

of an infallible interpreter—makes them, themselves, confirmed infidels; indeed, they often, fairly enough, follow up the same principle into atheism; for, when once we have taken upon us to argue from supposed “*necessity*,” we shall be apt to perceive a necessity for such divine interference as does not take place. We may think it *necessary* that God should interfere to rescue the victims of cruel oppression; to save men from temptations which there is no apparent possibility of their resisting; to remove ruinous ignorance from those who have no natural means of enlightenment, &c.; and seeing that this is *not* done, we shall infer that there cannot be any God.

I have said that in proportion as an intelligent man examines and reflects, he will see that in point of fact there *does not exist* such an infallible guide, accessible to all men, as is alleged to be a necessary accompaniment of a divine revelation. In the first place, he is told that it is on account of his unfitness to exercise his *private judgment* that this guide is provided for him; and yet, in deciding whether the claims of his church to be that guide are well founded, he *must* in the first instance, exercise his judgment. He must judge, first, whether the passages of Scripture, which are alleged to favour that claim, really do so, and whether the traditions which confirm it be authentic. And in doing this, it would be absurd, and a palpable begging of the question, to go by the guidance of his church; because her claim is the very point to be decided. In the next place he sees that to the great mass of the people the church is an interpreter not practically *accessible*. How can an Irishman in his cabin, or an Indian on the Pampas, put himself in communication with the pope? The *priest* must be, to him, the church. For the priest’s conformity to the church he must take the priest’s word. If

the priest be not infallible, if he be either ignorant, or erroneous, or dishonest, the poor man may be as widely misled as by his own ignorant perusal of the Bible. And the infallibility of every individual priest is too much for any but the unenlightened to swallow. And yet there is manifestly the same “*necessity*” for it that is alleged on behalf of the infallibility of the church. Thus the whole scheme falls to the ground; and, by virtue of that fundamental principle I have been speaking of, drags Christianity along with it.

My friend dwells much on a distinction between the *dogmas* taught by the church, and the *practical directions* given by it; for which last he claims no infallibility; but the distinction is of little avail. In the first place, there is the same apparent “*necessity*” for infallibility in our guide as to *both* points. To *do* what is agreeable to Christ’s will must be as essential as to *believe* what he has taught. And, in the next place, there can be no practical *directions* given which do not imply some belief in *certain propositions*. If I direct men to address their prayers to saints, I imply that *those prayers may be heard*. If I encourage men to go on pilgrimages to certain holy spots, I imply that their devotions are more acceptable there than elsewhere; and so of the rest.

It is a very great difficulty, no doubt, to understand why the Almighty has *not* supplied us with an infallible guide always accessible to every man, but has left us to act on our own judgment and on our own responsibility, as we best can, exposed to innumerable dangers of going wrong. In fact, it is a difficulty to understand why earth is not heaven; why evil of any kind exists. But that we are thus left is a *fact*, which no intelligent man can conceal from himself except by determining not to examine and reflect.