

and bound themselves by an oath, not to the commission of any wickedness, but to show the guilt of theft, robbery, and adultery—never to falsify their words—never to deny a pledge committed to them when called upon to return it, the common crimes of the populace of the empire. Pliny having thus far ascertained their harmlessness as subjects, examined no farther. The error of Tacitus may be a lesson to modern scepticism. His knowledge of Christianity was evidently obscure and negligent. Had he applied himself to investigate the question, he must have given a more respectful or at least a more detailed account of it. A religion professing to be the great promised wisdom which was to convert the earth—which came with the assumption of a heavenly sanction, and which alone of all religions declared determined hostility against all the rest, must have offered an object of eminent interest to the philosophic historian, if he had known more of it than the vulgar rumour of the day. It is plain, that what was called the "superstition" of the Christians, was the worship of a person unknown to the Roman calendar; and that its "perniciousness" was its opposition to the opulent and ancient Polytheism. Religion was not, in his day, a matter of the anxious investigation, which our deeper knowledge has made it; it had no attraction then to place it on a rank with politics—with the arts—with the labours of the imagination; It was a system left to soothsayers and sacrificers; to the statesman an useful assistant, and therefore not to be disturbed; to the philosopher a system of fable, and therefore its security or its struggle unimportant; to the populace a dispenser of largess and festival; in some instances a protection for licentious passions; and in all, an habitual depository of the traditions, customs, and history of their nation. A fair conclusion from this hasty opinion of Tacitus is the little reliance to be placed, even upon acute judg-

ments, in matters to which they come with a contemptuous prejudice. Had not Christianity lived to prove its own doctrines, it must have been branded as a "pernicious superstition;" and the authority of the great historian would have been quoted triumphantly as decisive of the question. It is also obvious that this contempt, prior to examination, is an intellectual vice, from which the first understandings are not free. We have no ill of ranking the brute absurdity of modern blasphemers with the scepticism of Tacitus; they know, and yet deny what they know; they hazard the lie for the sake of the lucre. The Roman was ignorant, and spoke from his ignorance. But by men of educated intellects, it must not be forgotten, that their besetting sin is pride; that the very consciousness of powerful faculties tempts to a rash decision; that the habit of rapid judgment is dangerous where the investigation is to be made out by careful and humble inquiry; and that the deduction of sweeping conclusions may involve the most important truth in the general contempt for contending impostures. Another plain result from the testimony of Tacitus, is the cessation of our surprise at not finding Christianity a common subject among the writers of the age. The noblest of them mistook its character. The rest might be expected to look upon it with negligence, or speak of it without knowledge. Jortin's remarks on this subject are rational:— "Men of rank and of abilities are often found, even in the Christian countries, to be surprisingly ignorant of religion and of every thing that relates to it. Such were many of the Heathens. Their thoughts were all fixed upon other things—upon reputation and glory—upon wealth and power—upon luxury and pleasure—upon business and learning. They thought, and they had reason to think, that the religion of their country was fable and forgery—a heap of inconsistent lies, which inclined them to think that other religions were no