

bers of society are not to be confused with what is understood by "society." Society is an institution and an ideal. As an institution it must necessarily exist. As an ideal it must necessarily create itself. And its creation of its own ideal is also necessarily the creation of an infinity of good or harm in its inferiors. Here is society's responsibility. If it only injured itself, that would be its own affair; but in injuring the whole world it has a double responsibility, both as to this world and the next.

AMERICAN FREETHINKING.

Resolutions of the American Freethinkers' Convention, at Watkins Glen, N. Y., August, 1882.

IT is singular that American freethinking has made no original advance since the days of Thomas Paine. This results partly from the natural limitations of the system (if so chaotic a medley as free thought deserves the name), and partly from the unmeta-physical character of the American intellect. A practical people by eminence, we deem it loss of time and "brain-power," to speculate about questions which reason tells us must be settled, if at all, by facts and historical evidence. Revelation is simply a question of fact, to be proved, as all facts are, by competent testimony.

It is clear that to confuse the fact and record of revelation with the nature of its contents, is to be guilty of a sophism. Yet this is what Paine did, and what Ingersoll is doing. If I receive a letter from you, that fact stands by itself, and is not at all modified by the contents of the letter. The confusion which ensues from not keeping these two ideas separate, runs through all the answers and rejoinders which have wearied the readers of Ingersollian controversy. Even so acute a thinker as Judge Black allowed himself to be dragged by Ingersoll into all sorts of Biblical difficulties—the meaning of ancient Jewish sacrifices, for example. The simple question should be insisted upon: Is the Bible a divine revelation? as, to doubt whether Omniscience and Omnipotence *can* reveal himself, is irrational.

Once the decks are cleared of all geological, chronological, and philological rubbish, the action is short and decisive. The imme-

morial witness of the Jewish people for the Old Testament, is paralleled by the witness of the Christian Church for the New. It matters not what difficulties the Book may contain. The question is entirely one of historical fact, which can be established by every law of human evidence, by every canon of criticism. But when we proceed from establishing the authenticity and credibility of the Bible, to explaining its doctrinal and moral teaching, we, as individuals, follow the infidel into just the jungle he wants—for a divine revelation requires a divinely guided interpreter. Here the Catholic alone is safe, logically, for he believes in an infallible Church as the guardian and judge of the meaning of revelation.

Whilst we do not admit that the demonstration of the evidences for the divine origin of the Holy Scriptures is uncommonly difficult, or demands any extraordinary penetration, still, it undoubtedly exacts time and thought—two things of which the average American is sparing. Unquestionably, the way of authority was designed by God, as the way for the vast majority of mankind to learn his truth. The Christian evidences, however, are so intertwined with history, and, in fact, with all the elements of universal life and thought, that a plain, simple reasoner may prove for himself the unshaken historical foundation on which the religion, viewed simply as a fact, rests. But, unhappily, the non-Catholic no sooner gets beyond the historical fact, than he begins to interpret the Bible for himself. He does not see that the Church takes his reason in helpful charge, as soon as his reason arrives at a human certitude of the truth of Christianity. This is why Protestant divines who write well upon the evidences, blunder hopelessly when they construct a creed from them, as, illogically, they do. Faith begins where reason ends. The Church begins where Protestantism, which is simply an exercise of private judgment upon the evidences of Christianity, ends. Protestantism cannot be more than this human criticism of the Bible, for it is obviously impossible for a Protestant, on his own principle, to make an act of *divine* faith in the Scriptures.

Allowing that we have an immense mass of literature about the evidences of Christianity, the difficulty with many men, and particularly Americans, is a certain eagerness for immediate intellectual results, and a certain impatience under unresolved doubts and unanswered difficulties, which make them surrender their intellectual freedom to a deft and quick explainer, it matters little what his explanation is. Indeed, the real strength of modern scientism lies, not in the study of its abstract principles, nor the process of reasoning by which it seeks to show that God and the supernatural are the unknowable, but in its charm for the indolent and the bewildered. If God is wholly impenetrable to human ken, we have

no concern with Him or it. The lazy, the confused, and the vicious mind hail this theory as the fabled nepenthè.

Back of the Bible, back of all natural substance and phenomena, is the invisible God, infinite in all perfections, and so startlingly real and true, that our limited mind is overwhelmed by the very excess of the proofs of His existence. Yet, as St. Thomas says, we know Him only by effects, for the first cause cannot admit of an *a priori* demonstration. A whole world of adoring thought is opened for us by the very first thesis of Theodicy: There is a God. Yet how little do the mass of mankind seem to know about God, as he is in His own infinite being! How thoroughly anthropomorphic is the God of multitudes! See how low and inadequate, how thoroughly human, is every conception of the divinity, outside the teaching of Catholic theology! To read a Protestant book about heaven is to be shocked and disgusted at the carnal views, which only the thought of the Beatific Vision can dispel.

Our readers will understand us when we say that, whilst the Old Testament contains the truest and most soundly metaphysical name of God, as the I AM WHO AM, there are passages descriptive of the Deity which, as they stand in their bald literalness, perplex the understanding, and even impart to it unworthy views of the infinitely blessed God. It is obvious that such passages entering the head of unspiritual-minded men, will find nothing there to explain them satisfactorily. What can be reasonably expected of a man who has never reflected upon the operations of his own soul; whose whole life has been immersed in matter, and whose gross imagination is incapable of appreciating a simile in poetry? That such men are by no means rare, is provable by everyone's experience. Before opening the Scriptures, the mind should be versed in that sublime revelation of God furnished by the natural world; by the tender musing of the intellect itself upon all the glorious attributes which inhere in the idea of necessary and self-existent being; and by the study of the testimony which all nations have borne to the existence of the Creator. There are men whose souls are more profoundly moved by the lightsome demonstrations of the Angelicals *De Deo*, or the worshipful brooding of Lessius and Suarez over the depths of the divine nature, than by even the harp of David, or the clarion notes of Isaias.

The God that the infidel denies, never had an existence. The very idea of imperfection in God is destructive of Him; and yet is not this the God against whom Ingersoll raves, as "delighting in blood," etc. Reason demonstrates the existence of a Necessary Being; for there is a contradiction in saying, that, given any existence, this world, for example, or even my own thought, there should not exist a Being from all eternity, uncreated and illimitable.

Out of nothing, comes nothing. No one now holds the absurdity of an infinite series of secondary causes. There being no cause superior to this First Cause to limit his being, and no intrinsic cause to limit it, He is infinite in every perfection, for all perfection belongs to the nature of being. Whatever perfection exists in created things must be found in God, either formally, or, in its proper form; or eminently, in an infinite degree; or virtually, in power and causality. The Scriptures abound in direct averments of this infinite perfection, and consequently passages which ascribe to God, qualities or attributes inconsistent with this absolute perfection and infinitude, are explainable in a manner which conserves it; and this is all that a defender need do, to refute the objection. God being essentially incomprehensible to the human intellect even when raised to the Vision (for the finite can never comprehend the infinite), the sublimity of the descriptions of the nature and attributes of God, contained in the Scriptures, is adduced as a proof of their divine origin; whilst an equally strong proof is drawn from their marvellous adaptedness to the limitations of the human mind and language, in conceiving and expressing the ineffable ways and purposes of the divinity.

Equally true is it that the God whom the Deists, the Agnostics, and the Pantheists construct never had an existence. The Deists of the eighteenth century denied the possibility of miracles and prophecies; or, in other words, denied the almighty power and wisdom of God; that is, they denied His existence, for His being is one with His attributes. The Agnostics describe God as the unknowable, whereas all science rests upon principles which cannot be adequately explained or accounted for, without assuming God. If by the unknowable they mean the undemonstrable, reason refutes them; if they mean the incomprehensible, reason at least knows that He is incomprehensible. In either case, God is known. How do we know that He is the unknowable? The very fact of giving Him a name implies some conception, however inadequate, of His existence. The Pantheist destroys God by giving Him two contradictory attributes, thought and extension. In short, the God whom the freethinker either denies or acknowledges is a myth.

It is undeniable that Protestantism, particularly in its Calvinistic form, promoted the spread of Deism in the period anterior to the American Revolution. The colonists, moreover, were free from that traditional reverence which attached to the Established Church in England. Colonial history, particularly that of New England, abounds in records of religious controversy. When the Encyclopedist school of infidelity arose in France it attracted the attention of many leading Americans. The sympathy which this country had with France, in her aspirations for enlarged liberty,

tended to spread the writings of French publicists, who were mainly infidel. Still, the prevalent form of free thought was a mild Deism, such as that propounded by the Englishman Toland. The excesses of the French revolutionists brought disesteem upon infidelity. Besides, Voltaire and his colleagues were wretchedly shallow and "unscientific" in the treatment of the gravest questions. They thought to get rid of God by a *bon mot*. Not until so late as Emerson's day did any considerable number of Americans know of the transcendental philosophy which dominated intellectual Germany. Indeed, Sir William Hamilton wrote in the *Edinburgh Review*, that not a half dozen metaphysicians in the British Isles had then even heard of Immanuel Kant, whom his admirers hailed as the greatest philosophic intellect since Aristotle. Kant's skepticism resulted from his criticism of pure reason, which he held to be inadequate to the demonstration of the existence of God, though, what he calls the practical intellect, irresistibly demands it.

Around Kant there grouped a number of dreamy, fanciful minds, that sought for God chiefly in themselves, and actually rioted in blasphemy. Divinity was ascribed to every being and every idea except the right one. This transcendentalism was brought to America, but, going through the brain of Emerson, it was transmuted into mere Agnosticism, or, what is now called, Positivism. Emerson was not a philosopher. He was not by any means the ideal thinker and poet that people fancied. He was a hard-headed, shrewd American, who emphasizes on every page the vulgar successes of life. There is no spiritual power in his books, and he is infinitely below Spinoza or Comte in any presentation of belief or elaboration of a system. His "Eternities" and "Infinities" are suggestive of what is inelegantly, but energetically, called "gas." His coterie pretended to absorb all the culture and intellect of New England, but they attempted nothing, from Brook Farm to a Liberal magazine, which did not fail.

The fact is that such are the conditions of American life, such the nature of the American mind and habits of thought, that its freethinking inevitably takes the form of ribald blasphemy, narrow intolerance, and the delusion that God and Christianity perish with the detection of an incongruity in the Bible. The resolutions passed at the Watkins Glen Convention assail the Church with a bitterness to which the claim of broad-minded liberality gives a particular sting. The Church is represented as an organization for the perpetuance of ignorance and bigotry, and the clergy as scheming scoundrels. No attempt is made to define any position. With ostentatious "liberality," dubious fraternities of Free lovers, Spiritualists, Agnostics, Deists, and a very significant "etc.," are wel-

came to the freethinking ranks. There is the usual glorification of liberty and progress. An enthusiastic freethinker sends as an answer to a very foolish telegram from the Methodists, the advice to keep the churches in good repair, as the future temples of liberty and science.

To show how intensely persuaded these people are that all revealed religion is bound up with the Bible, a long resolution is devoted to a congratulation that the Revisers of the New Testament have corrected prevalent views regarding the inspiration and the infallibility of the Scriptures.

The Church, enlightened by the Holy Ghost, has refrained from defining the precise nature and all the minutiae of inspiration. Protestantism has shown its folly by alternately insisting upon verbal, literal, and plenary inspiration, and by leaving it to be determined by the individual conscience and the private teaching of the Spirit. Having no guide or unerring rule of faith, a Protestant is perplexed by every discovery in science, by the divergent opinions of famous commentators, and, in the Apostle's comparison, by every wind and wave of doctrine. The new rationalistic criticism of the Scriptures has left hardly a book unquestioned.

A powerful ally of infidelity in the United States has been the system of public education. This is decidedly godless. In the Divine counsels, the general method for communicating religious truth to mankind has been external. Faith, says St. Paul, comes by hearing. All knowledge of the Creator, even that derivable from the contemplation of the creation, is sedulously avoided. Science is taught without any reference to the Maker of heaven and earth. History, instead of being treated as a revelation of Divine Providence, is made a mere recital of events, which are presented as though they were simply fortuitous. Stress is chiefly laid upon the importance of getting along in the world, and all education has this merely mediate end for its universal scope.

The indifference of American fathers to the religious training of their children is the frequent theme of the Protestant pulpit. The deeper religious sentiment of the mother cannot countervail the indifference of the father, whom the boys follow. They see him wholly occupied in business, careless about church, and critical of the minister and the congregation, with that unreserve before children which is not the least of the American's faults. The only aim held up to his youthful ambition is to make money, which is regarded as the root of all good.

The irreligious training begun in the public school is completed in the public newspaper, which is, perforce, "the essence of religious toleration;" that is, the absence of all positive ethical teaching. From the newspaper he learns of the doings of political

officials, who are either jocosely complimented on their shrewdness in peculating, or defended for their crimes by an appeal to the greater criminality of their opponents.

There may be such a power as a public conscience or a public sense of right, even when large numbers of the individual members of the state are corrupt. Such a public opinion existed in the ancient democracies of Greece and Rome. In the Middle Ages it expressed itself in the civil and corrective power assigned to the Christian Church. But no such bar of public opinion exists in the United States. A handful of unscrupulous politicians may hold power for years. The Presidency and its patronage are boldly claimed to be the personal perquisites of the party in office. No attempt is made to conceal taxation and extortion for political purposes. We have not even those occasional "fits of virtue" in which England dismisses a ministry, removes a grievance, and hangs a few dozen criminals.

With an education entirely severed from religious life and a public that are never directly interested in church affairs,—as they are in countries like England or France, where the Church comes directly before the people, either for defence or attack,—the American is startled by objections, on which rests the mould of centuries. Not only does the American freethinker present nothing new, but he is ignorant of the strongest objections that can be put to Revelation. The hardest objections are found in textbooks of Catholic theology. The whole ground of objections has been carefully traced and every point weighed, and it frequently happens, in the hall of disputation of a Catholic seminary, that infidel objections are pressed with a vigor and a logic to which the professed infidel is a stranger.

After reading the clear-cut objection, divested of all rant and fustian, one turns in disgust from the incoherence of Ingersoll's lectures or the calculations overthrowing the Mosaic cosmology. But it is easier to draw a harrowing picture of hell than to lead the good life which makes hell for us an impossibility. It is easier to compare man with the brutes than to analyze the operations of the intellect. In the "Comedy of Convocation," Mr. Lavender Kidds vehemently appeals to the assembled dignitaries to lay aside so fruitless a discussion as that on the existence of God and attack the growing evil of Popery. So the freethinker pleads for materialism when his very book, his very process of reasoning, establishes the spirituality of his soul; and he scoffs at the idea of fire and brimstone when his own reason irresistibly recognizes the infinite distance between right and wrong and affirms the eternal principles of justice.

The influences which place freethinking in England under a

social ban do not exist here. Bradlaugh here would be a hero. Not that Americans have any particular love of blasphemy, but because daring negation is a form in which individual liberty is apt to affirm its rights. The country seemed surprised at the product of such a creature as Guiteau; but while everybody called him a moral monster, nobody reflected upon the extent and the power of the influences which made him a monster. Such influences, differing in intensity but not in kind, exist in every American village where there are a public school, a newspaper, and, as a matter of course, a half dozen sects.

So far as infidelity in the United States has any plan, it seeks, first of all, to destroy faith in the Bible. It knows that whatever religious life there is in non-Catholic America is derived from Scriptural teaching; but it feels instinctively that the Catholic Church is stronger than the Bible. It has no fear of Protestantism, which lacks coherence, and contains in itself the principle of its own dissolution.

The Catholic Church, thoroughly organized and possessed of an invincible life, is peculiarly odious for its calm definition of the limits of the human intellect, its indifference to mere material progress, and its championship of the rights and powers of an invisible world. Indeed, its proof of Christianity as a living power in the world, is irresistible.

How may it be destroyed? or, since this is impossible, how may its influence in the United States be limited?

The resolutions point out the line of attack:

By representing the Church as hostile to our political institutions.

By organization, the formation of freethinkers' clubs, and the establishment and diffusion of "liberal" newspapers, tracts, and books.

By controlling education.

By espousing the cause and fighting the battle of labor.

We have only a word to say to Catholics in conclusion:

1. The Church which the freethinker fears and hates is the one true Church of Christ. Protestantism is either his ally or an opponent to be despised.

2. Fight the enemy with his own weapons.