

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

MYTH
AND
MIRACLE

A New Lecture

BY

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INTRODUCTION.

THE following is reprinted from the *Boston Investigator*. It is a report, evidently not in full, but probably containing the best and freshest portions, of a lecture delivered in the Boston Theatre on Sunday evening, October 11, by Colonel R. G. Ingersoll, the great American orator, whose Freethought discourses are more popular in the United States than the addresses of any Christian speaker, not even excepting Ward Beecher. The audience was very enthusiastic, and crowded the theatre to the very doors.

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Myth and Miracle.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:—What, after all, is the object of life; what is the highest possible aim? The highest aim is to accomplish the only good. Happiness is the only good of which man by any possibility can conceive. The object of life is to increase human joy, and the means, intellectual and physical development. The question, then, is, Shall we rely upon superstition or upon growth? Is intellectual development the highway of progress, or must we depend on the pit of credulity? Must we rely on belief or credulity, or upon manly virtues, courageous investigation, thought, and intellectual development? For thousands of years men have been talking about religious freedom. I am now contending for the freedom of religion, not religious freedom—for the freedom which is the only real religion. Only a few years ago our poor ancestors tried to account for what they saw. Noticing the running river, the shining star, or the painted flower, they put a spirit in the river, a spirit in the star, and another in the flower. Something makes this river run, something makes this star shine, something paints the bosom of

that flower. These were all spirits. That was the first religion of mankind—fetishism—and in everything that lived, everything that produced an effect upon them, they said, “This is a spirit that lives within.” That is called the lowest phase of religious thought, and yet it is quite the highest phase of religious thought. One by one these little spirits died. One by one non-entities took their places, and last of all

WE HAVE ONE INFINITE FETISH

that takes the place of all others. Now, what makes the river run? We say the attraction of gravitation, and we know no more about that than we do about this fetish. What makes the tree grow? The principle of life—vital forces. These are simply phrases; simply names of ignorance. Nobody knows what makes the river run, what makes the trees grow, why the flowers burst and bloom—nobody knows why the stars shine, and probably nobody ever will know.

There are two horizons that have never been passed by man—origin and destiny. All human knowledge is confined to the diameter of that circle. All religions rest on supposed facts beyond the circumference of the absolutely known. (Applause.) What next? The next thing that came in the world—the next man—was the myth-maker. He gave to these little spirits human passions; he clothed ghosts in flesh; he warmed that flesh with blood; and in that blood he put desire—motive. And the myths were born, and were only produced through the fact of the impressions that Nature makes upon the brain of

man. They were every one a natural production, and let me say here to-night that what men call monstrosities are only natural productions. Every religion has grown just as naturally as the grass; every one, as I said before, and it cannot be said too often, has been naturally produced. All the Christs, all the gods and goddesses, all the furies and fairies, all the mingling of the beastly and human, were produced by the impressions of Nature upon the brain of man—by the rise of the sun, the silver dawn, the golden sunset, the birth and death of day, the change of seasons, the lightning, the storm, the beautiful bow—all these produced within the brain of man all myths, and they are all natural productions. (Applause.)

There have been certain myths universal among men. Gardens of Eden have been absolutely universal—the Golden Age, which is absolutely the same thing. And what was the Golden Age born of? Any old man in Boston will tell you that fifty years ago all people were honest. (Applause). Fifty years ago all people were sociable—there was no stuck-up aristocracy then. Neighbors were neighbors. Merchants gave full weight. Everything was full length; everything was a yard wide and all wool. (Applause). Now everybody swindles everybody else, and calls it business. (Applause). Go back fifty years, and you will find an old man who will tell you that there was

A TIME WHEN ALL WERE HONEST.

Go back another fifty years, and you will find another sage who will tell you the same story;

Every man looks back to his youth—to the golden age ; and what is true of the individual is true of the whole human race. It has its infancy, its manhood, and, finally, will have an old age. The Garden of Eden is not back of us. There are more honest men, good women, and obedient children in the world to-day than ever before. The myth of the Elysian fields is universally born of sunsets. When the golden clouds in the West turned to amethyst, sapphire and purple, the poor savage thought it a vision of another land—a land without care or grief ; a world of perpetual joy. This myth was born of the setting of the sun.

A universal myth all nations have believed in floods. Savages found everywhere evidences of the sea having been above the earth, and saw in the shells souvenirs of the ocean's visit. It had left its cards on the tops of mountains. The savage knew nothing of the slow rising and sinking of the crust of the earth. He did not dream of it. We now know that where the mountains lift their granite foreheads to the sun, the billows once held sway, and that where the waves dash into white caps of joy the mountains will stand once more. Everywhere the land is, the ocean will be ; and where the ocean is, the land will be. The Hindoos believe in the Flood myth. Their hero, who lived almost entirely on water, went to the Ganges to perform his ablutions, and, taking up a little water in his hand, he saw a small fish, that prayed him to save it from the monster of the river, and it would save him in turn from his enemies. He did so, and put it into different receptacles until it

grew so large that he let it loose in the sea ; then it was large enough to take care of itself. The fish told him that there was going to be an immense flood, and told him to gather all kinds of seed and take two of each kind of animal of use to man, and he would come along with an ark and take them all in. He told him to pick out seven saints. And the fish towed the ark along tied to its horns, and took them in and carried them to the top of a mountain, where he hitched the ark to a tree. (Applause.) When the waters receded, they came out and followed them down until they reached the plain. There were the same number—eight—in this ark as there were with Noah.

I find that the myth of the Virgin Mother is universal.

THE VIRGIN MOTHER IS THE EARTH.

I find also in all countries the idea of a Trinity. In Egypt I find Isis, Osiris and Horus. This idea prevailed in Central America among the Aztecs. We find the myth of the Judgment almost universal. I imagine men have seen so much injustice here that they naturally expect that there must be some day of final judgment somewhere. (Applause). Nearly every Theist is driven to the necessity of having another world in which his God may correct the mistakes he has made in this. We find on the walls of Egyptian temples pictures of the judgment—the righteous all go on the right hand, and those unworthy on the left.

The myth of the Sun-god was universal. Agni was the sun-god of the Hindoos. He was called

the most generous of all gods, yet he ate his own father and mother. Baldur was another sun-god; he was a sun-myth. Hercules was a sun-god, and so was Samson. Jonah, too, was a sun-god, and was swallowed by a fish. So was Hercules, and a wonderful thing is, that they were swallowed in about the same place, near Joppa. Where did the big fish go? When the sun went down under the earth, it was thought to be followed by the fish, which was said to swallow it, and carry it safely through the under-world. The sun thus came to be represented as the body of a woman with the tail of a fish, and so the mermaid was born. (Applause). Another strange thing is that all the sun-gods were born near Christmas.

The myth of Red Riding Hood was known among the Aztecs. The myth of the Eucharist came from the story of Ceres and Bacchus. When the cakes made by the product of the field were eaten, it was of the body of Ceres, and when the wine was drunk, it was the blood of Bacchus. From this idea the eucharist was born. There is nothing original in Christianity.

Holy water! Another myth. The Hindoos imagined that the water had its source in the throne of God. The Egyptians thought the Nile sacred, Greece was settled by Egyptian colonies, and they carried with them the water of the Nile; and when anyone died the water was sprinkled on him. Finally Rome conquered Greece physically, but Greece conquered Rome intellectually. (Loud Applause).

This is the myth of holy water, and with it grew up

THE IDEA OF BAPTISM.

and I presume that that is as old as water and dirt. (Applause.)

The cross is another universal symbol. There was once an ancient people in Italy before the Romans, before the Etruscans. They faded from the world, and history does not even know the name of that nation. We find where they buried the ashes of their dead, and we find chiselled, hundred of years before Christ, the cross, a symbol of hope of another life. We find the cross in Egypt, in the cylinders from Babylon, and, more than that, we find them in Central America. On the temples of the Aztecs we find the cross, and on it a bleeding, dying god. Our cross was built in the Middle Ages.

When Adam was very sick he sent Seth, his son, to the Garden of Eden. He told him he would have no trouble in finding it; all he had to do was to follow the tracks made by his mother and father when they left it. (Applause.) He wanted a little balsam from the tree of life that he might not die. Seth found there a cherub with flaming sword, who would not let him pass the door. He moved his wing so that he could see in, and he saw the tree of life, with its roots running down to hell, and among them Cain, the murderer. The angel gave Seth three seeds, and told him to put them in his father's mouth when he was buried, and to watch the effect. The result was that three trees grew up—one pine, one cedar, and

one cypress. Solomon cut down one of these trees to put in the temple, but it grew through the roof and he threw it into the pool of Bethesda. When the soldiers went for a beam on which to crucify Christ they took this tree and made a cross of it. Helena, the mother of Constantine, went to Jerusalem to find this cross. She found the two crosses also that the thieves were crucified on. They could not tell which was which, so they called a sick woman, who touched them, and when she touched the right one she was immediately made whole.

Such is myth and fable. The history of one religion is substantially the history of all religions. In embryo man lives all lives. The man of genius knows within himself the history of the human race; he knows the history of all religions. The man of imagination, of genius, having seen a leaf and a drop of water, can construct the forests, the rivers and the seas. In his presence all the cataracts fall and foam, the mists rise and the clouds form and float. To really know one fact is to know its kindred and its neighbors. Shakespeare, looking at a coat of mail, instantly imagined the society, the conditions that produced it, and what it, in its turn, produced. He saw the castle, the moat, the drawbridge, the lady in the tower, and the knightly lover spurring over the plain. He saw the bold baron and the rude retainer, the trampled serfs and all the glory and the grief of feudal life.

The man of imagination has lived the life of all people, of all races. He has been a citizen of Athens in the days of Pericles; has listened to the eager elo-

quence of the great orator, and has sat upon the cliff, and with the tragic poet heard "the multitudinous laughter of the sea." He has seen Socrates thrust the spear of question through the shield and heart of falsehood—was present when the great man drank hemlock and met the night of death tranquil as a star meets morning. He has followed the peripatetic philosophers, and has been puzzled by the sophists. He has watched Phidias, as he chiselled shapeless stone to forms of love and awe. He has lived by the slow Nile, amid the vast and monstrous. He knows the very thought that wrought the form and features of the Sphinx. He has heard great Memnon's morning song—has lain him down with the embalmed dead, and felt within their dust the expectation of another life, mingled with cold and suffocating doubts—the children born of long delay. He has walked the ways of mighty Rome, has seen great Cæsar with his legions in the field, has stood with vast and motley throngs and watched the triumphs given to victorious men, followed by uncrowned kings, the captured hosts and all the spoils of ruthless war. He has heard the shout that shook the Coliseum's roofless walls when from the reeling gladiator's hand the short sword fell, while from his bosom gushed the stream of wasted life. He has lived the life of savage men—has trod the forest's silent depths, and in the desperate game of life or death has matched his thought against the instinct of the beast. He has sat beneath the bo-tree's contemplative shade, rapt in Buddha's mighty thought, and he has dreamed

all dreams that Light, the alchemist, hath wrought from dust and dew and stored within the slumbrous poppy's subtle blood. He has knelt with awe and dread at every prayer; has felt the consolation and the shuddering fear; has seen all the devils; has mocked and worshipped all the gods; enjoyed all heavens, and felt the pangs of every hell. He has lived all lives, and through his blood and brain have crept the shadow and the chill of every death, and his soul, Mazeppa-like, has been lashed naked to the wild horse of every fear and love and hate. The imagination has a stage within the brain, whereon he sets all scenes that lie between the morn of laughter and the night of tears, and where his players body forth the false and true, the joys and griefs, the careless shallows and the tragic deeps of human life. (Tremendous applause.)

Through with the myth-makers, we now come to the wonder-worker. There is this between the miracle and the myth—a myth is an idealism of a fact, and a miracle is a counterfeit of a fact. There is some

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A MYTH AND A MIRACLE.

There is the difference that there is between fiction and falsehood, and poetry and perjury. (Applause). Miracles are probable only in the far past or the very remote future. The present is the property of the natural. (Applause). You say to a man, "The dead were raised 4,000 years ago." He says, "Well, that's reasonable." You say to him, "In 4,000,000 years we shall all be raised." He says, "That is what I believe." Say to him, "A man was raised from the

dead this morning," and he will say, "What are you giving us?" (Laughter). Miracles never convinced at the time they were said to have been performed. [The speaker here spoke of several instances related in the Bible sustaining this statement.] He continued: John the Baptist was the forerunner of Christ. He was cast into prison. When Christ heard of it he "departed from that country." Afterwards he returned, and heard that John had been beheaded, and he again departed from that country. There is no possible relation between the miraculous and the moral. The miracles of the Middle Ages are the children of superstition. In the Middle Ages men told everything but the truth, and believed everything but the facts. The Middle Ages—a trinity of ignorance, mendacity and insanity! There is one thing about humanity. You see the faults of others but not your own. A Catholic in India sees a Hindoo bowing before an idol, and thinks it absurd. Why does he not get him a plaster-of-paris Virgin, and some beads and holy water? Why does the Protestant shut his eyes when he prays? The idea is a souvenir of sun-worship, which is the most natural worship in the world. Religious dogmas have become absurd, The doctrine of eternal torment to-day has become absurd—(applause)—low, grovelling, ignorant, barbaric, savage, devilish—(great applause)—and no gentleman would preach it. (Applause).

Referring to the demonstrations of science, he said :

Science, thou art the great magician! Thou alone performest the true miracles. Thou alone workest

the real wonders. Fire is thy servant, lightning thy messenger. The waves obey thee, and thou knowest the circuits of the wind. Thou art the great philanthropist. Thou hast freed the slave and civilised the master. Thou hast taught man to chain, not his fellow-man, but the forces of Nature—forces that have no backs to be scarred, no limbs for chains to chill and eat—forces that never know fatigue, that shed no tears—forces that have no hearts to break. Thou gavest man the plough, the reaper, and the loom—thou hast fed and clothed the world. Thou art the great physician. Thy touch hath given sight. Thou hast made the lame to leap, the dumb to speak, and in the pallid cheek thy hand hath set the rose of health. “Thou hast given thy beloved sleep”—a sleep that wraps in happy dreams the throbbing nerves of pain. Thou art the perpetual providence of man—preserver of life and love. Thou art the teacher of every virtue, the enemy of every vice. Thou hast discovered the true basis of morals—the origin and office of conscience—and hast revealed the nature and measure of obligation. Thou hast taught that love is justice in its highest form, and that even self-love, guided by wisdom, embraces with loving arms the human race. Thou hast

SLAIN THE MONSTERS OF THE PAST.

Thou hast discovered the one inspired book. Thou hast read the records of the rocks, written by wind and wave, by frost and flame—records that even priestcraft cannot change—and in thy wondrous scales thou hast weighed the atoms and the stars. Thou

art the founder of the only true religion. Thou art the very Christ, the only Savior of mankind! (Applause.)

Continuing, he said :—Theology has always been in the way of the advance of the human race. There is this difference between science and theology,—science is modest and merciful, while theology is arrogant and cruel. The hope of science is the perfection of the human race. The hope of theology is the salvation of a few and the damnation of almost everybody. As I told you in the first place, I believe in the religion of freedom. O Liberty, thou art the god of my idolatry. Thou art the only deity that hates the bended knee. (Applause.) In thy vast and unwall'd temple, beneath the roofless dome, star-gemmed and luminous with suns, thy worshippers stand erect. They do not bow or cringe or crawl or bend their foreheads to the earth. The dust hath never borne the impress of their lips. Upon thy sacred altars mothers do not sacrifice their babes, nor men their rights. Thou takest naught from man except the things that good men hate : the whip, the chain, the dungeon-key. Thou hast no kings, no popes, no priests to stand between their fellow-men and thee. Thou hast no monks, no nuns, who, in the name of duty, murder joy. Thou carest not for forms nor mumbled prayers. At thy sacred shrine hypocrisy does not bow, fear does not crouch, virtue does not tremble, superstition's feeble tapers do not burn, but Reason holds aloft her inextinguishable torch, while on the ever-broadening brow of science falls the ever-coming morning of the ever-better day. (Great Applause.)

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