

B2744

N388  
Ingersoll, Robert Green

## NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

### REPAIRING THE IDOLS.

---

MRS. HUMPHREY WARD'S *Robert Elsmere* is no less eagerly read in America than in England. The press teems with criticisms, and the pulpits are discussing the novel as though it were a theological treatise by an eminent divine. In view of this widespread interest, the *New York World* sent a reporter to wait on Colonel Ingersoll, whose views on religion are considered of the highest importance. He commands an immense audience in America. His lectures are listened to by thousands wherever he goes, his pamphlets are circulated wholesale, and his brilliant defence of Free-thought against Mr. Gladstone and Cardinal Manning has, if possible, placed him still higher in the public esteem. Colonel Ingersoll received the *World* reporter with his usual affability, and launched forth as follows in answer to leading questions.

---

“Why do people read a book like *Robert Elsmere*, and why do they take any interest in it?” Simply because they are not satisfied with the religion of our day. The civilised world has outgrown the greater

part of the Christian creed. Civilised people have lost their belief in the reforming power of punishment. They find that whips and imprisonment have but little influence for good. The truth has dawned upon their minds that eternal punishment is infinite cruelty—that it can serve no good purpose, and that the eternity of hell makes heaven impossible. That there can be in this universe no perfectly happy place while there is a perfectly miserable place—that no infinite being can be good who knowingly and, as one may say, wilfully created myriads of human beings, knowing that they would be eternally miserable. In other words, the civilised man is greater, tenderer, nobler, nearer just than the old idea of God. The ideal of a few thousand years ago is far below the real of to-day. No good man now would do what Jehovah is said to have done four thousand years ago, and no civilised human being would now do what, according to the Christian religion, Christ threatens to do at the day of judgment.

*Has the Christian religion changed in theory of late years, Colonel Ingersoll?*

A few years ago the Deists denied the inspiration of the Bible on account of its cruelty. At the same time they worshipped what they were pleased to call the God of Nature. Now we are convinced that nature is as cruel as the Bible, so that, if the God of Nature did not write the Bible, this god at least has caused earthquakes and pestilence and famine, and this god has allowed millions of his children to destroy one another. So that now we have arrived at the question—not as to whether the Bible is inspired, and not as to whether Jehovah is the real God, but whether there is a God or

not. The intelligence of Christendom to-day does not believe in an inspired religion any more than it believes in an inspired art or an inspired literature. If there be an infinite God, inspiration in some particular regard would be a patch—it would be the putting of a crack, the hiding of a defect—in other words, it would show that the general plan was defective.

*Do you consider any religion adequate?*

A good man, living in England, drawing a certain salary for reading certain prayers on stated occasions, for making a few remarks on the subject of religion, putting on clothes of a certain cut, wearing a gown with certain frills and flounces starched in an orthodox manner, and then looking about him at the suffering and agony of the world, would not feel satisfied that he was doing anything of value to the human race. In the first place, he would deplore his own weakness, his own poverty, his inability to help his fellow men. He would long every moment for wealth, that he might feed the hungry and clothe the naked—for knowledge, for miraculous power, that he might heal the sick and the lame, and that he might give to the deformed the beauty of proportion. He would begin to wonder how a being of infinite goodness and infinite power could allow his children to die, to suffer, to be deformed by necessity, by poverty, to be tempted beyond resistance; how he could allow the few to live in luxury and the many in poverty and want, and the more he wondered the more useless and ironical would seem to himself his sermons and his prayers. Such a man is driven to the conclusion that religion accomplishes but little; that it creates as much want as it

alleviates, and that it burdens the world with parasites. Such a man would be forced to think of the millions wasted in superstition. In other words, the inadequacy, the uselessness, of religion would be forced upon his mind. He would ask himself the question: "Is it possible that this is a divine institution? Is this all that man can do with the assistance of God? Is this the best?"

*That is a perfectly reasonable question, is it not, Colonel Ingersoll?*

The moment a man reaches the point where he asks himself this question he has ceased to be an orthodox Christian. It will not do to say that in some other world justice will be done. If God allows injustice to triumph here, why not there?

Robert Elsmere stands in the dawn of philosophy. There is hardly light enough for him to see clearly; but there is so much light that the stars in the night of superstition are obscured.

*You do not deny that a religious belief is a great comfort?*

There is one thing that it is impossible for me to comprehend. Why should anyone, when convinced that Christianity is a superstition, have or feel a sense of loss? Certainly a man acquainted with England, with London, having at the same time something like a heart, must feel overwhelmed by the failure of what is known as Christianity. Hundreds of thousands exist there without decent food, dwelling in tenements, clothed with rags, familiar with every form of vulgar vice, where the honest poor eat the crust that the

vicious throw away. When this man of intelligence, of heart, visits the courts; when he finds human liberty a thing treated as of no value, and when he hears the judge sentencing girls and boys to the penitentiary—knowing that a stain is being put upon them that all the tears of all the coming years can never wash away—knowing, too, and feeling that this is done without the slightest regret, without the slightest sympathy, as a mere matter of form, and that the judge puts this brand of infamy upon the forehead of the convict just as cheerfully as a Mexican brands his cattle; and when this man of intelligence and heart knows that these poor people are simply the victims of society, the unfortunates who stumble and over whose body rolls the Juggernaut—he knows that there is, or at least appears to be, no power above or below working for righteousness—that from the heavens is stretched no protecting hand. And when a man of intelligence and heart in England visits the workhouse, the last resting place of honest labor; when he thinks that the young man, without any great intelligence but with a good constitution, starts in the morning of his life for the workhouse, and that it is impossible for the laboring man, one who simply has his muscle, to save anything; that health is not able to lay anything by for the days of disease—when the man of intelligence and heart sees all this, he is compelled to say that the civilisation of to-day, the religion of to-day, the charity of to-day—no matter how much of good there may be behind them or in them—are failures.

A few years ago people were satisfied when the minister said: "All this will be made even in another

world; a crust-eater here will sit at the head of the banquet there, and the king here will beg for the crumbs that fall from the table there." When this was said the poor man hoped and the king laughed. A few years ago the Church said to the slave: "You will be free in another world and your freedom will be made glorious by the perpetual spectacle of your master in hell." But the people—that is, many of the people—are no longer deceived by what once were considered fine phrases. They have suffered so much that they no longer wish to see others suffer, and no longer think of the suffering of others as a source of joy to themselves. The poor see that the eternal starvation of kings and queens in another world will be no compensation for what they have suffered here. The old religions appear vulgar, and the ideas of rewards and punishments are only such as would satisfy a cannibal chief or one of his favorites.

*Do you think the Christian religion has made the world better?*

For many centuries there has been preached and taught in an almost infinite number of ways a supernatural religion. During all this time the world has been in the care of the infinite, and yet every imaginable vice has flourished, every imaginable pang has been suffered, and every injustice has been done. During all these years the priests have enslaved the minds and the kings the bodies of men. The priests did what they did in the name of God, and the kings appealed to the same source of authority. Man suffered as long as he could. Revolution, reformation, was simply a reaction, a cry from the poor wretch that was

between the upper and the nether millstone. The liberty of man has increased just in the proportion that the authority of the gods has decreased. In other words the wants of man, instead of the wishes of God, have, inaugurated what we call progress, and there is this difference: Theology is based upon the narrowest and intensest form of selfishness. Of course, the theologian knows, the Christian knows, that he can do nothing for God; consequently all that he does must be and is for himself, his object being to win the approbation of this God, to the end that he may become a favorite. On the other side, men touched not only by their own misfortunes but by the misfortunes of others are moved not simply by selfishness but by a splendid sympathy with their fellow men.

*“Christianity certainly fosters charity,” the reporter suggested.*

Nothing is more cruel than orthodox theology, nothing more heartless than a charitable institution. For instance, in England, think for a moment of the manner in which charities are distributed, the way in which the crust is flung at Lazarus. If that parable could be now retold, the dogs would bite him. The same is true in this country. The institution has nothing but contempt for the one it relieves. The people in charge regard the pauper as one who has wrecked himself. They feel very much as a man would feel rescuing from the water some hare-brained wretch who had endeavored to swim the rapids of Niagara—the moment they reach him they begin to upbraid him for being such a fool. This course makes charity a hypocrite, with every pauper for its enemy.

Mrs. Ward compelled Robert Elsmere to perceive, in some slight degree, the failure of Christianity to do away with vice and suffering, with poverty and crime. We know that the rich care but little for the poor. No matter how religious the rich may be, the sufferings of their fellows have but little effect upon them. We are also beginning to see that what is called charity will never redeem this world. The poor man willing to work, eager to maintain his independence, knows that there is something higher than charity—that is to say, justice. He finds that many years before he was born his country was divided out between certain successful robbers, flatterers, cringers, and crawlers, and that in consequence of such division not only himself but a large majority of his fellow men are tenants, renters, occupying the surface of the earth only at the pleasure of others. He finds, too, that these people who have done nothing and who do nothing have everything, and that those who do everything have but little. He finds that idleness has the money and that the toilers are compelled to bow to the idlers. He finds also that the young men of genius are bribed by social distinctions—unconsciously it may be, but still bribed in a thousand ways. He finds that the church is a kind of waste-basket into which are thrown the younger sons of titled idleness.

*Do you consider that society in general has been made better by religious influence?*

Society is corrupted because the laurels, the titles, are in the keeping and within the gift of the corrupters. Christianity is not an enemy of this system—it is in



harmony with it. Christianity reveals to us a universe presided over by an infinite autocrat—a universe without republicanism, without democracy—a universe where all power comes from one and the same source, and where everyone using authority is accountable, not to the people, but to this supposed source of authority. Kings reign by divine right. Priests are ordained in a divinely-appointed way—they do not get their office from man. Man is their servant, not their master.

In the story of Robert Elsmere all there is of Christianity is left after an excision of the miraculous. Theism remains, and the idea of a protecting providence is left, together with a belief in the immeasurable superiority of Jesus Christ. That is to say, the miracles are discarded for lack of evidence; not on the ground that they are impossible, not on the ground that they impeach and deny the integrity of cause and effect, not on the ground that they contradict the self-evident proposition that an effect must have an efficient cause, but like the Scotch verdict: "Not proven." It is an effort to save and keep in repair the dungeons of the Inquisition for the sake of the beauty of the vines that have overrun them. Many people imagine that falsehoods may become respectable on account of age, that a certain reverence goes with antiquity, and that if a mistake is covered with the moss of sentiment, it is altogether more credible than a parvenu fact. They endeavor to introduce the idea of aristocracy into the world of thought, believing, and honestly believing, that a falsehood long believed is far superior to a truth that is generally denied.

*If Robert Elsmere's views were commonly adopted, what would be the effect?*

The new religion of Elsmere is, after all, only a system of outdoor relief, an effort to get successful piracy to give up a larger percentage for the relief of its victims. The abolition of the system is not dreamed of. A civilised minority could not by any possibility be happy while a majority of the world were miserable; a civilised majority could not be happy while a minority were miserable. As a matter of fact, a civilised world could not be happy while one man was really miserable. At the foundation of civilisation is justice—that is to say, the giving of an equal opportunity to all the children of men.

Secondly, there can be no civilisation in the highest sense until sympathy becomes universal. We must have a new definition for success. We must have new ideals. The man who succeeds in amassing wealth, who gathers money for himself, is not a success. It is an exceedingly low ambition to be rich, to excite the envy of others, or for the sake of the vulgar power it gives to triumph over others. Such men are failures. So the man who wins fame, position, power, and wins these for the sake of himself, and wields this power not for the elevation of his fellow men, but simply to control, is a miserable failure: He may dispense thousands or millions in charity, and his charity may be prompted by the meanest part of his nature—using it simply as a bait to catch more fish, and to prevent the rising tide of indignation that might overwhelm him. Men who steal millions and then give a small percentage to the Lord to gain the praise of the clergy, and to bring the

salvation of their souls within the possibilities of imagination, are all failures.

Robert Elsemere gains our affection and our applause to the extent that he gives up what are known as orthodox views, and his wife Catharine retains our respect in the proportion that she lives the doctrine that Elsmere preaches. By doing what she believes to be right, she gains our forgiveness for her creed. One is astonished that she can be as good as she is, believing as she does. The utmost stretch of her intellectual charity is to allow the old wine to be put in a new bottle, and yet she regrets the absence of the old bottle—she really believes that the bottle is the important thing—that the wine is but a secondary consideration. She misses the label, and not having perfect confidence in her own taste, she does not feel quite sure that the wine is genuine.

*What, on the whole, is your judgment of the book?*

I think the book conservative. It is an effort to save something—a few shreds and patches and ravellings—from the wreck. Theism is difficult to maintain. Why should we expect an infinite being to do better in another world than he has done and is doing in this? If he allows the innocent to suffer here, why not there? If he allows rascality to succeed in this world, why not in the next? To believe in God and to deny his personality is an exceedingly vague foundation for a consolation. If you insist on his personality and power, then it is impossible to account for what happens. Why should an infinite God allow some of his children to enslave others? Why should he allow a child of

his to burn another child of his, under the impression that such a sacrifice was pleasing to him?

Unitarianism lacks the motive power. Orthodox people who insist that nearly everybody is going to hell, and that it is their duty to do what little they can to save their souls, have what you might call a spur to action. We can imagine a philanthropic man engaged in the business of throwing ropes to persons about to go over the falls of Niagara, but we can hardly think of his carrying on the business after becoming convinced that there are no falls, or that people go over them in perfect safety. In this country the question has come up whether all the heathen are bound to be damned unless they believe in the Gospel. Many admit that the heathen will be saved if they are good people, and that they will not be damned for not believing something that they never heard. The really orthodox people—that is to say, the missionaries—instantly see that this doctrine destroys their business. They take the ground that there is but one way to be saved—you must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ—and they are willing to admit—and to cheerfully admit, that the heathen for many generations have gone in an unbroken column down to eternal wrath.

---