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AN ADDRESS

IN REPLY TO ONE OF

MR. THOMAS COOPER'S LECTURES,

AT SPALDING.

BY LUKE GRIFFIN.



PRICE ONE PENNY.

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AN ADDRESS IN REPLY TO ONE OF MR. THOMAS COOPER'S LECTURES.

[Seeing from advertisements that Thomas Cooper was to deliver a course of lectures in Spalding, on the 20th, 21st, and 22nd of January, I wrote to that gentleman to allow me, for twenty minutes, on the first evening, before 10.20, to explain the position we stood in as opponents to orthodox Christianity. Mr. Cooper replied, stating that he could not promise me twenty minutes, especially on the first evening, when his lecture would be very lengthy, because he would have to say as much in one evening as he usually said in two. In fact, I gathered from Mr. Cooper's reply, that if I journeyed twenty miles to defend my principles, it would be more than probable that I should not have an opportunity of being heard. The remarks which I had prepared for the occasion were as follow:—]

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—I believe that no one present this evening would wish to occupy my place—to stand up in defence of that which Christians term 'Infidelity.' Be that as it may, I consider it my duty to be here, although, in many ways, my being here may injure me. The principle upon which I act is not that of expediency. I don't always stay to inquire whether there will be any pecuniary gain from what I do, but I first ask whether the act will be right; if so, I do it, not caring so very much about the consequences. Now, my friends, this evening I shall address you as the jury who will a true verdict give according to the evidence brought before you. Many of you have been in our law courts. There you have heard the plaintiff's counsel ably state a case, and call his witnesses to substantiate it; everything has appeared so clear and straightforward on behalf of the plaintiff that you have really thought that the verdict must be given in his favour. But when you have heard the defendant's counsel state his case, and examine his witnesses, your views have been entirely changed. Mr. Cooper for the plaintiff, is much better qualified to speak than I am for the defendant, because he has had years of experience, whilst I am quite a novice. Then many may think it presumptuous in me to oppose a man like Cooper; be that as it may, I deem it my duty to oppose him, and I feel confident that if I do not succeed in gaining your verdict, it will be because of my inefficiency, and not because I have undertaken the defence of a weak or bad cause. I take it for granted that Mr. Cooper is honest and sincere, and that however strange his conduct may appear to his old friends, still his acts are those of an earnest evangelical Christian, whose chief aim is to do his duty. Whatever I may say, I wish to say courteously and kindly, so as to give no offence to any right-minded person.

Methodists, Baptists, and Independents, I believe that your views are injurious to the majority of mankind, inasmuch as they bring to them fears which destroy that peace of mind necessary to the enjoyment of life. To the favoured few, to those who believe that they are born again, the Bible doubtless brings glad tidings of great joy, for it says that theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. But to the great mass of men—to those having no spirit bearing witness with their spirit that they are the children of God, to these the Bible, instead of bringing glad tidings of great joy, brings tidings of the greatest misery, for it says that they shall be cast into hell, there to remain for ever with the devil and his angels. You may reply that the road

to Heaven is open to all, and if men will not enter in at the straight gate, they must expect to perish, because they have only to repent and to believe in order to be saved. Now, my friends, the great fact is patent to us all that the masses don't believe, and what is more, there is every probability that notwithstanding all your preaching, praying, and lecturing, they won't believe; consequently, according to your teaching, they must all likewise perish. I repeat, that these are to them tidings of the greatest misery, and what is more, they are not only lead to believe that they themselves shall perish, but from what they knew of their forefathers, their souls are now where the worm dieth not, and where the fire is not quenched. These thoughts to a sensitive mind are very painful, and as I firmly believe that your views are erroneous, as I totally disbelieve that a good God would punish His creatures eternally, as I thoroughly disbelieve the Bible to be inspired by God more than any other book, and as I am entirely opposed to the doctrine that man is born totally depraved, I consider it to be my duty to oppose you, and to make known to my fellow-creatures the reasons I have for being what is termed a Disbeliever. In doing this I believe that I am acting rightly, that I may be the means of rescuing thousands from the hell of apprehension, and that I shall bring glad tidings of great joy to the majority, because, if they believe and disbelieve with me, they will no longer be enslaved and intimidated by the Bible. They will agree with the Secularist, that to do well is sufficient, believe what you may. They will place reliance where reliance ought to be placed—in good works, believing that if they work honestly, faithfully, and usefully, that that will save them. In all matters where positive truth cannot be arrived at, each party has reasons for believing, disbelieving, or remaining neutral. One argument or assertion made use of by some of you is, that supposing Christianity be not true, still it matters little, and will produce no evil in the end, and that, consequently, be it true or be it false, it is foolish and useless to oppose it. We will look at this for a few minutes. What does Christianity teach? It teaches that there exists a Being creator of all things, that this Being governs the Universe, and, as the Governor of the Universe, he will require an account of the lives of men whilst upon earth, and according to his decision, one part of the human family will enjoy endless happiness, whilst the other part will have to endure eternal misery. What is expected of men with regard to faith, it is allowed that not one-tenth of the human race has ever possessed, and, therefore, according to this teaching, nine-tenths of the human race will be doomed to everlasting woe. Now, some persons think with you, that there are sufficient reasons to believe this to be true, other persons believe with me, that it is false. Very well. We will now suppose a somewhat parallel case. A party in England have reasons to believe that the Emperor of France will shortly rule in this country, and that all who obey him he will reward with a life of ease and prosperity; but all who disobey him he will doom to slavery. Then supposing that nine-tenths of the population of England would disobey him and thus become slaves, would it not be the duty of an opposite party, who had reasons for believing that it was all false respecting the conquest of this country by France, to disseminate their views as widely as

possible, thus removing the fears of the disobedient and giving them peace of mind? The most orthodox Christian would say, certainly those who believe these notions about the Emperor to be false ought to oppose them—it is their duty to oppose them, and they will not be doing their duty as men if they do not oppose them. Well, just so it is with respect to Christianity. I believe that the Christian's views respecting God, eternity, and everlasting punishment, are erroneous, and tend unnecessarily to intimidate mankind, consequently, I think it my duty to oppose you as Christians, and I should be liable to just censure if I did not oppose you. So much, then, for the course which I have taken, and I think that you will allow that if I have reason and the balance of evidence in my favour, that I am really justified in what I am doing.

In this locality, had I seen religion subservient to good common sense, I should not have been so public in my opposition. But when upon every hand I hear preached doctrines threatening poor creatures with the most excruciating punishments, I think it my duty to inquire upon what basis these doctrines rest. I have no particular wish to interfere with the superstitious notions of men, so long as these notions simply console them; but when they produce benumbing terror, and incommodious fear amongst my friends and neighbours, I think that I should be highly culpable longer to hold my peace. I have no relish myself for passing my life in perpetual dread, and I consider myself justified in furnishing others with the means of escaping from the agony of mind under which they groan. Again, from the observations which I have so often heard from ministers and from Christians generally, I know that in their sermons they assume the absolute truth of their doctrines, and they urge that all, even those who are logically opposed to them, are so opposed because their deeds are evil, and because they wish to live in sin and wickedness. Believing that these assumptions are false, believing that there are many honest, industrious, truthful Freethinkers who are as good husbands, fathers, friends, and citizens, as the most devout Christians, and believing that these men have reasons for their rejection of orthodox Christianity sufficient to satisfy any earnest mind, I boldly stand forward in their behalf, and assert that they are conscientious in their disbelief, and that, consequently, they are as deserving of the respect, esteem, and goodwill of their fellow-creatures, as those who call themselves Christians. In whatever I have said, or may say, I appeal to your moral sense, to those inward powers by which all good men claim to be judged, and if you decide in accordance with the same, I shall be quite satisfied with your decision.

The character of God as represented in the Bible, instead of creating in me love, respect, or reverence, creates quite the opposite feeling. Commencing with the first and second chapters of Genesis, we find that an omnipotent and omniscient Being makes creatures, and places them in a position with such a temptation which he knew would cause their fall, and which he knew would bring misery to millions then unborn. Moreover, the temptation was of that character that until they had partaken of the forbidden fruit they did not know good from evil, so the book says, and not knowing good from evil, it would take a wiser person than myself to ascertain upon what grounds

they could be held responsible for their actions. As Mr. Newman argues, if a youth who had been carefully brought up were to fall by the first temptation, the saying is, 'Behold the proof of the essential depravity of human nature.' But Adam fell by the first temptation, what greater proof then of a fallen nature do you require than Adam's, as it came from the hands of the Creator? If God has so acted with man, and if angels also have fallen, why should not angels fall again? Hence, in heaven we have no guarantee that we may not become disobedient, and be cast away. If angels now are so constituted that they cannot sin, why could not man have been so constituted, and thus have saved much wretchedness? As we read on in the Bible we find this all-powerful God repenting that he had made man—yes, this all-wise Being repents, and is grieved at the heart, and he shows his repentance and grief by destroying all the human race with the exception of Noah and his family. But in the choice of Noah and his family God appears to have been truly unfortunate, for Noah was overtaken by drunkenness, and his descendants to this time have been far from correct in their conduct. Who can justify the partiality shown by God to Abraham and his seed? In what way were they deserving of that partiality, especially the deceitful Jacob, who so cruelly robbed his brother Esau? Yet we are told that God loved Jacob and hated Esau. The Bible also represents God as so inveterate in his hatred, that he instructs Saul to smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not, but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, camel and ass. To justify all this, Christians say that God is the Governor of the Universe, that he must preserve the harmony of his attributes, and that his perfect justice must be satisfied before he can shew mercy to the transgressor. To this our esteemed friend Thomas Cooper, some years ago, if not wisely, effectually replies:—'I hear thee, priest! We know thy solemn and mysterious croak well, old bo-peep behind the altar, where thou hast stood for ages affrighting grown up children with horrible pictures of a Divinity who, to preserve the harmony of his attributes, can plunge millions into the flames of endless torture, and be happy himself to all eternity; and who cannot admit any to share his happiness that have offended him, unless blood be shed as an atonement! He knows of the torture of hell's helpless tenantry. He hears their weeping and wailing, He sees their gnashing of teeth, and He knows, of their remorse for guilt; but He is happy amidst it all. He cannot forgive them, they must burn and suffer for ever, for He must preserve the harmony of his attributes.' 'Strange harmony,' continues Mr. Cooper. 'Does the most reprobate man that ever existed possess so horrible a nature? What! be happy whilst helpless worms writhe in endless agony? Worms that he brought into existence without their will, who never asked to exist, and whom he knew would tenant hell-fire for ever, whilst he was creating them.' After this forcible language from a man like Thomas Cooper, words from me would be powerless. This is a true picture of the evangelical Christian's Deity, and, as I before stated, in him I see nothing to love, respect, or reverence; but plenty to loathe, hate, and abhor. How men who have correct ideas of the heavenly bodies—men who can tell you the size of the planets, and can calculate the immense

distances of many of the fixed stars from the earth, men who have for years enjoyed a scientific education—how these men can believe the God of the Bible to be infinite in power, wisdom, and goodness, is a puzzle to me. They cannot have thoroughly investigated the subject, or if they have, there must be some powerful motives keeping them from speaking their convictions.

Frankly I say that I don't believe the Bible to be an infallible guide, because my opinion is, that by following many parts of it, men would be guided to do what their moral sense tells them is very wrong. For instance, we believe it to be very wrong to make slaves of our fellow creatures, still we find slavery sanctioned in the Bible, and not only sanctioned, but strict regulations are made by God himself relative to slavery. In the 25th chapter of Leviticus, from the 44th to the 46th verse, we read, 'Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you, of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. Moreover, of the children of the strangers that do sojourn amongst you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land; and they shall be your possession. And ye shall take them for an inheritance after you to inherit them for a possession; they shall be your bondmen for ever.' What think ye to this, after the Christian world has been declaring over and over again that the Bible is a friend to liberty—liberty of the highest caste? Why this one passage will do more to convince slaveowners that slavery is a divine institution, than volumes of anti-slavery writings will do to convince them to the contrary. Again, were we in a foreign country, and had borrowed of the natives various articles, we should think that we were morally bound to return them. How would it be if we were to consult the Bible first? There we should find that the Lord commands the Jews, upon leaving Egypt, to borrow of their neighbours, and to keep their neighbours' gold, silver, and raiment. If we acted according to this example, we should do what our moral sense distinctly tells us to be wrong. Again, if I were going to send a message by any one, I should think it right to choose some one who would speak the truth; but, if I were to take the Bible as an authority, I might send a liar with intent to tell lies, seeing that God sent a lying spirit unto the prophets to deceive Ahab. What God did surely I might do. If our soldiers wished to know how they were to treat the Sepoys in India, by consulting the Bible, and following the examples there given, they would slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, because, as I have before told you, that Saul was instructed by God so to act. If a man wished to put away his wife, he must refer to Deut., c. 21, vv. x to xiv, and c. 24, vv. 1 and 2—and he will there find by the standard the easiest way of getting rid of her. If any one be anxious for information respecting the number of wives he may have, I would advise him to read the life of Solomon. By following the example set by Solomon he may place Brigham or any of the Mormon elders completely in the shade, saying nothing of Solomon's concubines. Do you want to know how to treat your enemies upon your death-bed? Turn then to the 1st of Kings, c. 2, vv. viii and ix, and you will there find how the man after God's own heart treated his enemies. He requested his son with

nearly his last breath to bring down to the grave with blood the hoary hair of one who had offended him.

If we examine the New Testament, we find many reasons why we cannot accept its teachings as perfect. The story of the conception by the Holy Ghost is far too dreamy an affair for us. No one in his senses would credit the story if told now, respecting any young married couple; but this has not much to do with the perfection of the moral teachings. When we come to the sermon on the mount, we find many things said there which we are told are the perfection of wisdom, but which even pious Christians do not for a moment regard. We are told to resist not evil, and if any smite us on the one cheek we are to turn the other also. Who is there in this neighbourhood who does not resist evil? Does not every good man think it his duty to resist evil? And who turns the left cheek to the smiter, when smitten on the right? No one with whom I am acquainted. Certain signs follow those who believe. Do they follow? Can believers show the signs? Will they handle serpents or drink poison, or can they by laying on of hands heal the sick? I am afraid not. Remember these signs were to follow them that believe, and if he that believeth not shall be damned is to follow as the punishment in our day, why should not the signs of belief follow likewise? If the signs of belief had been the payment of tithes and church rates, and a blind deference to the opinions of the priests, every man who professed to believe would soon be tried by the standard of Christ. If a teacher of morality were to say these signs shall follow them that are moral—they shall not injure their fellow creatures, they shall pursue that course which is useful, etc., it would be just and logical to say if these signs did not follow, the man was not moral, and if it be just and logical in the one case, it is so in the other; therefore, I say, if the signs do not follow, according to the Bible, the man is not a believer. The fact is, the more I study the Old and the New Testament, the more I am convinced that the Bible is, like other books, fallible, full of errors, translators' errors, printers' errors, and hundreds of errors about which learned men have been and are still quarrelling—errors which have divided men into sects and parties, and which have made those who ought to have been friends the bitterest of enemies; but the time I hope will shortly arrive when all intelligent men will be of the one opinion that conscientious belief or disbelief ought always to be respected.

Several persons, I know, will inquire what is my aim? They ask me whether I expect my views to become popular, and whether I think that all men will renounce their present belief in the Bible. My answer is, that I do not expect that my views will very soon, if ever, become popular, neither do I think that all men will very soon renounce their belief in the infallibility of the Bible; but my aim is to give my neighbours some of the reasons I have for my disbelief, agreeing with Mirabaud, that so far as my views have the sanction of truth, they will gradually insinuate themselves into the human mind, become familiar to its exercise, extend their happy influence on every side, and finally produce the most substantive advantages to society. And, in fact, these views have already, to a large extent, insinuated themselves into the minds of thousands in this country, hence their

indifference to the speculative theories of our evangelical Christians, hence the apathy which we see amongst the congregations of our churches and chapels. The moral nature of men and women rebels against the infamous doctrine of eternal punishment, hence the number of moral people in our towns and villages who lay no claim to be religious—people who our preachers say are farther from godliness than many of the worthless wretches who lay no claim to virtue, but who weekly tremble at the denunciations of the pulpit. In point of numbers openly professing to be disbelievers, we may always be inferior to the Christian sects. We may probably never have a great many declaring themselves chiefly devoted to Secular matters, for not one in a hundred can see the benefit to be derived from openly asserting an opposition to the Christian doctrines, at the same time most can see a great loss in business and in social intercourse by so doing; because, whilst the disbeliever is generally shunned, a man who is known to be one of the greatest hypocrites and humbugs in existence, if he regularly attend a place of worship, and nominally profess to be a Christian, is taken by the hand and treated as a highly respectable member of society. Besides, we cannot expect to influence men the same as the parsons. We have no threats of hell or hopes of heaven. We cannot, neither do we wish, to frighten people into thinking as we think. We wish them honestly to inquire, and when they are satisfied of the truth of their principles, we like to see them faithful to them. Although our influence may not be so great in society as yours, still, my friends, we have an influence; although our hopes may not be so brilliant respecting a future state as yours, still our principles have given us great relief; for believing none of the stories about a future state, we have but few sources of anxiety on that account. To use the words of Joseph Barker, I say, 'It is certainly no slight relief to the benevolent mind to be rid of the idea of an angry and revengeful God, of a great savage devil, of an eternal hell of fire and brimstone, and of countless hosts of fallen angels and damned spirits weltering together in the burning pool, weeping and wailing in infinite and hopeless agony. It is also no slight relief to be at liberty to study nature, and to receive her revelations, without being forced to reconcile them with the childish fancies of an indignant and superstitious people. It is a great relief to feel ourselves at liberty to despise old foolish and savage laws, to reject old monster fables, and to judge for ourselves what is true, and just, and good, on every subject.' To those amongst you who wish to become thoroughly acquainted with the weighty reasons brought by disbelievers against what is known as orthodox Christianity, I would recommend 'Parker on Religion,' Newman's 'Phases of Faith,' 'The Bible and its Evidences,' by R. Cooper, and the discussions between the Rev. Brewin Grant and Mr. G. J. Holyoake. I think that the perusal of these works will convince you that conscientious disbelief is possible and justifiable.

These remarks are nearly word for word as I intended delivering them at Spalding. If only twenty minutes had been allowed me, I should have had somewhat to have condensed them. Upon the whole I think the foregoing would have been a fair, honest, and straightforward statement of the position we stand in as opponents to Christian doctrines.