

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

SALVATION

HERE AND HEREAFTER

A Lecture

*DELIVERED TO IMMENSE AUDIENCES IN THE
UNITED STATES*

BY

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SALVATION: HERE AND HEREAFTER.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—The history of the world shows that religion has made enemies instead of friends. That one word "religion" paints the sky of the past with every form of agony and torture. When we pronounce the word religion we think of 1500 years of persecution, of 6000 years of hatred, slander, and vituperation. Strange, but true, that those who have loved God most have loved men least; strange that in countries where there has been the most religion there has been the most agony; and that is one reason why I am opposed to what is known as religion. By religion I mean the duties that men are supposed to owe to God: by religion I mean, not what man owes to man, but what we owe to some invisible, infinite, and Supreme Being.

The question arises: Can any relation exist between finite man and infinite being? An infinite being cannot receive; a finite being cannot give to an infinite one. Can I increase his happiness or decrease his misery? Does he need my strength or my life? What can I do for him? I say, nothing. For one, I do not believe in serving God, or that there is any God who gives rain or sunshine for praying. For one, I do not believe there is any being who helps man simply because he kneels. I may be mistaken, but that is my doctrine; that the finite cannot by any possibility help the infinite or the infinite be indebted to the finite; that the finite cannot by any possibility assist a being who is all in all. What can we do? We can help man; we can help to clothe the naked; feed the hungry; we can help to break the chains of the slave; we can help to weave a garment of joy

that will finally cover this world. That is all that man can do. Wherever he has endeavoured to do more he has simply increased the misery of his fellows. My unaided reasoning does not carry me beyond the limits of this life, but if there is an infinite God and I have not reason enough to comprehend His universe, whose fault is it?

I am told that we have the inspired will of God. I do not know exactly what is meant by inspired. Not two sects agree on that word. Some tell me that every great work is inspired, that Shakspeare is inspired. I would be less apt to dispute that than a similar remark about any other book on this earth. If Jehovah wanted a book written, the inspiration of which should not be disputed, he should have waited until Shakspeare lived. Whatever theologians mean by inspiration they at least mean that it is true. If it is true, it does not need to be inspired. The truth will take care of itself. Nothing except a falsehood needs inspiration. What is inspiration? A man looks at the sea and the sea says something to him. Another man looks at the same sea, and the sea tells another story to him. The sea cannot tell the same story to any two human beings. There is not a thing in nature, from a pebble to a constellation, that tells the same story to any two human beings. It depends upon the man's experience, his intellectual development, and what chord of memory is touched. One looks upon the sea and is filled with grief; another looks upon it and laughs. Last year, riding in the cars from Boston to Portsmouth, sat opposite me a lady and gentleman. As we reached the latter place the woman, for the first time in her life, caught a burst of the sea, and she looked and said to her husband: "Isn't that beautiful," and he looked and said: "I'll bet you can dig clams right there."

Another illustration. A little while ago a gentleman was walking with another in South Carolina, at Charleston,—one who had been upon the other side. Said the Northerner to the Southerner, "Did you ever see such a night as this; did you ever in your life see such a moon?" "Oh my God," replied the Southerner, "You ought to have seen that moon before the war." I simply say these things to convince

you that everything in nature has a different story to tell every human being. So the Bible tells a different story to every man that reads it. History proves what I say. Why so many sects? Why so much persecution? Simply because two people couldn't understand the Bible exactly alike. You may reply that God intended it should be understood in such and such a way, but that decides nothing.

For instance, I write a letter to Smith; I want to convey to him certain thoughts. If I am honest, I will use the words which will convey to him my thoughts, but not being infinite I don't know exactly how Smith will understand my words; but if I were infinite I would be bound to use the words that I know Smith would get my exact idea from. If God intended to make a revelation to me he has to make it to me through my brain and my reasoning. He cannot make a revelation to another man for me. That other man will have God's word for it, but I will only have that man's word for it. As that man has been dead for several thousand years, and as I don't know what his reputation was for truth and veracity in the neighbourhood in which he lived, I will wait for the Lord to speak again. Suppose when I read the Bible, the revelation to me, through the Bible, is that it is not true, and God knew that this would be the result of my reading, and knew that if I did not make known this result I would be dishonest, is it possible that he would damn me for being honest, and give me wings if I would play the hypocrite? The inspiration of the Bible depends upon the ignorance of the gentleman who reads it.

They tell me this book was written by the Creator of every shining star. Now let us see. I want to be honest and candid. I have just as much at stake in the way of soul as any doctor of divinity that ever lived, and more than some I have met. According to this book, the first attempt at peopling the world was a failure. God had to destroy all but eight. He saved some of the same kind to start again, which I think was a mistake. After that, the people still getting worse, he selected from the wide world a few of the tribe of Abraham. He had no time to waste with everybody.

He had no time to throw away on Egypt. It had at that time a vast and splendid civilization, in which there were free schools; in which the one man married the one wife; where there were courts of law; where there were codes of laws.

Neither could he give attention to India, which had at that time a literature as splendid almost as ours, a language as perfect, which had produced poets, philosophers, statesmen. He had no time to waste with them, but took a few of the tribe of Abraham, and did his best to civilise these people. He was their Governor, their Executive, their Supreme Court. He established a despotism, and from Mount Sinai he proclaimed his laws. They didn't pay much attention to them. He wrought thousands of miracles to convince them that he was a God. Isn't it perfectly wonderful that the priest of one religion never believes the miracle told by the priest of another? Is it possible that they know each other? I heard a story the other day. A gentleman was telling a very remarkable circumstance that happened to himself, and all the listeners except one said, "Is it possible; did you ever hear such a wonderful thing in all your life?" They noticed that this one man didn't appear to take a vivid interest in the story, so one said to him, "You don't express much astonishment at the story?" "No," says he, "I am a liar myself."

I find by reading this book that a worse government was never established than that established by Jehovah; that the Jews were the most unfortunate people who lived upon the globe. In all civilized countries it is not only admitted, but passionately asserted, that slavery is an infamous crime; that a war of extermination is murder; that polygamy enslaves woman, degrades man, and destroys home; that nothing is more infamous than the slaughter of decrepit men and helpless women and of prattling babes; that the captured maiden should not be given to her captors; that wives should not be stoned to death for differing in religion from their husbands. We know there was a time in the history of most nations when all these crimes were regarded as divine institutions. Nations entertaining these views to-day are called savage,

and with the exception of the Fiji Islanders, some tribes in Central Africa, no human being can be found degraded enough to agree upon those subjects with Jehovah.

To-day the fact that a nation has abolished and abandoned those beliefs and practices is the only evidence that it can offer to show that it is not still barbarous. But a believer in the inspiration of the Bible is compelled to say there was a time when slavery was right, when polygamy was the highest form of virtue, when wars of extermination were waged with the sword of mercy, and when the Creator of the whole world commanded the soldier to sheathe the dagger of murder in the dimpled breast of infancy. The believer in inspiration of the Bible is compelled to say there was a time when it was right for a husband to murder his wife because they differed upon subjects of religion. I deny that such a time ever was. If I knew the real God said it, I would still deny it. Four thousand years ago, if the Bible is true, God was in favour of slavery, polygamy, wars of extermination, and religious persecution. Now we are told the devil is in favour of all those things, and God is opposed to them; in other words, the devil stands now where God stood 4000 years ago; yet I am assured God is just as good now as he was then, and the devil just as abominably bad now as God was then. Other nations believed in slavery, polygamy, and war and persecution, without ever having received the ray of light from heaven. That shows that a special revelation is not necessary to teach a man to do wrong. Other nations did no worse without the Bible than the Jews did with it. Suppose the devil had inspired a book. In what respect would he have differed from God on the subject of slavery, polygamy, wars of extermination, and religious persecution? Suppose we knew that after God had finished his book the devil had gotten possession of it, and wrote a few passages to suit himself, which passages, O Christian, would you pick out now as having probably been written by the devil? which of these two, "Love thy neighbour as thyself," or "Kill all the males among the little ones, and kill every man, but all the women and girls keep alive for yourselves,"—which of those two passages would you select

as having been written by the devil ? If God wrote the last, there is no need of a devil.

Is there a Christian in the wide world who does not wish that God, from the thunder and lightning of Sinai, had said : "You shall not enslave your fellow-man" ? But they say God did the best he could ; that the Jews were so bad that he had to come up kind of slow. If he had told them suddenly they must not murder and steal, they would not have paid any respect to the Ten Commandments. Suppose you go to the Cannibal Islands to prevent the gentlemen there from eating missionaries, and you find they ate them raw. The first move is to induce them to cook them. After you get them to eat cooked missionaries, you will then, without their knowing it, occasionally slip in a little mutton. You will go on gradually decreasing missionaries and increasing mutton, until finally the Islanders will be so cultivated that they will prefer the sheep to the priest. I think the missionaries would object to that mode, of course.

I know this book was written by the Jews themselves. If they were to write it to-day it would be different. They are a civilized people. I do not wish it understood that a word I say to-night touches the slightest prejudice in any man's mind against the Jewish people. They are as good a people as live to-day. I will say right here, they never had any luck until Jehovah abandoned them.

Now we come to the New Testament. Theologians claim that is better than the Old. I say it is worse. The great objection to the Old Testament is that it is cruel, but in the Old Testament the revenge of God stopped with the portals of the tomb. He never threatened punishment after death. He never threatened one thing beyond the grave. It was reserved for the New Testament to make known the doctrine of eternal punishment.

Is the New Testament inspired ? I have not time to give many reasons, but I will give some. In the first place it is argued, that the very fact the witnesses disagree in minor matters shows that they have not conspired to tell the same story. Good. And I say in every lawsuit where four or five witnesses testify, or endeavour to testify, to the same thing,

it is natural that they should differ on minor points. Why? Because no two occupy exactly the same position; no two see exactly alike; no two remember precisely the same, and their disagreement is due to and accounted for by the imperfection of human nature, and the fact that they did not all have an equal opportunity to know. But if you admit or say that the four witnesses were inspired by an infinite being who did see it all, then they should remember all the same, because inspiration does not depend on memory.

That brings me to another point. Why were there four gospels? What is the use of more than one correct account of any thing? If you want to spread it send copies. No human being has got the ingenuity to tell me why there were four gospels when one correct gospel would have been enough. Why should there not have been four original multiplication tables? One is enough, and if anybody has got any use for it he can copy that one. The very fact that we have got four gospels shows that the book is not inspired.

The next point is that according to the New Testament the salvation of the world depends upon the atonement. Only one of the books in the New Testament says anything about that, and that is John. The Church followed John, and it ought to follow John, because the Church wrote that book called John. According to that the whole world was to be damned on account of the sins of one man; and that absurdity was the father and mother of another absurdity, that the whole world could be saved on account of the virtue of another man. I deny both propositions. No man can sin for me; no man can be virtuous for me; I must reap what I sow. But they say the law must be satisfied. What kind of a law is it that would demand punishment of the innocent? Just think of it. Here is a man about to be hanged, and another comes up and says: "That man has got a family, and I have not; that man is in good health, and I am not well, and I will be hung in his place." And the Governor says, "All right. There has a murder been committed, and we have got to have a hanging,—we don't care who." Under the Mosaic dispensation there was no remission of sins without the shedding of blood. If a man

committed a murder he brought a pair of doves or a sheep to the priest, and the priest laid his hands on the animal, and the sins of the man were transferred to the animal. You see how that could be done easy enough. Then they killed the animal, and sprinkled its blood on the altar. That let the man off. And why did God demand the sacrifice of a sheep? I will tell you: because priests love mutton. To make the innocent suffer is the greatest crime. I don't wish to go to heaven on the virtues of somebody else. If I can't settle by the books and go, I don't wish to go. I don't want to feel as if I was there on sufferance,—that I was in the poorhouse of the universe, supported by the town.

We are told Judas betrayed Christ. Well, if Christ had not been betrayed no atonement would have been made, and then every human soul, according to the dispensation, would have been damned, and heaven would have been to let. Supposing that Judas knew the Christian system, then perhaps he thought that by betraying Christ he could get forgiven not only for the sins that he had already committed, but for the sin of betrayal, and if, on the way to Calvary, and later, some brave, heroic soul had rescued Christ from the mob, he would have made his own damnation sure. It won't do. There is no logic in that. They say God tried to civilize the Jews. If he had succeeded, according to the Christian system, we all would have been damned, because if the Jews had been civilized they would not have crucified Christ. They would have believed in freedom of speech, and as a result the world would have been lost for 2000 years. The Christian world has been trying to explain the atonement, and they have always ended by failing to explain it.

Now I come to the second objection, which is that a certain belief is necessary to salvation. I will believe according to the evidence. In my mind are certain scales which weigh everything, and my integrity stands there and knows which side goes up and which side goes down. If I am an honest man I will report the weights like an honest man. They say I must believe a certain thing or I will be eternally damned. They tell me that to believe is the safer way. I deny it. The safest thing you can do is to be honest. No man, when the shadows

of the last hours were gathering around him, ever wished that he had lived the life of a hypocrite. If I find at the day of judgment that I have been mistaken, I will say so like a man. If God tells me then that he is the author of the Old Testament, I will admit that he is worse than I thought he was, and when he comes to pronounce sentence upon me I will say to him: do unto others as you would that others should do unto you. I have a right to think, I cannot control my belief; my brain is my castle, and if I don't defend it, my soul becomes a slave and a serf. If you throw away your reason, your soul is not worth saving. Salvation depends not upon belief, but upon deed—upon kindness, upon justice, upon mercy. Your own deeds are your saviour, and you can be saved in no other way. I am told in this Testament to love my enemies. I cannot; I will not. I don't hate enemies; I don't wish to injure enemies, but I don't care about seeing them. I don't like them. I love my friends, and the man who loves enemies and friends loves me. The doctrine of non-resistance is born of weakness. The man that first said it, said it because it was the best he could do under the circumstances. While the Church said love your enemies, in her sacred vestments gleamed the daggers of assassination. With her cunning hand she placed the crown upon the brow of crime. For more than 1000 years larceny held the scales of justice and hypocrisy wore the mitre, and the tiara of Christ. He knew of the future, he knew what crimes and horrors would be committed in his sacred name. He knew the fires of persecution would climb around the limbs of countless martyrs, that brave men and women would languish in dungeons and darkness, that the Church would use instruments of torture, that in his name his followers would trade in human flesh, that cradles would be robbed and women's breasts unbabed for gold, and yet he died with voiceless lips. If Christ was God, why did he not tell his disciples, and through them the world, man shall not persecute his fellow-man? Why didn't he say, "I am God"? why didn't he explain the doctrine of the Trinity? why didn't he tell what manner of baptism was pleasing to him? why didn't he say the Old Testament is true? why didn't he

write his Testament himself? why did he leave his words to accident, to ignorance, to malice, and to chance? Why didn't he say something positive, definite, satisfactory about another world? Why did he not turn the tear-stained hope of immortality to the glad knowledge of another life? Why did he go dumbly to his death, leaving the world to misery and to doubt? Because he was a man.

I care not for salvation hereafter. I contend that no God has a right to create a man who has to be eternally damned. Infinite wisdom has no right to make a failure, and a man that is to be eternally damned is not a conspicuous success. Infinite wisdom has no right to make an instrument that will not finally pay a dividend. No God has a right to add to the agony of this universe, and yet around the angels of immortality Christianity has coiled this serpent of eternal pain. Upon love's breast the Church has placed that asp, and yet talks to me about the consolations of religion.

A few days ago the bark *Tiger* foundered upon the wide sea 126 days from Liverpool. For nine days not a mouthful of food or a drop of water was to be had. There were on board the captain, mate, and eleven men. When they had been out 117 days they killed the captain's dog.

Nine days more—no food, no water. Capt. Kruger stood upon the deck in the presence of his starving crew, with a revolver in his hand; he put it upon his temple, and said, "Boys, this can't last much longer; I am willing to die to save the rest of you." The mate grasped the revolver, and said, wait; and the next day upon the horizon of despair rose the smoke of the ship which rescued them. Do you tell me to-night if Capt. Kruger was not a Christian and he had sent that ball crashing through his generous brain that there was an Almighty waiting to clutch his naked soul that he might damn him for ever?

The fact is we have civilized God. We make our own God, and we make him better day by day. Some honest people really believe that in some wonderful way we are indebted to Moses for geology, to Joshua for astronomy and military tactics, to Samson for weapons of war, to Daniel for holy curses, to Solomon for the art of cross-examination, to Jonah

for the science of navigation, to St Paul for steamships and locomotives, to the four Gospels for telegraphs and sewing-machines, to the Apocalypse for looms, saw-mills, and telephones; and that to the Sermon on the Mount we are indebted for mortars and Krupp guns. We are told that no nation has ever been civilized without a Bible. The Jews had one, and yet they crucified a perfectly innocent man. They couldn't have done much worse without a Bible.

Take from the Bible the barbarities, the absurdities, the miracles, and I admit that the good passages are true. If they are true they don't need to be inspired. Miracles are the children of mendacity. Nothing can be more miraculous than the majestic, sublime, and eternal march of cause and effect. Reason must be the final arbiter. An inspired book cannot stand against a demonstrated fact. Is a man to be rewarded eternally for believing without evidence or against evidence? Do you tell me that the less brain a man has the better chance he has for heaven? Think of a heaven filled with men who never thought. Better that all that is should cease to be; better that God had never been; better that all the springs and seeds of things should fall and wither in great Nature's realm; better that causes and effects should lose relation; better that every life should change to breathless death and voiceless blank, and every star to blind oblivion and moveless naught, than that this religion should be true. The religion of the future is humanity. The religion of the future will say to every man, you have the right to think and investigate for yourself. Liberty is my religion. Everything that is true, every good thought, every beautiful thing, every self-denying action—all these make my Bible. Every bubble, every star, are passages in my Bible. A constellation is a chapter. Every shining world is a part of it. You cannot interpolate it; you cannot change it. It is the same for ever. My Bible is all that speaks to man. Every violet, every blade of grass, every tree, every mountain crowned with snow, every star that shines, every throb of love, every honest act, all that is good and true combined, make my Bible, and upon that book I stand.

Somebody asked Confucius about another world, and his

reply was, "How should I, who know so little about this, know anything about another?" For my part, I know nothing of any other state of existence, either before or after this, and I have never become personally acquainted with anybody that did. There may be another life, and if there is, the best way to prepare for it is by making somebody happy in this. God certainly cannot afford to put a man in hell who has made a little heaven in this world. I propose simply to take my chance with the rest of the folks, and prepare to go where the people I am best acquainted with will probably settle. I can't afford to leave the great ship and sneak off to shore in some orthodox canoe. I hope there is another life, for I would like to see how things come out in this world when I am dead. There are some people I would like to see again, and hope there are some who would not object to seeing me; but if there is no other life I shall never know it. I don't remember the time when I did not exist; and if, when I die, that is the end, I shall not know, because the last thing I will know is that I am alive, and if nothing is left, nothing will be left to know that I am dead; so that, so far as I am concerned, I am immortal; that is to say, I can't recollect when I did not exist, and there never will be a time when I will remember that I do not exist. Our hope of immortality does not come from any religion, but nearly all religions come from that hope. The Old Testament, instead of telling us that we are immortal, tells us how we lost immortality. You will recollect that if Adam and Eve could have gotten to the tree of life, they would have eaten of its fruit and would have lived for ever; but for the purpose of preventing immortality God turned them out of the Garden of Eden, and put certain angels with swords or sabres at the gate to keep them from getting back. The Old Testament proves, if it proves anything, which I do not think it does, that there is no life after this; and the New Testament is not very specific on the subject.

Since hanging has got to be a means of grace, I would prefer hell. I had a thousand times rather associate with the Pagan philosophers than with the inquisitors of the Middle Ages. I certainly should prefer the worst man in Greek or

Roman History to John Calvin ; and I can imagine no men in the world that I would not rather sit on the same bench with than the Puritan fathers and the founders of orthodox churches. I would trade off my harp any minute for a seat in the other country. All the poets will be in perdition, and the greatest thinkers, and, I should think, most of the women whose society would tend to increase the happiness of man ; nearly all the painters, nearly all the sculptors, nearly all the writers of plays, nearly all the great actors, most of the best musicians, and nearly all the good fellows—the persons who know stories, who can sing songs, or who will loan a friend a dollar. They will mostly all be in that country, and if I did not live there permanently, I certainly would want it so I could spend my winter months there. But, after all, what I really want to do is to destroy the idea of eternal punishment. That doctrine subverts all ideas of justice. That doctrine fills hell with honest men, and heaven with intellectual and moral paupers. That doctrine allows people to sin on a credit. That doctrine allows the basest to be eternally happy, and the most honourable to suffer eternal pain. I think of all doctrines it is the most infinitely infamous, and would disgrace the lowest savage ; and any man who believes it, and has imagination enough to understand it, has the heart of a serpent and the conscience of a hyena.

I am afraid that the old hell is cooling off, and that many Christians are slowly giving up the consolations naturally springing from the old belief. Another terrible blow to the old infamy is the fact that in the revised New Testament the consoling word "hell" has been left out. I am informed that in the revised New Testament the word Hades has been substituted. As nobody knows exactly what Hades means, it will not be quite so easy to frighten people at revivals by threatening them with something that they don't clearly understand. After this, when the impassioned orator cries out that all the unconverted will be sent to Hades, the poor sinners, instead of getting frightened, will begin to ask each other what and where that is. It will take many years of preaching to clothe that word in all the terrors and horrors, pains and penalties, and pangs of hell.

Hades is a compromise. It is concession to the philosophy of our day. It is a graceful acknowledgment to the growing spirit of investigation that hell, after all, is a barbaric mistake. Hades is the death of revivals. It cannot be used in song. It won't rhyme with anything with the same force that hell does. It is altogether more shadowy than hot. It is not associated with brimstone and flame. It sounds somewhat indistinct, somewhat lonesome,—a little desolate, but not altogether uncomfortable. For revival purposes, Hades is simply useless, and few conversions will be made in the old way under the revised Testament.

It is said a negation is a poor thing to die by. I would just as lief die by that as the opposite. The murderer dies with courage and firmness in many instances, but that does not make me think that it sanctifies his crime ; in fact, it makes no impression upon me one way or the other. When a man through old age or infirmity approaches death the intellectual faculties are dimmed, his senses become less active, and as he loses these he goes back to his old superstition. Old age brings back the memories of childhood. And the great bard gave even in the corrupt and besotted Falstaff—who prattled of babbling brooks and green fields—an instance of the retracing steps taken by the memory at the last gasp. It has been said that the Bible was sanctified by our mothers. Every superstition in the world, from the beginning of all time, has had such a sanctification. The Turk dying on the Russian battle-field pressing the Koran to his bosom, breathes his last thinking of the loving adjuration of his mother to guard it. Every superstition has been rendered sacred by the love of a mother. I know what it has cost the noble and the brave to throw to the winds these superstitions.

But I perceive the intimations of the dawn of Freedom in the morning sky ; and the "free man thinks of nothing so little as of death."