

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

TRUE RELIGION

BY

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Price Twopence.

LONDON:
PROGRESSIVE PUBLISHING COMPANY
28 STONECUTTER STREET, E.C.

1892.

INTRODUCTION.

ON Thursday evening, January 14, 1892, the Unitarian Club of New York, held its annual dinner at Sherry's. Colonel Ingersoll was one of the guests, and in response to the toast of "The Ideal," he delivered a speech which was reported verbatim in the next day's *Evening Telegram*, and is here reproduced without alteration or addition.

TRUE RELIGION.

MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES, AND GENTLEMEN,—

In the first place, I wish to tender my thanks to this club for having generosity and sense enough to invite me to speak this evening. (Laughter.) It is probably the best thing the club has ever done. (Renewed laughter.) You have shown that you are not afraid of a man simply because he does not happen to agree entirely with you—(applause)—although in a very general way it may be said that I come within one of you. (Continued laughter.)

So I think not only that you have honored me—that I most cheerfully and gratefully admit—but, upon my word, I think that you have honored yourselves. (Laughter and applause.) And imagine the distance the religious world has travelled in the last few years to make a thing of this kind possible! (Applause.) You know—I presume everyone of you knows—that I have no religion, not enough to last a minute—(laughter)—none whatever—that is, in the ordinary sense of that word. And yet you have become so nearly civilised—(a smile)—that you are willing to hear what I have to say; and I have become so nearly civilised—(audible smiles)—that I am willing to say what I like. (Laughter and applause.)

RESPECT FOR UNITARIANS.

And, in the second place, let me say that I have great respect for the Unitarian Church. (Applause.) I have great respect for the memory of Theodore Parker. (Renewed applause.) I have great respect for every man who has assisted in reaving the heavens of an infinite monster. (Repeated applause.) I have great respect for every man who has helped to put out the fires of hell. (Loud applause.) In other words, I have great respect for every man who has tried to civilise my race. (Applause.)

The Unitarian Church has done more than any other church—and maybe more than all other churches—to substi-

tute character for creed—(applause)—and to say that a man should be judged by his spirit, by the climate of his heart, by the autumn of his generosity, by the spring of his hope; that he should be judged by what he does, by the influence that he exerts rather than by the mythology he may believe. (Loud applause.) And, whether there be one God or a million, I am perfectly satisfied that every duty that devolves upon me is within my reach. (Continued applause.) It is something that I can do myself, without the help of anybody else, either in this world or any other. (Great applause.)

BELIEVE IN A GOD WHO IS A GENTLEMAN.

Now, in order to make myself plain on this subject—I think I was to speak about the Ideal—I want to thank the Unitarian Church for what it has done, and I want to thank the Universalist Church too. (Applause.) They at least believe in a God who is a gentleman—(laughter and applause)—that is much—more than was ever done by an orthodox church. (Applause.) They believe at least in a heavenly father who will leave the latchstring out until the last child gets home—(applause and laughter)—and as that lets me in—especially the reference to the “last”—I have great respect for that church. (Applause.)

THE STANDARD IS HIS REASON.

But, now I am coming to the Ideal; and in what I may say you may not all agree. I hope you won't —(laughter),—because that would be to me evidence that I am wrong. You cannot expect everybody to agree in the right, and I cannot expect to be really in the right myself. (Continued laughter.) I have to judge with the standard called my reason, and I do not know whether it is right or not; I will admit that. (Prolonged laughter.) But, as opposed to any other man's, I will bet on mine. (Great laughter.) That is to say, for home use. (Laughter and applause.) In the first place, I think it is said in some book—and if I am wrong there are plenty here to correct me—that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” I think a knowledge of the limitations of the human mind is the beginning of wisdom, and, I may almost say, the end of it—to really understand yourself. (Applause.)

Now, let me lay down this proposition No. 1:—The imagination of man has the horizon of experience; and

beyond experience or nature man cannot go, even in imagination. Man is not a creator. He combines; he adds together; he divides; he subtracts; he does not create, even in the world of imagination. Let me make myself a little plainer:—Not one here—not one in the wide, wide world—can think of a color that he never saw. No human being can imagine a sound that he has not heard, and no one can think of a taste that he has not experienced. He can add to—that is, add together—combine; but he cannot, by any possibility, create.

EVERY MAN AN IDEALIST.

Man originally, we will say—go back to the age of barbarism—and you need not go far—(laughter):—our own childhood, probably, is as far as is necessary; but go back to what is called the age of savagery. Every man was an idealist, as every man is to-day an idealist. Every man in savage or civilised time, commencing with the first that ever crawled out of a cave and pushed the hair back from his forehead to look at the sun—commence with him and end with Judge Wright—the last expression on the god question—and from that cave to the soul that lives in this temple everyone has been an idealist and has endeavored to account in some way for what he saw and for what he felt; in other words, for the phenomena of nature.

The cheapest way to account for it by the rudest savage is the very way it has been accounted for to-night. What makes the river run? There's a god in it. What makes the tree grow? There's a god in it. There's god in the tree? What makes the stars shine? There's a god in it. What makes the sun rise? Why, he's a god himself—(laughter);—and the moon. And what makes the nightingale sing until the air is faint with melody? There's a god in it.

GODS OF MANY KINDS.

They commenced making gods to account for everything that happens—gods of dreams and gods of love and friendship, and wars and heroism and courage. Splendid! They kept making more and more. The more they found out in Nature, up to a certain point, the more gods they needed; and they kept on making gods until almost every wave of the

sea bore a god. Gods on every mountain, and in every vale and field, and by every stream! Gods in flowers, gods in grass; gods everywhere! All accounting for this world, and for what happened in this world.

Then, when they had got about to the top, when their ingenuity had been exhausted, they had not produced anything, and they did not produce anything beyond their own experience. We are told that they were idolators. That is a mistake, except in the sense that we are all idolators. They said, "Here is a god; let us express our idea of him. He is stronger than a man is; let us give him the body of a lion. He is swifter than a man is; let us give him the wings of an eagle. He is wiser than a man is"—and when man was very savage he said, "Let us give him the head of a serpent. A serpent is wonderfully wise; he travels without feet; he climbs without claws; he lives without food, and he is of the simplest conceivable form."

REPRESENTED THEIR IDEAS.

And that was simply to represent their idea of power, of swiftness, of wisdom. And yet this impossible monster was simply made of what man had seen in Nature, and he put the various attributes or parts together by his imagination. He created nothing. He simply took these parts of certain beasts, when beasts were supposed to be superior to man in some particulars, and in that way expressed his thought.

You go into the Territory of Arizona to-day, and you will find there pictures of God. He was clothed in stone, through which no arrow could pierce, and so they called God the Stone-Shirted, whom no Indian could kill. That was for the simple and only reason that it was impossible to get an arrow through his armor. They got the idea from the armadillo.

Now, I am simply saying this to show that they were making gods for all these centuries, and making them out of something they found in nature. Then, after they got through with the beast business, they made gods after the image of man. And they are the best gods, so far as I know, that have been made.

The gods that were first made after the image of man were not made after the pattern of very good men; but they were good men according to the standard of that time, because, as I will show you in a moment, all these things are

relative. The qualities or things that we call mercy, justice, charity and religion are all relative. There was a time when the victor on the field of battle was exceedingly merciful if he failed to eat his prisoner; he was regarded as a very charitable gentleman if he refused to eat the man he had captured in battle. (Laughter.) Afterward he was regarded as an exceedingly benevolent person if he would spare a prisoner's life and make him a slave.

GODS BEGAN TO DIE.

So that—but you all know it as well as I do, or you wouldn't be Unitarians—all this has been simply a growth from year to year, from generation to generation, from age to age. And let me tell you the first thing about these gods that they made after the image of men. After a time there were real men on the earth who were better than these gods in heaven. (Applause.)

Then those gods began to die, one after another, and dropped from their thrones. The time will probably come in the history of this world when an insurance company can calculate the average life of gods as well as they do now of men. (Laughter and applause.) Exactly! because all these gods have been made by folks. And, let me say right here, the folks did the best they could. I do not blame them. (Laughter.) Everybody in the business has always done his best. (Laughter.) I admit it. (Renewed laughter.) I admit that man has travelled from the first conception up to Unitarianism by a necessary road. Under the conditions he could have come up in no other way. I admit all that. I blame nobody. (Laughter.) But I am simply trying to tell, in a very feeble manner, how it is.

Now, in a little while, I say, men got better than their gods. Then the gods began to die. Then we began to find out a few things in nature, and we found out that we were supporting more gods than were necessary—that fewer gods could do the business—(laughter)—and that, from an economical point of view, expenses ought to be cut down. (Renewed laughter and applause.) There were too many temples, too many priests, and you always had to give tithes of something to each one, and these gods were about to eat up the substance of the world.

And there came a time when it got to that point that either the gods would eat up the people or the people must destroy some gods, and of course they destroyed the gods—one by one—and in their places they put Forces of Nature to do the business—Forces of Nature that needed no church, that needed no theologians. Forces of Nature that you are under no obligation to; that you do not have to pay anything to keep working. (Laughter.) We found that the attraction of gravitation would attend to its business, night and day, at its own expense. (Laughter and applause.) There was a great saving. (Laughter.) I wish it was the same with all kinds of law, so that we could all go into some useful business, including myself. (Renewed laughter.)

A HIT AT PRESBYTERIANS.

I say they found this. So, day by day, they dispensed with this expense of deities; and the world got along just as well—a good deal better. (Laughter.) They used to think—a community thought—that if a man was allowed to say a word against a deity that the God would visit his vengeance upon the entire nation. But they found out, after awhile, that no harm came of it; so they went on destroying the gods. Now all these things are relative; and they made gods a little better all the time—I admit that—till we struck the Presbyterian, which is probably the worst ever made. The Presbyterians seem to have bred back. (Laughter and applause.)

But no matter. As man became more just, or nearer just; as he became more charitable, or nearer charitable—his god grew to be a little better and a little better. He was very bad in Geneva—the three that we then had. They were very bad in Scotland—horrible! Very bad in New England—infamous! (Laughter.) Might as well tell the truth about it—very bad! And then men went to work, finally, to civilise their gods, to civilise heaven, to give heaven the benefit of freedom of this brave world. That's what we did. (Laughter and applause.) We wanted to civilise religion—civilise what is known as Christianity. And nothing on earth needed civilisation more; and nothing needs it more than that to-night. (Applause.) Civilisation! I am not so much for the freedom of religion as I am for the religion of freedom. (Applause.)

Now there was a time when our ancestors—good people, away back, all dead, no great regret expressed at this meeting on that account—there was a time when our ancestors were happy in their belief that nearly everybody was to be lost, and that a few, including themselves, were to be saved. (Laughter and applause.) That religion, I say, fitted that time. It fitted their geology. It was a very good running mate for their astronomy. (Laughter.) It was a good match for their chemistry. (Renewed laughter.) In other words they were about equal in every department of human ignorance. (Laughter.)

And they insisted that there lived up there somewhere—generally up—exactly where nobody has, I believe, yet seen a Being—an infinite person “without body, parts or passions.” And yet without passions he was angry at the wicked every day. Without body he inhabited a certain place, and without parts he was, after all, in some strange and miraculous manner, organised, so that he thought.

A GOOD SERVANT.

And I don't know that it is possible for any one here—I don't know that any one here is gifted with imagination enough to conceive of such a Being. Our fathers had not imagination enough to do so, at least, and so they said of this God that he loves and he hates; he punishes and he rewards; and that religion has been described perfectly to-night by Judge Wright as really making God a monster and men poor hopeless victims. And the highest possible conception of the orthodox man was, finally, to be a good servant—just lucky enough to get in—feathers somewhat singed, but enough left to fly. That was the idea of our fathers. And then came these divisions, simply because men began to think.

And why did they begin to think? Because in every direction, in all departments, they were getting more and more information. And then the religion did not fit. When they found out something of the history of this globe they found out that the scriptures were not true. I will not say not inspired, because I do not know whether they are inspired or not. It is a question, to one, of no possible importance, whether they are inspired or not. The question is, “Are they true?” If they are true, they do not need inspiration;

and if they are not true inspiration will not help them. So that is a matter that I care nothing about.

On every hand, I say, they studied and thought. They began to grow—to have new ideas of mercy, kindness, justice; new ideas of duty—new ideas of life. The old gods, after we got past the civilisation of the Greeks—past their mythology, and it is the best mythology that man has ever made—the best (after we got past that), I say—the gods cared very little about women. Woman occupied no place in the state—no place by the hearth, except one of subordination, and almost of slavery. So the early churches made God after that image who held women in contempt. It was only natural (I am not blaming anybody)—they had to do it, it was part of the *must!* (Laughter.)

THE COLONEL'S TROUBLE.

Now, I say that we have advanced up to the point that we demand, not only intelligence, but justice and mercy, in the sky; we demand that—that idea of God. (Applause.) Then comes my trouble—my trouble. I want to be honest about it. Here is my trouble—and I want it also understood that if I should see a man praying to a stone image or to a stuffed serpent, with that man's wife or daughter or son lying at the point of death, and that poor savage on his knees imploring that image or that stuffed serpent to save his child or his wife, there is nothing in my heart that could suggest the slightest scorn, or any other feeling than of sympathy—any other feeling than that of grief that the stuffed serpent could not answer the prayer and that the stone image did not feel. I want that understood. (Applause.) And wherever man prays for the right—no matter to whom or to what he prays; where he prays for strength to conquer the wrong, I hope his prayer may be heard; and if I think there is no one to hear it I will hear it, and I am willing to help answer it to the extent of my power. (Loud applause.)

So I want it distinctly understood that that is my feeling. But here is my trouble:—I find this world made on a very cruel plan. I do not say it is wrong—I just say that it is the way it seems to me. I may be wrong myself, because this is the only world I was ever in; I am provincial. This grain of sand and tear they call the Earth is the only world I have ever lived in. And you have no idea how little I know about

the rest of this universe; and you never will know how little I know about it until you examine your own minds on the same subject. (Laughter.)

HIS HOPE.

The plan is this:—Life feeds on life. Justice does not always triumph. Innocence is not a perfect shield. There is my trouble; there is my trouble. No matter, now, whether you agree with me or not; I beg of you to be honest and fair with me in your thought as I am towards you in mine. That is my trouble.

I hope, as devoutly as you, that there is a power somewhere in this universe that will finally bring everything as it should be. I take a little consolation in the “perhaps”—in the guess that this is only one scene of a great drama, and that when the curtain rises on the fifth act, if I live that long, I may see the coherence and the relation of things. But, up to the present writing—or speaking—I do not. I do not understand it—a God that has life feed on life; every joy in the world born of some agony! I do not understand why in this world, over the Niagara of cruelty, should run this flood of blood. I do not understand it. (Applause.) And, then—why does not justice always triumph? Why is not innocence a perfect shield? These are my troubles.

Suppose a man had control of the atmosphere, knew enough of the secrets of nature, had read enough in “Nature’s Infinite Book of Secrecy” so that he could control the rain and wind; suppose a man had that power, and suppose that last year he kept the rain from Russia and did not allow the crops to ripen, when hundreds of thousands are famishing and when little babes are found with their lips on the breasts of dead mothers! What would you think of such a man? Now, there is my trouble. If there be a God, he understood this. He knew when he withheld his rain that the famine would come. He saw the dead mothers, he saw the empty breasts of death and he saw the helpless babes. There is my trouble. I am perfectly frank with you, and honest. That is my trouble.

Now, understand me. I do not say there is no God. I do not know. As I told you before, I have travelled but very little—only in this world.

There was a missionary went to the Indians and talked to

them awhile, and one Indian, I thought, made quite a remark. He took a stick and made a little circle in the sand, and he said, "That is what Indian knows." Then he made a larger circle around that and said, "That is what white man knows." But out here—outside of the circles—Indian knows just as much as white man. (Laughter and applause.)

HE DON'T KNOW.

I want it understood that I do not pretend to know. I say I think. And to my mind the idea expressed by Judge Wright so eloquently and so beautifully is not exactly true. I cannot conceive of the God he endeavors to describe, because he gives to that God will, purpose, achievement, benevolence, love, and no form—no organisation—no wants. There's the trouble. No wants! And let me say why that is a trouble—anybody can move to adjourn now at any moment—(laughter)—I will tell you why that is a trouble. Man acts only because he wants. You civilise man by increasing his wants, or as his wants increase he becomes civilised. You find a lazy savage who would not hunt an elephant tusk to save your life. But let him have a few tastes of whiskey and tobacco, and he will run his legs off for tusks. (Laughter.) You have given him another want and he is willing to work. (Renewed laughter.) And they nearly all started on the road toward Unitarianism—that is to say, toward civilisation—in that way. You must increase their wants. (Applause.)

The question arises, "Can an infinite being want anything?" If he does, and cannot get it, he is not happy. If he does not want anything, I cannot help him. I am under no obligation to do anything for anybody who does not need anything and who does not want anything. Now, there is my trouble. I may be wrong, and I may get paid for it some time—(laughter)—but that is my trouble.

I do not see—admitting that all is true that has been said about the existence of God—I do not see what I can do for him; and I do not see either (I give my word of honor) what he can do for me, judging by what he has done for others. I do not.

And then I come to the other point, that religion so called explains our duties to this supposed being, and we do not even know that he exists, and no human being has got ima-

gination enough to describe him, or to use such words that you understand what he is trying to say. I have listened with great pleasure to Judge Wright this evening, and I have heard a great many other beautiful things on the same subject—none better than his. But I never understood them—never. (Laughter.)

WHAT IS RELIGION?

Now then, what is religion? I say religion is all here in this world—right here—and that all our duties are right here to our fellow men; that the man that builds a home, marries the girl that he loves, takes good care of her; likes the family; stays home nights as a general thing; pays his debts; tries to find out what he can; gets all the ideas and beautiful things that his mind will hold; turns a part of his brain into a gallery of the fine arts: has a host of statues there and paintings; then has another niche devoted to music; a magnificent dome, filled with winged notes that rise to glory. Now the man who does that gets all he can from the great ones dead; swaps all the thoughts he can with the ones that are alive; true to the ideal that he has got here in his brain, he is what I call a religious man, because he makes the world better, happier; he puts the dimples of joy in the cheeks of the one he loves, and he lets the gods run heaven to suit themselves. (Great laughter and applause.)

And I am not saying that he is right; I do not know. (Laughter.)

That is all the religion that I have. It is to make somebody else happier if I can. I do not mean to take any great trouble about it, but if I can do it easily—(prolonged laughter)—that, it seems to me, is all there is of real religion.

I divide this world into two classes—the cruel and the kind; and I think a thousand times more of a kind man than I do simply of an intelligent man. I think more of kindness than I do of genius. I think more of real good human nature in that way—of one who is willing to lend a helping hand and who goes through the world with a face that looks like its owner was willing to answer a decent question—I think a thousand times more of that than I do of being theologically right; because I do not care whether I am theologically right or not. (Laughter.) It is something that is not worth talking about, because it is something that I never, never,

never will understand; and every one of you will die and you won't understand it, either—until after you die, at any rate. I do not know what will happen then.

THE DREAM OF IMMORTALITY.

I am not denying anything. There is another ideal, and it is a beautiful ideal. It is the greatest dream that ever entered the heart or brain of man—the Dream of Immortality. It was born of human affection. It did not come to us from heaven. It was born of the human heart. And when he who loved kissed the lips of her who was dead there came into his heart the dream “We may meet again.” (Applause.)

And let me tell you that Hope of Immortality never came from any religion. That Hope of Immortality has helped make religions. It has been the great oak around which have climbed the poisonous vines of superstition—that Hope of Immortality is the great oak. (Long continued applause.)

And yet the moment a man expresses a doubt about the truth of Joshua or Jonah or the other three fellows in a furnace, up hops some poor little wretch and says, “Why, he doesn't want to live any more; he wants to die and go down like a dog, and that is the end of him and his wife and children.” (Laughter and applause.) They really seem to think that the moment a man is what they call an Infidel he has no affections, no heart, no feeling, no hope—nothing—nothing. Just anxious to be annihilated. But if the orthodox creed be true, and I have to make my choice between heaven and hell, I make my choice to-night. I take hell. (Great laughter and applause.) And if it is between hell and annihilation, I take annihilation.

WHY HE CHOSE HELL.

I will tell you why I take hell in making the first choice. We have heard from both of those places—heaven and hell—according to the New Testament. There was a rich man in hell, and a poor man, Lazarus, in heaven. And there was another gentleman by the name of Abraham. And the rich man in hell was in flames, and he called for water, and they told him they couldn't give him any. No bridge! But they did not express the slightest regret that they could not give him any water. Mr. Abraham was not decent enough to say he would if he could; no, sir; nothing. It did not make any

difference to him. (Laughter.) But this rich man in hell—in torment—his heart was all right, for he remembered his brothers; and he said to this Abraham, "If you cannot go, why send a man to my five brethren, so that they will not come to this place!" Good fellow, to think of his five brothers when he was burning up. Good fellow! Best fellow we ever heard from on the other side—in either world. (Great laughter and applause.)

So, I say, there is my place. And, incidentally, Abraham at that time gave his judgment as to the value of miracles. He said, "Though one should arise from the dead he wouldn't help your five brethren!" "There are Moses and the prophets." No need of raising people from the dead. (Laughter.)

That is my idea, in a general way, about religion; and I want the imagination to go to work upon it, taking the perfections of one church, of one school, of one system, and putting them together, just as the sculptor makes a great statue by taking the eyes from one, the nose from another, the limbs from another, and so on; just as they make a great painting of a landscape by putting a river in this place instead of over there, changing the location of a tree, and improving on what they call nature—that is to say, simply by adding to, taking from, that is all we can do. But let us go on doing that until there shall be a church in sympathy with the best human heart and in harmony with the best human brain. (Applause.)

HIS IDEA OF RELIGION.

And, what's more, let us have that religion for the world we live in. Right here! (Applause.) Let us have that religion until it cannot be said that they that do the most work have the least to eat. Let us have that religion here until hundreds and thousands of women are not compelled to make a living with the needle that has been called "the asp for the breast of the poor," and to live in tenements, in filth where modesty is impossible. (Applause.)

I say, let us preach that religion here until men will be ashamed to have forty or fifty millions, or any more than they need, while their brethren lack bread, while their sisters die from want. (Great applause.) Let us preach that religion here until man will have more ambition to become wise and good than to become rich and powerful. (Applause.) Let

us preach that religion here among ourselves until there are no abused and beaten wives. (Applause.) Let us preach that religion until children are no longer afraid of their own parents, and until there is no back of a child bearing the scars of a father's lash. (Continued applause.) Let us preach it, I say, until we understand and know that every man does as he must, and that, if we want better men and women, we must have better conditions. (Loud applause.)

TRY AND GET A LITTLE RELIGION.

Let us preach this grand religion until everywhere—the world over—men are just and kind to each other. (Renewed applause.) And then, if there be another world, we will be prepared for it. (Applause.) And if I come into the presence of an Infinite, good and wise Being, he will say: "Well you did the best you could. You did very well indeed. There is plenty of work for you to do here. Try and get a little higher than you were before." (Applause.) Let us preach that one drop of restitution is worth an ocean of repentance.

And if there is a Life of Eternal Progress before us, I shall be as glad as any other angel to find that out. (Laughter and applause.)

But I will not sacrifice the world I have for one I know not of. (Great applause.) I will not live here in fear, when I do not know that that which I fear lives. (Applause.)

I am going to live a perfectly free man. I am going to reap the harvest of my mind, no matter how poor it is—(laughter)—whether it is wheat or corn or worthless weeds. (Renewed laughter.) And I am going to scatter it. (Laughter and applause.) Some may "fall on stony ground." (Laughter.) But I think I have struck good soil to-night. (Prolonged laughter and applause.)

And so, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you a thousand times for your attention. I beg that you will forgive the time that I have taken, and allow me to say, once more, that this event marks an epoch in Religious Liberty in the United States. (Loud and prolonged applause.)