idolatrous of all nations'. After some more of this, Alciphron deplores the loss of the books 'of those great men Celsus, Porphyry and Julian', books that would have enabled the modern free-thinkers to demolish the whole 'Jewish religious' system at once'. Crito questions that, and says some slighting things about each of the three, especially emphasizing how credulous they were, accepting all sorts of weird beliefs. They were, he concludes, 'whimsical, superstitious, weak and visionary'—and he throws in a final gibe against the 'impartial gentlemen' who 'admire the talents, and are proud to tread in the footsteps' of those three.]

**Alciphron:** Men see things in different lights: something that one person wonders at is regarded as negligible by another; it can even happen that a prejudiced mind whose attention is turned towards things' faults and blemishes fancies it sees some shadow of defect in the great lights that have in our own days enlightened the world.

**26.** But tell me, Crito, what you think of 'the Jewish historian' Josephus. He is agreed to have been a man of learning and judgment. He did himself accept a revealed religion, 'namely Judaism'. And Christians commonly cite him with respect when his authority suits their purposes.

**Crito:** All this I accept.

**Alciphron:** Then mustn't it seem suspicious, to any impartial inquirer, that this learned Jew should write the history of his own country, focusing on the very place and time of Jesus Christ's appearance, without saying anything about the character, miracles and doctrine of that extraordinary person? Some ancient Christians were so sensitive about

this that they tried to repair the situation by inserting a famous passage in the work of that historian—a forgery that has been sufficiently detected by able modern critics.

**Crito:** Well, there is expert opinion on both sides of that question, but I don't want to get into all that, so I am content to take it your way by supposing that the passage is not genuine, but is the pious fraud of some wrong-headed Christian who couldn't tolerate the omission in Josephus. But that fraud can't make the omission a real objection against Christianity. And I can't see in the omission any other basis for amazement or suspicion. Supposing the Gospel account to have exactly true, it would seem very natural for Josephus not to have reported it, given that

- he was aiming by his work to give his country some standing in the eyes of the world, which had been greatly prejudiced against the Jews and knew little of their history—a purpose that the life and death of our Saviour wouldn't have contributed to even slightly;
- Josephus couldn't have been an eye-witness of our Saviour or his miracles;
- he was a high-class Pharisee who was learned in foreign as well as Jewish scholarship, with a high position in the State, whereas the Gospel was preached to the poor;
- the Gospel was initially accepted and then spread by poor illiterate people, chosen for this role so that the Gospels' spread wouldn't seem to be the work of man, or a product of human self-interest or power;
- the Jews generally expected the Messiah to be a worldly and conquering prince—a prejudice that was so strong that they preferred attributing our Saviour's miracles to the devil to acknowledging him to be the Messiah;
- at Josephus's time the Jewish state was in a condition

of hellish disorder and confusion, with men's minds filled and stunned by unparalleled wars, dissensions, massacres, and seditions of that devoted people.

Taking all these facts together, I don't find it strange that such a man who was writing with that view, at that time, and in those circumstances, should omit to describe our blessed Saviour's life and death, or to mention his miracles, or to pay any attention to the state of the Christian church, which at that time was like a tiny seed just beginning to take root and germinate. And this will seem even *less* strange if you bear in mind that

- the apostles in a few years after our Saviour's death left Jerusalem, set about convert non-Jews, and were dispersed throughout the world;
- the converts in Jerusalem were not only some of the poorest people but were also few in number (the three thousand converts added to the church in one day when Peter preached in Jerusalem seem to have been strangers from all over the country, who had gathered there to celebrate the feast of Pentecost);
- throughout the time of Josephus and for several years more, during a succession of fifteen bishops, the Christians at Jerusalem conformed to the laws of Moses, which made them in outward appearance just like the rest of the Jews, which must have made them harder to notice.

The Gospel when first propagated seemed to ignore the great or considerable men of this world; would it be surprising if *they* in turn overlooked *it*, as something not suited to their way of thinking?

[He goes on to say that learned Jews at that time might well be afraid in one way of writing in favour of Christianity and in another way of writing against it, so that their safest course was to say nothing about it. Also, the historian

Gamaliel does mention Jesus Christ in passing, in his account of St. James's death. Although he shows a respect for the apostle, he mentions Jesus in a casual and neutral way, saying nothing either good or bad about him; but he characterizes him as:

Jesus 'who was called the Christ', not 'who claimed to be the Christ' or 'who was falsely called the Christ', but simply. . . ' and then he says it again, this time in Greek.

He continues:] It is evident that Josephus knew there was such a man as Jesus, and that he was said to be the Christ, and yet he condemns neither him nor his followers; which I see as evidence in their favour. If Josephus had known or been convinced that Jesus was an impostor, *of course* he would have said so plainly. . . .

I can't understand why any man should conclude against the truth of the Gospel from Josephus's omitting to •speak of it, any more than from his omitting to •accept it. If the first Christians been chief priests and rulers, or men of science and learning. . . .it might have been more plausible to contend that their religion was a human construct than it is in fact, given that it has pleased God to use weak things to confound the strong. . . .

**27. Alciphron:** Yet it seems an odd argument in support of any doctrine that it was preached by simple people to simple people.

**Crito:** It would indeed be a very weak argument if the *only* testimony to the doctrine came from simple people. But what we have here is a doctrine of which this is true:

- its first instruments were people with very few human advantages,
- it made its first progress among people who didn't have wealth, skills or power to grace or encourage it,

- in a short time, through its own innate excellence and the mighty force of miracles and the demonstration of the •Holy• Spirit, it spread throughout the world and subdued men of all ranks and conditions of life, doing this not only with no support from all worldly motives but positively *against* such motives.

Isn't it very unreasonable to reject or suspect such a doctrine on the grounds that its human means are lowly? Mightn't this with much better reason be thought to be evidence that the doctrine comes from God?

[Alciphron replies that real inquirers will demand testimony from learned men. Crito: There has been plenty of that. Alciphron: But their testimony is suspect because they were 'prejudiced Christians', and therefore their testimony is to be suspected. Crito: You are demanding evidence of the truth of Christianity from people who didn't believe it; this isn't reasonable. They kick this topic around for a while, and then a dispute starts up concerning how much respect the early Church Fathers deserve. Alciphron says that even if he did give weight to early Christian writings, 'the great number of forgeries and heresies that sprung up in those times' would considerably take away from that weight.]

**Crito:** Let us suppose something that you *do* agree to be *possible*, namely that there is a God, a devil, and a revelation from heaven that was committed to writing many centuries ago. On the basis of that supposition, *take a look at human nature*, and ask what would probably follow if the supposition were fact. Isn't it very likely there would be

half-believers, mistaken bigots, holy frauds, men who were ambitious, self-interested, disputing, conceited, schismatic, heretical, absurd

among those who announced themselves as believers in this revealed religion? And isn't it also very likely that after a few

centuries there would be

various readings, omissions, transpositions, and obscurities

in the text of the sacred oracles? You be the judge: is it reasonable to treat as an objection to something a course of events that would probably and naturally follow if the thing in question did exist?

**Alciphron:** Well, say what you will, this variety of opinions *must* shake the faith of a reasonable man. Where there are so many different opinions on the same point, it's very certain that they *can't* all be true, but it's certain that they *can* all be false. And the means we have to use to find out the truth! When a man of sense embarks on this inquiry, he finds himself suddenly startled and thrown off-balance by hard words and knotty questions. This makes him abandon the pursuit, thinking the game not worth the chase.

[Crito replies that differences of opinion and the formation of sects occurs in all branches of human study—he cites law, medicine, and politics—and this doesn't deter us from thinking that there are 'good rules, sound ideas, and useful truths in all those disciplines'. He develops this approach in connection with medicine, remarking that real discoveries have been made, despite the 'hard words and knotty questions' that have arisen on the way to them. Then, after a brief exchange of insults, Crito turns to the question of schisms and sub-sects:] But to return: what profession of men is there who never split into schisms, and never talk nonsense? Isn't it obvious that out of all the kinds of knowledge on which the human mind is employed there grow certain excrescences that can safely be pared off, as we pare our finger-nails. Under all that rubbishy stuff, it is certain that the faith derived from Christ and his apostles was not a piece of empty sophistry. . . . And to claim to demolish •the

foundation of faith for the sake of •the superstructure that humans have built. . . is a sign of poor thinking; and it's a sign of unfairness to suppose that a doubtful sense is fixed, and argue from one side of the question in disputed points. Such questions as

•Should the beginning of Genesis be understood in a literal or an allegorical sense?

•Is the book of Job a history or a parable?

are disputed amongst Christians; so an unbeliever has no right to argue from one side of any of them. What we are arguing for now is not •this or that tenet of a sect, •this or that controversial idea, but rather •the general faith taught by Christ and his apostles and preserved by universal and perpetual tradition in all the churches down to our own times. To attack this divine doctrine on account of things that come not from within the doctrine but from external sources such as the theories and disputes of men strikes me as an absurdity comparable with cutting down a fine tree that provides fruit and shade because its leaves give nourishment to caterpillars or because spiders sometimes weave cobwebs among the branches.

[After an exchange focussing on the question of how clever men ought to spend their time:]

**Alciphron:** But after all the examination and inquiry that mortal man can make about revealed religion, it is impossible to reach any rational sure footing. We are told strange things that are said to be proved by the fact that men have laid down their lives •for them•. But it is perfectly conceivable—indeed it has often happened—that men have died for the sake of •false• beliefs that they used to hold.

**Crito:** You may indeed find examples of men dying for falsehoods that they believed; but can you find a case of a man's dying for the sake of a proposition that he *didn't*

believe? Of course not; it is inconceivable. Yet this must be what happened if the witnesses of Christ's miracles and resurrection were impostors.

**30. Alciphron:** There is indeed a great deal of glittery talk about faith based on miracles. But when I examine this matter thoroughly, and track the Christian faith back to its origins, I find that it is really based on darkness and hesitation and uncertainty. Instead of propositions that are evident, or ·at least· agreeable to human reason, I find an astonishing narrative of *the Son of God tempted in the wilderness by the devil*—something utterly unexplainable, having absolutely no purpose or use or reason. I meet with strange stories of angels appearing, voices from heaven, demons—things quite out of line with common sense and common experience—along with a number of incredible feats said to have been done by divine power but more probably the inventions of men, and not made less likely to be so by my complete inability to guess *why* they were invented. Deeply laid plans are dark, and the less we •know the more we •suspect; but even if all those stories are true, I shan't accept that they were miraculous until I have a thorough knowledge of ordinary natural causes and of the force of magic.

**Crito:** It seems to me, Alciphron, that what you are analysing is not faith but infidelity [= 'lack of faith'], and that you are tracing it back to its sources which, judging from your own account, I understand to be

dark and doubtful worries and surmises,  
hastiness in judging, and  
narrowness in thinking.

And all this is based on your fantastic over-rating of your own scrap of experience, and on real ignorance of the views of God and of the qualities, operations, and inter-relations of

the many ·fundamentally different· kinds of beings that exist in the universe (or that you don't know *don't* exist). That's what the sources of unbelief are like—obscure, uncertain, fanciful and conjectural. Whereas the sources of faith are propositions that seem to me plain and clear. There is nothing unclear about these:

- This faith in Christ was spread throughout the world soon after his death.
- That wasn't brought about by human learning, politics or power.
- In the church's early years many knowledgeable and honest men accepted this faith not *from some* but *against all* worldly motives.
- The nearer those men were to the fountain-head of Christianity, the better chance they had to check on the truth of the propositions that they believed.
- The less it was in their self-interest to be persuaded, the more need there was for evidence to convince them.
- They relied on the authority of people who declared themselves eye-witnesses of the miracles and resurrection of Christ.
- Those professed eye-witnesses suffered greatly through giving this testimony, and finally they sealed it with their blood.
- Those witnesses, weak and unimportant as they were, overcame the world—spread more light, preached purer morals, and did more benefit to mankind than all the philosophers and wise men put together.

If these propositions are clear and sure (as they seem to me to be), they constitute plain, just and reasonable grounds for assent ·to the Christian faith·. They don't rest on any falsehoods; they don't contain anything beyond our sphere, because they don't presuppose more knowledge than we have

or better faculties than we are actually equipped with; and even if they aren't accepted as morally certain (as I think they *will* be by fair and unprejudiced inquirers), even accepting them as only probable is sufficient to stop the mouth of an unbeliever. ['Morally certain' means 'certain enough for all practical purposes'; it's a bit vague, but is stronger than 'only probable'.] The pillars of our faith are the above ·eight· plain propositions, and *not* the obscure ones that you supposed, which are in fact the unsound, uncertain sources of unbelief in a rash, prejudiced, and assuming mind. To argue or counter-argue on the basis that a supposed miracle might be explained by hidden powers of nature or by magic is groping in the dark; but by the evident light of their senses men can be sure enough about perceptible effects and matters of fact, such as the miracles and the resurrection of Christ; and the testimony of such men can be passed on through centuries with the same moral certainty as can other historical narrations; and those same miraculous facts, when reason has related them to the doctrines they were brought to prove, provide an unbiased mind with strong indications that they have come from God or from a superior source. . . .

As for the fact that Jews and gentiles back then attributed our Saviour's miracles to magic—do you count that as evidence against the miracles? It seems to be to be positive evidence that those events did occur; it doesn't square with the Christian account of what caused them, but it doesn't bring any *evidence* against that account. As for the nature and operations of demons, the history, laws and system of rational beings, and God's schemes or views—we don't claim to know enough about all this to account for every action and appearance recorded in the Gospel; but *you* don't know enough of those things to be entitled to object against accounts that are so well supported by testimony. It's easy to raise doubts regarding many authentic parts

of civil history—events that we find inexplicable because the explanation of them requires more knowledge than we have of facts, circumstances, and councils. And it's even easier with respect to natural history. In that field, if •surmises were accepted as evidence against things that are odd, strange and inexplicable; if •our slight experience were made the rule and measure of truth, and no phenomenon was accepted unless *we* (with our ignorance of the principles, laws and system of nature) could explain it; •we would make discoveries all right—discoveries about our own blindness and presumption! Something that I can't begin to explain by any rules of logic and good sense is why men who are so easily and so often floored by problems about the natural visible world should yet be so sharp-sighted and dogmatic about the invisible world and its mysteries. . . .

**Alciphron:** I expect that I'll always be 'in the dark'—as you put it—about the evidence for the Christian religion, and always presume there isn't any.

**31.** For how is it possible, at this remote distance ·in time·, to arrive at any knowledge or conduct any demonstrations about it?

**Crito:** What of it? I admit that •knowledge in a strict sense can't be had except of something that is either self-evident or •demonstrated; but •probable arguments are a sufficient basis for •faith. Who ever thought that rigorous proofs are necessary to make a Christian? All that is needed is *faith*; and provided that men are convinced in the main and on the whole, this saving faith can be consistent with some degrees of obscurity, doubt, and error. For although the light of truth is unchangeable in its eternal source, the Father of Lights, in relation to us it is variously weakened and obscured by passing across a long distance or through a thick medium in which it is intercepted, distorted or tinted

by men's prejudices and passions. But despite all this, if you will use your eyes you can see enough for the purposes either of nature or of grace, although the light you see by is dimmer or brighter depending on the place, the distance, the time of day, and the medium. And although there may be much that we can't explain in the realms of nature and of grace, all that is required for faith to be maintained is that the two should exhibit enough analogy to make it probable that they have the same author, are the workmanship of one and the same hand.

**Alciphron:** Those who saw, touched and handled Jesus Christ after his resurrection (if anyone did) may be said to have seen by a clear light; but to us the light is very dim, and yet we are expected to believe in the resurrection just as they did. For my part, I agree with Spinoza that Christ's death was literal, but his resurrection was allegorical.

**Crito:** And, for *my* part, I can't see anything in this celebrated unbeliever that should make me desert matters of fact, and moral evidence, so as to adopt his ideas. [Throughout this paragraph 'evidence' means 'evidentness'. In this usage, 'the evidence of proposition P' refers to *how evident* P is; it's not about evidence *for* P. So 'matters of fact and moral evidence' means 'matters of fact and propositions that are morally evident'. Re 'morally', see the note on page 110.] I do have to allow a certain allegorical resurrection—I mean the 'resurrection' of Christ's disciples from weakness to resolution, from fear to courage, from despair to hope; and *that* allegorical resurrection is evidence for *the real* one, because I can't see how those changes in the disciples can be explained except by supposing that they knew through their own senses that our Lord had truly, really, literally risen from the dead. It can't be denied that his disciples, who were eye-witnesses of his miracles and resurrection, had stronger evidence than we can have of those matters;

but it also can't be denied that at that time there was a correspondingly greater *need* for evidence, to induce men to embrace a new institution that was contrary to the whole system of their upbringing, their prejudices, their passions, their interests, and every human motive. Still, it seems to me that the moral evidence and probable arguments that are within *our* reach are quite enough to make prudent thinking men keep to the faith that has been handed down to us from our ancestors and established by the laws of our country—a faith requiring submission on matters that are above our knowledge, and for the rest recommending doctrines that best fit our interests and our reason. [He goes on to talk about the advantage that we have of being able to look back at the history of the world during the Christian period, and seeing God's plans a work in it. Then:] We can behold Christ crucified, that stumbling-block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, putting an end to the temple worship of the one and the idolatry of the other. . . . [But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness.' (1 *Corinthians* 1:23).]

**32.** If a due reflection on these things isn't enough to create a reverence for the Christian faith in the minds of men, why would that be? Because men have a wise and cautious incredulity? Anything but that! Consider how *easily* men have faith during their daily doings, where there is no prejudice or appetite to bias or disturb their natural judgment. The men who in matters of religion won't move an inch unless things are made *evident* to them, and at every turn expect *demonstration*, trust their health to a physician and their lives to a sailor, with complete faith. I can't think they deserve the honour of being thought harder to convince than other men, or that they are more accustomed to *know* and therefore less inclined to *believe*. On the contrary, it's tempting to suspect that our modern unbelief owes more to

ignorance than to knowledge. . . .

[This leads to squabbles with Lysicles about attitudes to careful scholarship, and then about the legitimacy of attacking Christianity by jokes and puns and innuendo. Euphranor joins in on that last topic, and so finally does Alciphron:]

**Alciphron:** Although I am a declared admirer of reason, a worshipper of reason, I have to admit that in some cases

the sharpness of ridicule can do more than the strength of argument. But if ·free-thinkers· sometimes use mirth and humour, it's not because we have no other weapons. It shall never be said that a free-thinker was afraid of reasoning. No, Crito, we have reasons in store, the best are yet to come; and if we can find an hour for another conversation before Lysicles and I set out for London tomorrow morning, I'll undertake to supply you with reasons that are as clear, effective, and close to the point as you could wish.