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THE
BELIEFS OF UNBELIEVERS.

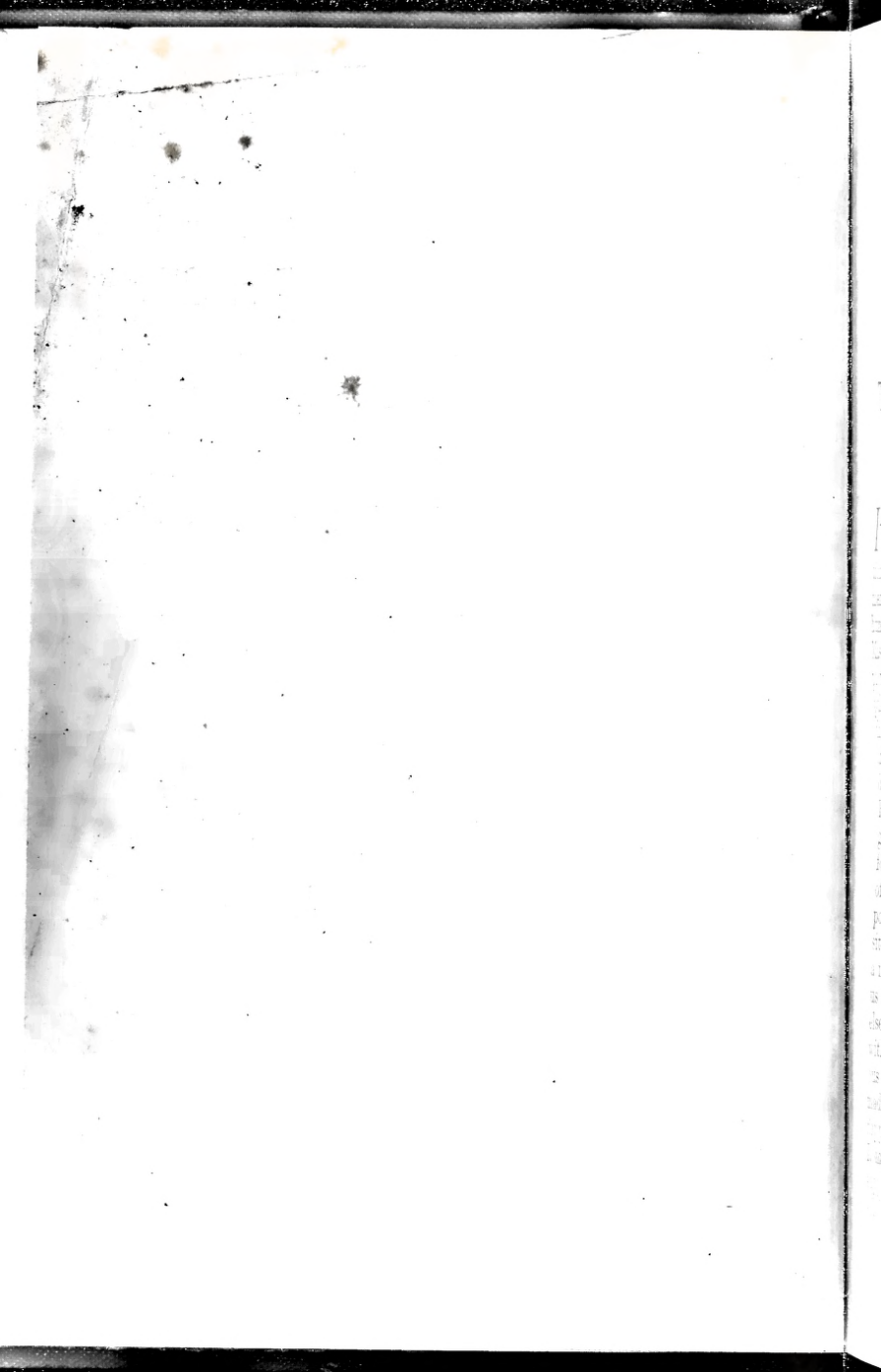
A LECTURE

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REV. O. B. FROTHINGHAM,
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THE BELIEFS OF UNBELIEVERS.

IN a Swedenborgian book written thirty years ago on the inspiration of the Bible, one finds a description, copied from an official report made to the government by a Mr James, of a "horrid desert" occupying hundreds of square miles of the territory between the Mississippi river and the Rocky Mountains. The picture of this desolate waste, with its unsightly and repulsive vegetable growths, its swarming locusts (on which the Mississippi hawk swooped and fed), its venomous and enormous snakes, is a thing to haunt the reader's dreams. But now through this region the Pacific Railroad runs, and one steams away through the golden, far-off West, looking vainly from rear platforms of cars for this land of darkness and the shadow of death, and finding instead a region capable of supporting an immense agricultural population, the future site of pleasant homes. The great American desert is a myth. Similar accounts have been handed down to us of intellectual and moral deserts in Europe and elsewhere—great spaces of territory or of time, covered with the prickly thorns of disbelief, cursed with poisonous vegetable growths, infested with deadly serpents, made hideous by unclean animals, awful with the dark flappings of demoniac wings. Such a district the Roman empire before the coming of Christ was long supposed to have been; and it is the more liberal scholarship of our own generation which has shown it

to us in fairer colours—taught us that then and there, even, men hoped, and trusted, and prayed, and believed, and endeavoured, and attained—that the empire had something to bestow on Christianity, as well as Christianity on the empire—that the time and state were neither worse nor better than they should have been, but lay directly in the track of historic progress. We know that human nature exhibited there all its attributes, its best as well as its worst; that it produced sages, reformers, and saints; grew philosophers by the dozen; noble men and women by the score; that it rectified laws, remedied abuses, restrained crime, rebuked sin, and in the usual way pushed itself out into the light and atmosphere of virtue. Renan makes it pretty clear that the middle of the second century, so long regarded as given over to the devil, was neither worse nor better than it ought to have been, and Lecky shows that the Roman empire neither experienced conversion nor needed it. One by one the deserts are disclosed in their native fertility, and the shapes of moral grandeur are revealed in spots where nothing was supposed able to exist. In like manner a beam or two of illumination may well be thrown into the dreaded shadow-land of so-called infidelity, by bringing to the light of day the beliefs of the unbelievers. With the worst side of infidelity the church-going world is familiar enough. It will be allowable, to day, to present the best side of it. But nothing shall be unfairly extenuated or exaggerated, since the only thing worth our having is the truth.

In every age of Christendom there have been men whom the church named “infidels,” and thrust down into the abyss of moral degradation. The oldest of these are forgotten. The only ones now actively anathematised lived within the last hundred years, and owe the blackness of their reputation to the assaults or superstitions that still are powerful, and the dogmas that are still supreme. The names of Chubb, Toland,

Tindal, of Herbert of Cherbury, Shaftesbury, and Bolingbroke, though seldom spoken now, are mentioned, when they are mentioned, with scorn and horror. The names of Voltaire and Rousseau recall at once sermons and verdicts that our own ears have heard. The memory of Thomas Paine is still a stench in our nostrils, though he has been dead sixty years—so deep a stamp of damnation the church fixed on him. Even a man as well intentioned as Adam Storey Farrar, who must have studied his themes for himself, falls into the vulgar slang of the pulpit when speaking of these men who dared to reject the prevailing beliefs of Christendom. It will be years before the grass will be allowed to grow green on their graves. Disbelievers they were. He claimed for them that honour. It is their title to immortality. Doubtless they were deniers, infidels, if you will. They made short work of creed and catechism, of sacrament and priest, of tradition and formula. Miraculous revelation, inspired Bible, authoritative dogma, dying Gods and atoning Saviours, infallible apostles and churches founded by the Holy Ghost, ecclesiastical heavens and hells, with other fictions, their minds would not harbour. They criticised mercilessly the drama of the redemption, and spoke more roughly than wisely of the great mysteries of the Godhead. But, after their fashion, they were great believers. In the interest of faith they doubted; in the interest of faith they denied. Their way was a backhanded method of pronouncing "yea." They were after the truth, and supposed themselves to be removing a rubbish-pile to reach it. Toland, whose "Christianity not Mysterious" was condemned to the flames by the Irish Parliament, while the author fled for protection to England, professed himself sincerely attached to the pure religion of Jesus, and anxious to exhibit it free from the corruptions of after times. So Thomas Paine wrote his "Age of Reason" as a check to the professors of French Atheism. One author in

1646 enumerates 180 "flagrant heresies," one of which was: "That *we* may walk with God as well as the patriarchs."

These unbeliefs were born of the spirit of the age. It was a time of terrible shakings. The axe had fallen on the neck of a king, and the halberd had smitten the images of the saints. Scarcely an authority stood fast, and not one was unchallenged. The infidels felt this spirit first. Fidelity to its call was their faith. They believed in the sovereignty of reason, the rights of the individual conscience. They had that faith in human nature which is the faith of faiths. It is a faith hard to hold; and these infidels found it so in their time. If anything is clear, it is that faith is large in proportion as it dares to put things to the proof. Fear and laziness can accept beliefs; only trust and courage will question them. To reject consecrated opinions demands a consecrated mind—at all events, the moving impulse to such rejection is faith—faith in reason; faith in the mind's ability to attain truth; faith in the power of thought, in the priceless worth of knowledge. The great sceptic must be a great believer. None have so magnificently affirmed as those who have audaciously denied; none so devoutly trusted as they who have sturdily protested. Not willingly do good men undermine deep-planted beliefs or throw precious hopes away. Small pleasure does it give to noble minds to pull down roofs beneath which for ages people have found shelter. If they are indifferent to others' sorrow they must have some thought for themselves. Is there pleasure in having ill-will, hate, persecution, in order that they may belittle the world and themselves? Is it such a privilege to be without faith in the world that men are willing to lay down their lives for it? Is it true, as I read lately on a sarcastic page, that "the most advanced thinker of our times takes an enlightened delight in his father, the monkey? When he has sunk his pedigree as man and adopted as family-

tree a procession of baboons, superior enlightenment radiates from his very person, and his place of honour is fixed in the illuminated brotherhood." I know of none who profess such a creed, but if there be any such, what martyrs so devoted as they, who are willing to abrogate humanity in the cause of knowledge, and to immolate their immortal being on the altar of creative law! The great provers have dared to prove because they were sure that their proving must result in the establishment of truth.

The beliefs of the unbelievers, being fundamental, are few. The creed of the infidel is short, but few nobler words have been written than some of the utterances of Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke, and other English infidels. Francis W. Newman's creed is: "God is a righteous governor, who loves the righteous, and answers prayers for righteous men;" but this may be abbreviated by omitting the last clause. Speaking more particularly of some of the half-forgotten English infidels, the creed of Herbert of Cherbury was a universal religion implanted in the minds of all men; Charles Blount's that God was to be worshipped by piety alone; Tindal asserted the immutability of God and the perfection of this law; Lord Shaftesbury opposed the sensational philosophy of Locke, and maintained the existence of an immutable principle of faith and duty in the breast; Anthony Collins received a letter from Locke, in which occurs this sentence:—"Believe it, my good friend, to love truth for truth's sake is the principal part of human perfection in this world and the seedplot of all other virtues; and if I mistake not, you have as much of it as I ever met with in anybody;" Thomas Chubb referred Christianity, like any other religion, to the law written on the heart; Bollingbroke taught belief in the existence of a supreme being of infinite wisdom and power. In England infidelity planted itself on reason and common-sense, stood by the broad facts of nature, maintained the unity

of God, the order of the world, and the welfare of all creatures in it.

French infidelity was of a different cast, for it was born of different experiences. The French infidel was by necessity a revolutionist. France had neither free press, free parliament, nor free debates. There were no public meetings and no discussions. A government decree forbade the publication of any book in which questions of government were discussed ; another made it a capital offence to write a book likely to excite the public mind ; a third denounced the punishment of death against any one who spoke of matters of finance or who attacked religion. Besides the worship of reason and the search for truth, it was a fiery and passionate protest against injustice. There was no freedom in the France of Voltaire's time. Almost every French writer of that epoch, whose writings have survived the age in which they were produced, suffered fine or imprisonment, or the suppression of his works. Voltaire was again and again imprisoned. Rousseau was exiled, and his works publicly burned. The whole intellect of France, thus thwarted, insulted, goaded to madness, rose in insurrection against the government. But the only hopeful way of assailing government was to assail the church. Religion was weak in comparison with royalty. Divinity hedged the king but not the priest. The clergy had greatly degenerated in character, and had forfeited by their hypocrisy the respect even of the immoral. Thus the church offered the first point to the attack of the outraged genius of France. That attack was too headlong and furious ; the church recovered from it and heaped infamy on the names of its enemies. But that offal-heap is disappearing, and we see now that even these sinners lived and died in the faith. Their courage was kindled at the upper and not the nether fires. The love of truth and of humanity constrained them, and their foes were dogmatism and superstition.

One cannot do justice to the faith of these men by a bare enumeration of their religious opinions ; but it is interesting to know that Voltaire believed in a personal God and trusted in immortality. The inscription on his tomb—"He combatted the Atheists"—wears an impressive look. I read Voltaire's confession of faith in sentences scattered all over his pages, which, written most of them in heart's blood, attest the fact that this terrible infidel had a soul of faith great enough to save him. It saved many beside. The soul of Voltaire quickens France to-day, a soul of revolution, but of regeneration as well. The inspiration of Diderot was the spirit of intelligence, not the spirit of unbelief. His atheism was the protest of a glowing heart against a freezing divinity. His belief in a great God instead of a little one. Can any good thing be urged for materialists like Helvetius, or atheists like Dr Holback? Their articles of faith were indeed few. They rose in such wrath against the church that they struck away the last vestige of religion, leaving neither God nor immortality. Man was for them an ingenious piece of mechanism—the universe a machine. But they taught an obedience to the laws of nature, which, if fully carried out, would almost make God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Sensible men have done talking about the infidelity of Rousseau—the apostle of sentiment in religion, the prophet of the conscience, the passionate eulogist of Jesus. The sentimentalists win glory to-day by their repetitions of his thoughts on the absolute goodness of God and the large hospitalities of heaven. Our republican state is not more indebted to him for its idea of man than is our church for its idea of deity.

We come to Tom Paine—his name was Thomas, but that name being Christian is not yet given him by respectable people—Tom Paine, "the foul-mouthed infidel," the "ribald blasphemer," "the man of three countries, and disowned by all—English in his deism,

American in his radicalism, French in his scoffing temper," the bugbear of the priest, the anti-Christ of the preacher. They that deny to him beliefs have never read his writings—they that refuse to him a faith must explain his heroism as they can. The "Age of Reason," dreadful book, which all revile because none read it, opens with this statement: "I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow-creatures happy." "The world my country; to do good my religion," was this unbeliever's motto; and to him we owe this exquisite definition: "Religion is man bringing to his Maker the fruits of his heart." There was a soul of faith in him; and in these days he would take rank with our beloved Theodore Parker.

Character was the test of conviction, and these unbelievers must be judged by their acts. They were not saints, and very few men are. Their character would compare favourably with any of the so-called believers of their age. There were few to speak a word for the atheist Diderot; yet for a few such atheists the church would not be made worse. Clergymen had copied the small virtues of Voltaire, multiplied them by ten, and perfumed them with asafetida, while his great virtues were beyond their comprehension. The prominent traits of Paine's character were benevolence, tenderness to the weak, and hatred of wrong and oppression. When we test the faiths of our unbelievers by their works, we find them men, like the rest of us, sharing the faults, sometimes the vices, of their times, but all had a certain nobility of soul, and some were heroes. Lord Barrington speaks of "the virtuous and serious deists" of his time. Taylor calls Herbert of Cherbury "a man of religious mind." Sir James M'Intosh describes Shaftesbury as "a man of

many excellent qualities; temperate, chaste, honest, and a lover of his country." "The principal traits in the character of Voltaire," says Jules Barin, "were benevolence, tenderness to the weak, hatred of wrong and oppression." Indeed Voltaire's grand acts of heroism are well known to all who have read anything about him—his devoted efforts to obtain a reversal of the sentence against the family of Jean Calas—victim at once of sanguinary superstitions and brutal laws—an effort which lasted three years, "during all which time," he declares, "I reproached myself with every smile as if it were guilt"—was only one of his self-sacrificing attempts to aid the weak and oppressed. We find him paying the debts of the poor, restoring the fallen fortunes of one and another, making himself a benevolent providence wherever he found suffering. Surely at the end he could say, "I have fought a good fight, I have kept the faith."

The new day-spring that is coming over the hills has reached even the low grave of Thomas Paine, and is covering it with flowers. The foul spectres that gathered there no longer appear to those that have eyes to see. Every true American should know at least something of the great qualities of Thomas Paine. Every true American should know that it was he who struck the key-note of the Revolution by his "Common Sense." Every true American should know that his "Crisis," written in an hour of extreme discouragement, electrified the army, put a soul into the country, and was worth to the failing cause of independence more than an army with banners. His first sentence, "These are the times that try men's souls," is still the patriot's battle-cry in the last struggle. Every true American should know and should love to remember that when these two publications were having an enormous sale—the demand for the former reaching not less than 100,000 copies, and both together offered to the author profits that would have made him rich—

that man, poor and overworked, refused a cent of remuneration for his toil, and, like a prince, nay, rather like a true friend of man, freely gave the copyright to every State in the Union. Every true American should know and delight to tell how Thomas Paine, in his period of public favour and of intimate friendship with the founders of the government, declined to accept any place or office of emolument, saying, "I must be in everything, as I have ever been, a disinterested volunteer. My proper sphere of action is on the common floor of citizenship, and to honest men I give my hand and my heart freely." Every true American should know and should not forget that when the State of Virginia made a large claim on the general government for lands, Thomas Paine opposed the claim as unreasonable and unjust, though at that very time there was a resolution before the Legislature of Virginia to appropriate to him a handsome sum of money for services rendered. He knew it when he wrote. He knew what would be the effect of his writing; but not for any private considerations would he hold back his protest. Every true American will be glad to know that Paine, though an Englishman, had such love for republican institutions that he declared he would rather see his horse "Button" eating the grass of Bordentown or Morrisania than see all the pomp and show of Europe.

No private character has been more foully calumniated in the name of God than Thomas Paine's. Dead now for more than sixty years, few people care, perhaps, whether he was slandered or not; but, speaking as a historian alone, one would be justified in demanding attention to a fully detailed vindication of this name, so remarkable in our own annals. Speaking not as a historian, but as a free-religionist, surely one may be allowed a brief space wherein to show that infidels had their virtues as well as their beliefs; that the territory occupied by the unbelievers is not a

barren desert, but a fruitful domain wherein the humanities dwell and the angels sing. All the gravest charges against Paine have been utterly disproved, and have fallen to the ground. We have left, the memory of a man full of zeal for God and for humanity—not a saint, indeed, but surely not a sinner above all who dwelt in Jerusalem. He drank more brandy than was wise, or would now be deemed dignified, but the eminent Christians of his time more than kept him company. He was no dandy, but is dandyism reckoned an apostolic grace? He used snuff, but is snuff-taking so much more heinous than smoking, which is said to be a clerical weakness, that it makes all the difference between the believer and the infidel? He lost his temper sometimes, but what amount of orthodoxy will make it sure that a good man's temper shall never fail? There were magnificent moments in this much maligned life. It was one of them when the French Assembly met, to order the execution of Louis XVI., and Thomas Paine protested in the name of liberty against the deed. "Destroy the king," he cried, "but save the man. Strike the crown, but spare the heart." The members, in a rage, would not believe their ears. "These are not the words of Thomas Paine," resounded from every side of the chamber. "They are my words," said the undaunted man. But they cost the hero his reputation, and came near costing him his life.

Ah, what do we not owe to the few who have had the courage to disbelieve! The men who bore hard names through life, and after death had harder names piled like stones over their memories! The men who lived solitary and misunderstood, who were driven by the spirit into the wilderness; who were called infidels because they believed more than their neighbours; and heretics because they chose the painful pursuit of truth in preference to the idle luxury of traditional opinion; and atheists because they rested on a God so

large that the vulgar could not see his outline ; and image breakers because they adored the unseen Spirit ; and deniers of the Christ because they affirmed the Eternal Word ! What do we not owe them, who went about shaking their heads, and murmuring *no* with their lips, their hearts all the while saying *yes* to the immortals ! They, after all, are the builders of our most splendid beliefs. Almost all our rational faiths we must thank them for, liberators that they are ! It is they who have hunted the old devil from the highways and byways of creation. To them we owe deliverance from witchcraft, priestcraft, and the manifold shapes of superstition. They have taught us to read the Bible with open eyes. They have interpreted the sweet humanity of Jesus. Who but they have practically taught us the preciousness of the eternal life, have rescued us from the tyranny of creeds, and purchased with their blood the soul-freedom which is our birthright ? We will cry with Erasmus : “ Holy Socrates, pray for us.” We will say with Schleiermacher : “ Join me in offering a lock of hair to the shade of the rejected Saint Spinoza. Full of religion was he ; and full of the Holy Ghost.” And if there were a louder voice calling on us to lay tears, vows, and purposes on the graves of all faithful infidels and believing unbelievers, we would say amen and amen.

