

## LIVE TOPICS.

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[THE following is the report of an interview between Mr. George Macdonald, of the New York *Truthseeker*, and Colonel Robert Ingersoll. The questions are, of course, put by the former, and the answers given by the latter.]

Q. Shall you attend the Albany Freethought Convention?

A. I have agreed not only to be present, but to address the Convention, on Sunday, the 13th of September. From all I hear, the Convention is going to be a success. I am greatly gratified to know that the interest in the question of intellectual liberty is growing from year to year. Everywhere I go it seems to be the topic of conversation. No matter upon what subject people begin to talk, in a little while the discussion takes a religious turn, and people who a few moments before had not the slightest thought of saying a word about the churches, or about the Bible, are giving their opinions in full. I hear discussions of this kind in all the public conveyances, at the hotels, on the piazzas at the seaside—and they are not discussions in which I take any part, because I rarely say anything upon these questions except in public, unless I am directly addressed.

There is a general feeling that the Church has ruled this world long enough. People are beginning to see that no amount of eloquence, or faith, or erudition, or authority can make the records of barbarism

satisfactory to the heart and brain of this century. They have also found that a falsehood in Hebrew is no more credible than in plain English. People at last are beginning to be satisfied that cruel laws were never good laws, no matter whether inspired or un-inspired. The Christian religion, like every other religion depending upon inspired writings, is wrecked upon the facts of Nature. So long as inspired writers confined themselves to the supernatural world; so long as they talked about angels, and Gods, and heavens, and hells; so long as they described only things that man has never seen, and never will see, they were safe, not from contradiction, but from demonstration. But these writings had to have a foundation, even for their falsehoods, and that foundation was in Nature. The foundation had to be something about which somebody knew something, or supposed they knew something. They told something about this world that agreed with the then general opinion. Had these inspired writers told the truth about Nature—had they said that the world revolved on its axis, and made a circuit about the sun—they could have gained no credence for their statements about other worlds. They were forced to agree with their contemporaries about this world, and there is where they made the fundamental mistake. Having grown in knowledge, the world has discovered that these inspired men knew nothing about this earth; that the inspired books are filled with mistakes—not only mistakes that we can contradict, but mistakes that we can demonstrate to be mistakes. Had they told the truth in their day about this earth, they would not have been believed about other worlds, because their contemporaries would have used their own knowledge about this world to test the knowledge of these inspired men. We pursue the same course; and what we know about this world we use as the standard, and by that standard we have found that the inspired men knew nothing about Nature as it is.

Finding that they were mistaken about this world, we have no confidence in what they have said about another. Every religion has had its philosophy about this world, and every one has been mistaken. As education becomes general, as scientific modes are adopted, this will become clearer and clearer, until "ignorant as inspiration" will be a comparison.

Q. Have you seen the memorial to the New York legislature, to be presented this winter, asking for the repeal of such laws as practically unite Church and State?

A. I have seen a memorial asking that church property be taxed like other property; that no more money should be appropriated from the public treasury for the support of institutions managed by, and in the interest of, sectarian denominations; for the repeal of all laws compelling the observance of Sunday as a religious day. Such memorials ought to be addressed to the legislatures of all the states. The money of the public should only be used for the benefit of the public. Public money should not be used for what a few gentlemen think is for the benefit of the public. Personally, I think it would be for the benefit of the public to have Infidel or scientific—which is the same thing—lectures delivered in every town in every state, on every Sunday; but knowing that a great many men disagree with me on this point, I do not claim that such lectures ought to be paid for with public money. The Methodist church ought not to be sustained by taxation, nor the Catholic, nor any other church. To relieve their property from taxation is to appropriate money, to the extent of that tax, for the support of that church. Whenever a burden is lifted from one piece of property, it is distributed over the rest of the property of the state, and to release one kind of property is to increase the tax on all other kinds.

There was a time when people really supposed that churches were saving souls from the eternal

wrath of a God of infinite love. Being engaged in such a philanthropic work, and at that time nobody having the courage to deny it—the church being all-powerful—all other property was taxed to support the church; but now the more civilised part of the community, being satisfied that a God of infinite love will not be eternally unjust, feel as though the church should support herself. To exempt the church from taxation is to pay a part of the priest's salary. The Catholic now objects to being taxed to support a school in which his religion is not taught. He is not satisfied with the school that says nothing on the subject of religion. He insists that it is an outrage to tax him to support a school where the teacher simply teaches what he knows. And yet this same Catholic wants his church exempted from taxation, and the tax of an Atheist or of a Jew increased, when he teaches in his untaxed church that the Atheist and Jew will both be eternally damned! Is it possible for impudence to go further? I insist that no religion should be taught in any school supported by public money; and by religion I mean superstition. Only that should be taught in a school that somebody can learn and that somebody can know. In my judgment, every church should be taxed precisely the same as other property. The church may claim that it is one of the instruments of civilisation and therefore should be exempt. If you exempt that which is useful, you exempt every trade and every profession. In my judgment, theatres have done more to civilise mankind than churches; that is to say, theatres have done something to civilise mankind—churches nothing. The effect of all superstition has been to render man barbarous. I do not believe in the civilising effects of falsehood.

There was a time when ministers were supposed to be in the employ of God, and it was thought that God selected them with great care—that their pro-

fession had something sacred about it. These ideas are no longer entertained by sensible people. Ministers should be paid like other professional men, and those who like their preach should pay for the preach. They should depend, as actors do, upon their popularity—upon the amount of sense, or nonsense, that they have for sale. They should depend upon the market like other people, and if people do not want to hear sermons badly enough to build churches and pay for them, and pay the taxes on them, and hire the preacher, let the money be diverted to some other use. The pulpit should no longer be a pauper. I do not believe in carrying on any business with the contribution box. All the sectarian institutions ought to support themselves. There should be no Methodist, or Catholic, or Presbyterian hospitals or orphan asylums. All these should be supported by the State. There is no such thing as Catholic charity or Methodist charity. Charity belongs to humanity, not to any particular form of faith or religion. You will find as charitable people who never heard of religion as you can find in any church. The State should provide for those who ought to be provided for. A few Methodists beg of everybody they meet—send women with subscription papers, getting money from all classes of people, and nearly everybody gives something for politeness or to keep from being annoyed; and when the institution is finished, it is pointed at as the result of Methodism! Probably a majority of the people in this country suppose that there was no charity in the world until the Christian religion was founded. Great men have repeated this falsehood until ignorance and thoughtlessness believe it. There were orphan asylums in China, in India and in Egypt, thousands of years before Christ was born; and there certainly never was a time in the history of the whole world when there was less charity in Europe than during the centuries when the Church of Christ had absolute power. There were hundreds of Moham-

medan asylums before Christianity had built ten in the entire world.

All institutions for the care of unfortunate people should be secular—should be supported by the State. The money for the purpose should be raised by taxation, to the end that the burden may be borne by those able to bear it. As it is now, most of the money is paid, not by the rich, but by the generous, and those most able to help their needy fellow-citizens are the very ones who do nothing. If the money is raised by taxation, then the burden will fall where it ought to fall, and these institutions will no longer be supported by the generous and emotional, and the rich and stingy will no longer be able to evade the duties of citizenship and of humanity.

Now, as to the Sunday laws, we know that they are only spasmodically enforced. Now and then a few people are arrested for selling papers or cigars. Some unfortunate barber is grabbed by a policeman because he has been caught shaving a Christian on Sunday morning. Now and then some poor fellow with a hack, trying to make a dollar or to feed his horses, or to take care of his wife and children, is arrested as though he were a murderer. But in a few days the public are inconvenienced to that degree, that the arrests stop and business goes on in its accustomed channels, Sunday and all.

Now and then society becomes so pious, so virtuous, that people are compelled to enter saloons by the back door; others are compelled to drink beer with the front shutters up; but otherwise the stream that goes down the thirsty throats is unbroken. The ministers have done their best to prevent all recreation on the Sabbath. They would like to stop all the boats on the Hudson and on the sea—stop all the excursion trains. They would like to compel every human being that lives in the city of New York to remain within its limits twenty-four hours each Sunday. They hate the parks; they hate music; they

hate anything that keeps a man away from church. Most of the churches are empty during the summer, and now most of the ministers leave themselves, and give over the entire city to the Devil and his emissaries. And yet if the ministers had their way, there would be no form of human enjoyment except prayer, signing subscription papers, putting money in contribution boxes, listening to sermons, reading the cheerful histories of the Old Testament, imagining the joys of heaven and the torments of hell. The church is opposed to the theatre, is the enemy of the opera, looks upon dancing as a crime, hates billiards, despises cards, opposes roller-skating, and even entertains a certain kind of prejudice against croquet.

Q. Do you think that the orthodox Church gets its ideas of the Sabbath from the teachings of Christ?

A. I do not hold Christ responsible for these idiotic ideas concerning the Sabbath. He regarded the Sabbath as something made for man—which was a sensible view. The holiest day is the happiest day. The most sacred day is the one in which have been done the most good deeds. There are two reasons given in the Bible for keeping the Sabbath. One is that God made the world in six days, and rested on the seventh. Now that all the ministers admit that he did not make the world in six days, but that he made it in six "periods," this reason is no longer applicable. The other reason is that he brought the Jews out of Egypt with a "mighty hand." This may be a very good reason still for the observance of the Sabbath by the Jews, but the real Sabbath, that is to say, the day to be commemorated, is our Saturday, and why should we commemorate the wrong day? That disposes of the second reason.

Nothing can be more inconsistent than the theories and practice of the churches about the Sabbath. The cars run Sundays, and out of the profits hundreds of ministers are supported. The great iron and steel works fill with smoke and fire the Sabbath air, and

the proprietors divide the profits with the churches. The printers of the city are busy Sunday afternoons and evenings, and the presses during the nights, so that the sermons of Sunday can reach the heathen on Monday. The servants of the rich are denied the privileges of the sanctuary. The coachman sits on the box out-doors, while his employer kneels in church, preparing himself for the heavenly chariot. The iceman goes about on the holy day, keeping believers cool, they knowing at the same time that he is making it hot for himself in the world to come. Christians cross the Atlantic, knowing that the ship will pursue its way on the Sabbath. They write letters to their friends knowing that they will be carried in violation of Jehovah's law, by wicked men. Yet they hate to see a pale-faced sewing-girl enjoying a few hours by the sea; a poor mechanic walking in the fields; or a tired mother watching her children playing on the grass. Nothing ever was, nothing ever will be, more utterly absurd and disgusting than a Puritan Sunday. Nothing ever did make a home more hateful than the strict observance of the Sabbath. It fills the house with hypocrisy and the meanest kind of petty tyranny. The parents look sour and stern, the children sad and sulky. They are compelled to talk upon subjects about which they feel no interest, or to read books that are thought good only because they are stupid.

Q. What have you to say about the growth of Catholicism, the activity of the Salvation Army, and the success of revivalists like the Rev. Samuel Jones? Is Christianity really gaining a strong hold on the masses?

A. Catholicism is growing in this country, and it is the only country on earth in which it is growing. Its growth here depends entirely upon immigration, not upon intellectual conquest. Catholic emigrants who leave their homes in the Old World because they have never had any liberty, and who are Catholics



for the same reason, add to the number of Catholics here, but their children's children will not be Catholics. Their children will not be very good Catholics, and even these immigrants themselves, in a few years, will not grovel quite so low in the presence of a priest. The Catholic Church is gaining no ground in Catholic countries.

The Salvation Army is the result of two things—the general belief in what are known as the fundamentals of Christianity and the heartlessness of the Church. The Church in England—that is to say, the Church of England—having succeeded—that is to say, being supported by general taxation—that is to say, being a successful, well-fed parasite—naturally neglected those who did not in any way contribute to its support. It became aristocratic. Splendid churches were built; younger sons with good voices were put in the pulpits; the pulpit became the asylum for aristocratic mediocrity, and in that way the Church of England lost interest in the masses, and the masses lost interest in the Church of England. The neglected poor, who really had some belief in religion, and who had not been absolutely petrified by form and patronage, were ready for the Salvation Army. They were not at home in the Church. They could not pay. They preferred the freedom of the street. They preferred to attend a church where rags were no objection. Had the Church loved and labored with the poor, the Salvation Army never would have existed. These people are simply giving their idea of Christianity, and in their way endeavoring to do what they consider good. I don't suppose the Salvation Army will accomplish much. To improve mankind you must change conditions. It is not enough to work simply upon the emotional nature. The surroundings must be such as naturally produce virtuous actions. If we are to believe recent reports from London, the Church of England, even with the assistance of the Salvation Army, has accomplished

but little. It would be hard to find any savage country with less morality. You would search long in the jungles of Africa to find greater depravity.

I account for revivalists like the Rev. Samuel Jones in the same way. There is in every community an ignorant class—what you might call a literal class—who believe in the real blood atonement, who believe in heaven and hell, and harps, and gridirons—who have never had their faith weakened by reading commentators or books harmonising science and religion. They love to hear the good old doctrine; they want hell described; they want it described so that they can hear the moans and shrieks; they want heaven described; they want to see God on a throne, and they want to feel that they are finally to have the pleasure of looking over the battlements of heaven and seeing all their enemies among the damned. The Rev. Mr. Munger has suddenly become a revivalist. According to the papers he is sought for in every direction. His popularity seems to rest upon the fact that he brutally beat a girl twelve years old because she did not say her prayers to suit him. Muscular Christianity is what the ignorant people want. I regard all these efforts—including those made by Mr. Moody and Mr. Hammond—as evidence that Christianity, as an intellectual factor, has almost spent its force. It no longer governs the intellectual world.

*Q.* Are not the Catholics the least progressive? And are they not, in spite of their professions to the contrary, enemies to republican liberty?

*A.* Every church that has a standard higher than human welfare is dangerous. A church that puts a book above the laws and constitution of its country, that puts a book above the welfare of mankind, is dangerous to human liberty. Every church that puts itself above the legally expressed will of the people is dangerous. Every church that holds itself under

greater obligation to a pope than to a people is dangerous to human liberty. Every church that puts religion above humanity—above the well-being of man in this world—is dangerous. The Catholic Church may be more dangerous, not because its doctrines are more dangerous, but because, on the average, its members more sincerely believe its doctrines, and because that Church can be hurled as a solid body in any given direction. For these reasons it is more dangerous than other churches; but its doctrines are no more dangerous than those of the Protestant churches. The man who would sacrifice the well-being of man to please an imaginary phantom that he calls God, is also dangerous. The only safe standard is the well-being of man in this world. Whenever this world is sacrificed for the sake of another, a mistake has been made. The only God that man can know is the aggregate of all beings capable of suffering and of joy within the reach of his influence. To increase the happiness of such beings is to worship the only God that man can know.

Q. What have you to say to the assertion of Dr. Deems that there were never so many Christians as now?

A. I suppose that the population of the earth is greater now than at any other time within the historic period. This being so, there may be more Christians, so-called, in the world than there were a hundred years ago. Of course, the reverend doctor, in making up his aggregate of Christians, counts all kinds and sects—Unitarians, Universalists, and all the other “ans,” and “ists,” and “ics,” and “ites,” and “ers.” But Dr. Deems must admit that only a few years ago most of the persons he now calls Christians would have been burnt as heretics and infidels. Let us compare the average New York Christian with the Christian of two hundred years ago. It is probably safe to say that there is not now

in the city of New York a genuine Presbyterian outside of an insane asylum. Probably no one could be found who will to-day admit that he believes absolutely in the Presbyterian Confession of Faith. There is probably not an Episcopalian who believes in the Thirty-nine Articles. Probably there is not an intelligent minister in the city of New York, outside of the Catholic church, who believes that everything in the Bible is true. Probably no clergyman, of any standing, would be willing to take the ground that everything in the Old Testament—leaving out the question of inspiration—is actually true. Very few ministers now preach the doctrine of eternal punishment. Most of them would be ashamed to utter that brutal falsehood. A large majority of gentlemen who attend church take the liberty of disagreeing with the preacher. They would have been very poor Christians two hundred years ago. A majority of the ministers take the liberty of disagreeing, in many things, with their Presbyteries and Synods. They would have been very poor preachers two hundred years ago. Dr. Deems forgets that most Christians are only nominally so. Very few believe their creeds. Very few even try to live in accordance with what they call Christian doctrines. Nobody loves his enemies. No Christian, when smitten on one cheek, turns the other. Most Christians do take a little thought for the morrow. They do not depend entirely upon the providence of God. Most Christians now have greater confidence in the average life insurance company than in God—feel easier, when dying, to know that they have a policy, through which they expect the widow will receive ten thousand dollars, than when thinking of all the Scripture promises. Even church members do not trust in God to protect their own property. They insult heaven by putting lightning-rods on their temples. They insure the churches against the act of God. The experience of man has

shown the wisdom of relying on something that we know something about, instead of upon the shadowy supernatural. The poor wretches to-day in Spain, depending upon their priests, die like poisoned flies—die with prayers between their pallid lips—die in their filth and faith.

Q. What have you to say on the Mormon question?

A. The institution of polygamy is infamous and disgusting beyond expression. It destroys what we call, and what all civilised people call, "the family." It pollutes the fireside, and, above all, as Burns would say, "petrifies the feeling." It is however, one of the institutions of Jehovah. It is protected by the Bible. It has inspiration on its side. Sinai, with its barren, granite peaks is a perpetual witness in its favor. The beloved of God practiced it, and, according to the sacred word, the wisest man had, I believe, about seven hundred wives. This man received his wisdom directly from God. It is hard for the average Bible-worshipper to attack this institution without casting a certain stain upon his own book.

Only a few years ago slavery was upheld by the same Bible. Slavery having been abolished, the passages in the inspired volume upholding it have been mostly forgotten; but polygamy lives, and the polygamists, with great volubility, repeat the passages in their favor. We send our missionaries to Utah, with their Bibles, to convert the Mormons. The Mormons show, by these very Bibles, that God is on their side. Nothing remains now for the missionaries except to get back their Bibles and come home. The preachers do not appeal to the Bible for the purpose of putting down Mormonism. They say: "Send the army." If the people of this country could only be honest, if they would only admit that the Old Testament is but the record of a barbarous people, if the Samson of the nineteenth century would not allow its limbs to be bound by the Delilah of Super-

stitution, it could with one blow destroy this monster. What shall we say of the moral force of Christianity when it utterly fails in the presence of Mormonism? What shall we say of a Bible that we dare not read to a Mormon as an argument against legalised lust, or as an argument against illegal lust?

. I am opposed to polygamy. I want it exterminated by law; but I hate to see the exterminators insist that God, only a few thousand years ago, was as bad as the Mormons are to-day. In my judgment, such a God ought to be exterminated.

Q. What do you think of men like the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher and the Rev. R. Heber Newton? Do they deserve any credit for the course they have taken?

A. Mr. Beecher is evidently endeavoring to shore up the walls of the falling temple. He sees the cracks; he knows that the building is out of plumb; he feels that the foundation is insecure. Lies can take the place of stones only so long as they are thoroughly believed. Mr. Beecher is trying to do something to harmonise superstition and science. He is reading between the lines. He has discovered that Darwin is only a later Saint Paul, or that Saint Paul was the original Darwin. He is endeavoring to make the New Testament a scientific text-book. Of course he will fail. But his intentions are good. Thousands of people will read the New Testament with more freedom than heretofore. They will look for new meanings; and he who looks for new meanings will not be satisfied with the old ones. Mr. Beecher, instead of strengthening the walls, will make them weaker.

There is no harmony between religion and science. When science was a child, religion sought to strangle it in the cradle. Now that science has attained its youth, and superstition is in its dotage, the trembling, palsied wreck says to the athlete: "Let us be friends." It reminds me of the bargain the cock

wished to make with the horse: "Let us agree not to step on each other's feet." Mr. Beecher, having done away with hell, substitutes annihilation. His doctrine at present is that only a fortunate few are immortal, and that the great mass return to dreamless dust. This, of course, is far better than hell, and is a great improvement on the orthodox view. Mr. Beecher cannot believe that God would make such a mistake as to make men doomed to suffer eternal pain. Why, I ask, should God give life to men whom he knows are unworthy of life? Why should he annihilate his mistakes? Why should he make mistakes that need annihilation?

It can hardly be said that Mr. Beecher's idea is a new one. It was taught, with an addition, thousands of years ago, in India, and the addition almost answers my objection. The old doctrine was that only the soul that bears fruit, only the soul that bursts into blossom, will, at the death of the body, rejoin the infinite, and that all other souls—souls not having blossomed—will go back into low forms, and make the journey up to man once more, and should they then blossom and bear fruit, will be held worthy to join the infinite, but should they again fail, they again go back; and this process is repeated until they do blossom, and in this way all souls at last become perfect. I suggest that Mr. Beecher make at least this addition to his doctrine.

But allow me to say that, in my judgment, Mr. Beecher is doing great good. He may not convince many people that he is right, but he will certainly convince a great many people that Christianity is wrong.