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Ingersoll, Robert Green

Orthodox theology.

Exordium.

“ORTHODOX THEOLOGY” is the substance of a brilliant lecture delivered at Coate’s Opera House, Kansas City, by a great and brilliant man of brilliant brains. The Colonel, great as is his nature, wields a tremendous power against the “orthodox theology” of our times. It is a source of satisfaction to him to do so too. To use his own language: “It is to me a positive joy to extinguish the fires of hell—a great pleasure to drive the fiend of fear from the hearts of men.”

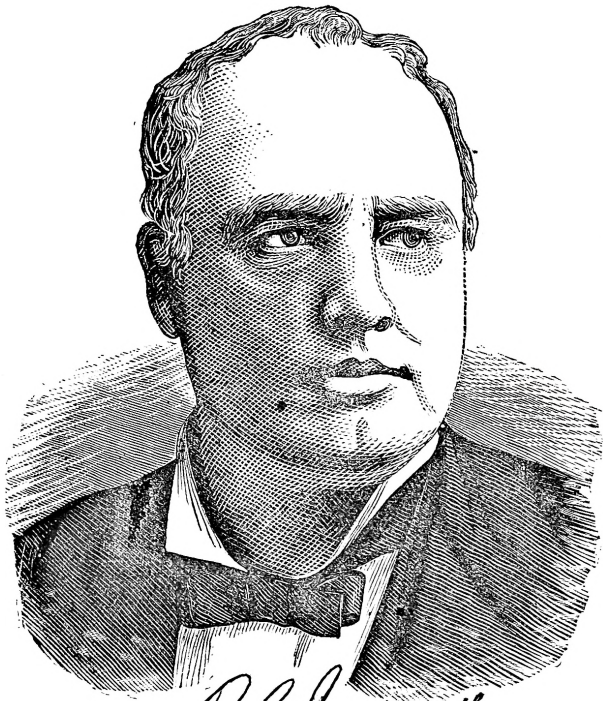
The eloquent *unbeliever* believes that the multitudes are rising from the dust—that the world is tired of the follies of faith and the falsehoods of superstition; and that the barren waste of orthodoxy, the desolate dream of theology, no longer satisfies the heart and brain of humanity. “Nothing can be more dreary,” he says, “than one lonely god—a heaven filled with thoughtless angels, a hell with unfortunate souls.”

Man is being freed from the political powers of the pulpit. The priests of all religions have always wielded the cowardly lash of fear to frighten the multitudes into subjection to their privileged claims. They felt “called upon” to live without working at the whole and sole expense of those who work to live. Like the lilies, they toiled not, neither did they spin. But the day of deliverance is at hand. The old theology only provokes a laugh, and, as our distinguished orator predicts, “in a few years all the old theological books will be sold to make paper on which to print the discoveries of science.”

Colonel Ingersoll is logically *individualistic*, and is in favor of *absolute* human liberty. “Organisation means creed,” he says, “and creed means petrification and tyranny. I will join no society except an *anti-society* society.”

His powerful genius is full of new and striking thoughts, of sublime and splendid wit, argument, and humor. He is the man of whom Beecher said: “He is the most eloquent man that speaks, in all the tongues of men.”

H. SEYMOUR.



R. G. Ingersoll

ORTHODOX THEOLOGY.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.—There has always been a conflict between the people who lived for this world and those who lived for the next, quite a conflict between naturalists and those who believe in the supernatural; between those who believe in man, and those who have great confidence in ghosts. And the believers in ghosts have always endeavored to frighten the unbelievers from their beliefs. According to ministers, nothing is so dangerous as to give your honest thoughts. According to their ideas there dwells in the infinite blue somewhere a being who created us, and whose brutal brows are instantly corrugated with anger when he hears one of his children making the best guess he can. They have an idea that this being is lying in wait, anxious to clutch the soul of the investigator, anxious to lay hold of a thinker in order that he may consign him to perpetual pain. I am often asked, suppose that after all you are mistaken in your doctrine, what are you going to do at the day of judgment? Well, if I find I have been wrong, I intend to admit it. That is all. I shall be compelled to say to Jehovah, you are not as good as I thought; I hope you will pardon me for having flattered you in my imagination. Here is an old story that illustrates my views upon this subject. There was once a man who contended that the place he lived in was the entire world; that there was no more land except that occupied by him and the little nation to which he belonged. Some people said that over the sea there is another country, and that country has a very great and powerful king. You must not deny the existence of that king. If ever he gets his hands on you it will go hard with you. But the

fellow had given the very best opinion he had, and had courage enough to stick to it, that there was no land on the other side. One day he fell asleep in his boat, and there came up a violent storm. He was blown far out to sea. He could not return. The storm still kept on, and the first thing he knew he saw a strange land. Well, said he, I have been mistaken. His boat was blown ashore. He got out, trembling, weak, and frightened. A moment afterwards he saw an immense man walking towards him, and he said, there is the king. He said, I might just as well have it all over. I expect I shall get killed, but I don't want to live in suspense. So he walked up to the king and said to him: "Your majesty, I live over the way; I used to deny there was any such place as this, and when men said there was such a thing as you, I used to laugh at them. Now I suppose you are going to kill me. I cannot help it." The man looked at him. "Well," says he, "what are you going to do with me now I am here?" The king replied: "Nothing, if you behave yourself." I am of opinion that if there is another world, no matter what you may believe here, when you get there, if you behave yourself, you will be all right.

Now every religion, you know, must have its ministers. In the olden times they called them medicine men, soothsayers, and augurs. They might call them augurs now, for they bore me very much. Prophets, parsons, and clergymen, they are all of the same school, all born of the same seed, all children of the same absurdities. And yet these ministers here in the nineteenth century take it upon themselves to say that none outside of the church have a right to express their thoughts. They tell me that they have been *called*, that they didn't go into the ministry as other men go to blacksmithing, or to practising law and medicine; but when God wants a parson—that is to say, a flunkey—he carefully looks over the field and with great circumspection selects the man he wants; that every other profession is left to be filled by accident, by the choice of chance; that philosophers, scientists, inventors, painters, sculptors, poets, are simply left to a freak of nature, but when God wants a parson he puts them in a sieve and carefully selects the grains of wheat for that purpose. For my part I don't believe it. The selections made don't justify the statement. I imagine that they go

at that business very much the same as other people go to theirs. Whenever there is a young man in the community, not very well, with hardly constitution enough to be wicked, with hardly health enough to do anything wrong, it is instantly suggested by all the dear people in the neighborhood what a minister he would make! He is then sent to some religious seminary, a place which is built for the more general diffusion of useless knowledge, and he is there educated—first, not to think; secondly, not to dispute; and thirdly, to intellectually eat what is set before him, asking no questions for conscience sake. He walks out of the institution a kind of sausage of superstition, stuffed with stupid mistakes. He instantly becomes a teacher, and imagines that he has been called, and that apostolic hands, dripping with blessings, have been laid upon his brainless head. He then takes the position that no one has a right to question his theories and his dogmas, and if there should be a point raised by some member of the Church, he immediately turns to his commentaries and answers him, not with reason, but with authority, and that too often of the most ancient kind.

I do not prove the correctness of my ideas by names of dead people; I depend upon reasons instead of gravestones. One fact is worth more than a cemetery of distinguished corpses. I ask, not for the belief of somebody, but for evidences, for facts. Now, while I live I propose to have my say, no matter who has been selected, no matter who has been called. Now and then one of these young ministers develops, and in spite of what we first thought of him, he turns out to be a good deal of a man. Then he gets touched with heresy. Then he leaves the Church that educated him. Then they say, Pursue him and shoot at him all the poisoned arrows of malice, saying that he is a heretic and that he is worse than an infidel. Every minister who enters a pulpit enters an intellectual bastille. He gives up his liberty of thought, he gives up his intellectual manhood, and he agrees to defend a creed, and thousands do defend it who don't believe a word. If the ministers would only express their doubts, you would find that there is very little difference between them and myself. They will not do that. They have a certain thing to defend, and intend to stick to it. Now and then one gets grand enough to step out. The first point these ministers make

is against the right to think. Now, my first position is that orthodox theology believes in mental slavery. I take the ground that I have the right not only to think, but that I cannot help it. I also take the ground that my brain thinks in spite of me. That there is not a person here who can control his thought. If there is, let him tell me what he is going to think next year. Is there a solitary person here who can help thinking as he thinks? Your brain is affected by your surroundings, by what you see and hear, by what enters through all the avenues of the senses, and the result is—what? Thought. And that result is an absolute necessity. That the brain thinks as the heart beats, as the blood pursues its old accustomed rounds, as the lungs contract and expand, as the eyes see, and the ears hear—so the brain thinks, and the owner of the brain is not responsible for his thoughts. The brain is like a field where Nature sows with careless hands the seeds of thought. Most of those seeds are barren, cold, and hard, producing only orthodox weeds; but others like the torrid clime, producing the balm and vine, the royal children of sun and soil. But whatever the field produces man is not responsible for.

Now if thought is an absolute necessity the next question is have I a right to express the thought? Under these circumstances, under these conditions, I have the right to express every thought that visits or is produced by my brain; and is it possible that there is a God that will give a man a thinker, a thinker that thinks in spite of him, and then damn the man because the thinker thinks? Is it possible that a God would give wings to a bird, and then damn the bird for flying? We might just as well be sent to eternal perdition for breathing, as for our thought. Can any man control his thought? I have asked that question a great many times. And there is a little story that illustrates the control a man has over his thought. There was a Methodist minister once who said he could think of one subject for a minute and nothing else. A man told him he couldn't do it. He said: There is the best riding horse in the country, and if you will think of one thing for a minute, and only one thing, I will give you the horse. The minister said he would say the Lord's Prayer and not think of any other thing, and he said: How are you going to prove it? He said: I will show you. "Our

Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name——” I suppose you will throw in the saddle and bridle?

No man has been grand enough to tell what the brain is, to tell how it acts—the complex tangled web of imagination and memory, of wish and will, of hope and fear, and love and hate. The woven wonder of the human life has never been unravelled back to simple threads. No man can do it; I hear a great deal said about responsibility and about conscience and about will, but the trouble is that what you call conscience is not a force. Conscience bears the same relation to man that the compass does to a ship. But when the waves are too powerful, when the tide is too strong, when the winds are too fierce, of what use is the compass? A man may know what is right, but in the storm of passion be wrecked on the rocks and reefs of crime. The compass is not a force if it does not propel the ship, and the simple knowledge of right and wrong is not in and of itself a force. And it seems to me that when that doctrine is well understood, we shall have a little more charity in this world—a little more charity. Do you know that a great—we will say a very large—minority of the human race are failures? Everybody cannot get a living. There are hundreds and thousands and millions incapable of supporting themselves. They are so constructed, their brains are of such a shape, such a quantity, their will is so weak, or there is something about them so badly constructed, that they cannot get a living. Nobody blames a man because he does not write like Shakspeare. Why? You say it takes genius to write like Shakspeare; maybe it takes a certain genius to be honest; to be industrious; and if you don't blame anybody for not writing like Shakspeare, maybe you ought not to blame a person for not acting like Christ. Where is that man great enough, with intellect enough, whose intellectual horizon is wide enough to take into consideration all the circumstances and all the conditions of the human life? Consequently I believe in charity. I have charity for the minister who answers *me* instead of my arguments, who attacks me personally instead of giving reason against reason, argument against argument. Some time, it may be, we will be great enough and splendid enough to know that nature produces these failures; that nature sows these seeds of grief and pain, of love and joy, of virtue and of vice, and that all human

failures are simply children of a blind chance, and that the good and great have in the lottery of life drawn heart and brain. Perhaps we will, but not while we believe in the Christian religion; not while we believe every human being lives under an infinite responsibility, and that every man, no matter what his education may have been, no matter what the development of his brain may be, must believe in a certain thing, or go in a certain way, or be eternally lost. While we believe that doctrine we shall not have true charity.

Now we have what is called orthodox religion; and many people are astonished that I should say anything against the theology of our day. I denounce it because I believe it petrifies the heart and paralyses the brain. I talk against it because it teaches intellectual slavery, because it endeavors to put chains upon the brains of men. I talk against it because it puts in heaven an infinite fiend, who threatens to damn most of his children, and while I live I shall continue to talk against it.

They tell me that the Old Testament is inspired. I don't care whether it is or not; the question is—is it true? If it is not true, inspiration is no good to it, and if it is true, it doesn't need inspiration. Who wrote it? Nobody knows. When was it written? Nobody knows that, and probably never will. While I live I shall never believe in the inspiration of any book that upholds the system of human slavery. And no honest ministers will deny that the Old Testament upholds this infamous institution. And I say that any book that upholds slavery is infamous. Now don't let these ministers dodge the question; let them walk right up to the rack and say honestly whether they believe that God believed in slavery. Another objection I have to the Old Testament is that it upholds polygamy, and in America all the ministers are actually circulating this inspired work, and talking against the Mormons. A book that upholds an institution that teaches a disregard for family ties, that turns the heart of man into a den of corruption, cannot, I believe, be inspired. Now let the ministers state honestly whether the Bible upholds polygamy or not. Another objection I have to that book is, that according to it, man was ordered to wage wars against his fellow man. Wars of absolute extermination. Do you believe that God ever ordered the

murdering of innocent children; the butchery of innocent women? I do not. The Bible justifies the husband who kills his wife for differing from him on the subject of religion. You are told that if a wife worshipped the sun or the moon your duty was to kill her. What do you think of that? There is a woman who says: "Let us worship the sun as the fireside of the world. It was the sun that gave your face to my vision; that led me to look into your eyes." Then it is your duty to kill her. Now if there is any God, let him make a note of the fact that I indignantly deny in his name that persecution is right. Let us take an honest step. According to modern theology Christ was God. God directed his chosen people to murder the man who differed from Him in religion; well, God came upon the earth after that and preached a different religion, and obedient to his behests the Jews crucified *him*. Did not God reap exactly what he sowed? Look at it and see if that doctrine is true. It won't do. There is not a bit of sense in this business. We have had no administration in the history of this country so great a failure as that.

Another objection is that this Bible teaches the existence of witches, wizards, spooks, sprites, and hobgoblins. I have no respect for a book that is serious about such childish things. And this book is held up in the land as fit for reverence and as the absolute work of God. And we are taught to pay great respect to the old patriarchs. Compare Homer with Isaiah; compare Confucius with holy Moses, who, when asked: "What do you say to the doctrine that we return benefit for injuries?" replied: "It is not my doctrine; if you return benefits for injuries, what do you propose to return for benefits?" My doctrine is this: "For benefits return benefits, and for injuries return justice, without any administration of revenge." And when asked if there is any word which contained the whole duty of man, after thinking, I reply: "The nearest word I can think of is *reciprocity*." There is another objection I have to the book, and that is its miracles. We are called upon to believe miracles that no man can believe. If a man came up and said that he had seen a man raised from the dead, you would begin to think of the nearest road to an asylum. You might call him religious, but you wouldn't call him sane. And is it possible this and these things were done without having

any effect upon the people? The Jews lived in the presence of miracles; they were miraculously fed, the Bible says, but the reason the miracles had so little effect upon them was because they were there at the time, because they saw what happened. And, of course, if we had seen what happened, it would have had as little effect on us. And we take this book and poison the minds of our children.

The clergy say if you talk about the Bible, that is blasphemy. Well, perhaps it is. Blasphemy is a crime manufactured by hypocrisy. In reality there is no such crime. It is impossible to blaspheme a fact. Can any person blaspheme nature? Chief Justice Comegys once instructed the grand jury to indict me for blasphemy. That was in the State of Delaware. I have taken my revenge on the State by leaving it in ignorance.

Can we believe in such a thing as special providence? Where is the evidence that God has ever saved the innocent? In what age do we find that innocence has been a perfect shield? In what age do we find that the innocent were not placed in dungeons; that the innocent were not taken to the scaffold; and that innocent men and women were not doomed to death and martyrdom for giving the honest expression of their honest opinions?

They tell the story of a man who was in great poverty, all run down, with nothing to eat in the house; and his wife said: "It is because you are not in the Church, and because you do not pray. You must come back again and pray, and see if things won't take a turn." Well, he knew he could not make it any worse, and he took down the Bible and read and prayed, and as he got up he actually found a ten-dollar bill between the leaves. Well, hungry as he was, he thanked God, and rushed out to the baker's and to the butcher's, and they lost no time in cooking some supper, and in a few minutes the wife's face was covered with smiles. Just then the existence of providence was indisputable. A knock came at the door, and a constable arrested him for passing a counterfeit bill.

Here is another argument the Church had—that is, the argument of numbers. When Christianity commenced was it in the majority? No. Was it just as near right when it was in a minority as it is now? Yes. Then that explodes the argument of numbers.

Now I come to the New Testament, and I have the same objection to that as I had to the Old Testament. I don't know who wrote it; nobody does, and nobody ever will in all probability. The first objection I have to that book is the doctrine that you must love your enemies. I cannot do it. I don't believe in making any distinction between men. I deny that a man can do me some great wrong, and that I should love him notwithstanding that injury. It is contrary to human nature. The doctrine of "Love your enemies" founded the Inquisition. Let us look at this doctrine a moment. They say I am bound to forgive my enemies. Why does not God forgive his, then? I may be accounted inquisitive, but let some minister honestly answer that question. It won't do. Neither do these men live up to it. There was a man at the point of death, and he sent for the minister, who said: "Have you got any enemies? If so, you must reconcile yourself with them." "Well," he said, "I have one enemy, my hateful neighbor over there." "But," said the minister, "you must send for him and forgive him." "Do you think it is necessary?" "Oh, yes." "Well, I suppose I must, then?" He sent for him, and asked his forgiveness and shook hands with him. The man started out, and the sick man suddenly whispered: "I'll forgive the scoundrel if I get well. All this will go for nothing." Another objection I have to the New Testament is the doctrine of the Atonement. I don't know that any man can do wrong, and have it charged to my account. I don't think that any man can be good, and be entitled to the credit. I object to that kind of book-keeping—to charge me with the rascality of Adam, and then balance it with the virtues of Christ. I might just as well be left out of the transaction. There is no idea more absurd than that God was so enraged with his children that he came down to this world and made himself flesh, and then allowed his children to kill him in order to reconcile himself to them. I don't believe it; so I am opposed to the miracles of the New Testament. Suppose a man should come to Kansas city, not very well dressed, and he should meet in your streets a blind man, and should say to him: "Receive your sight," and the moment afterwards the sightless balls were visited by the blessed rays of light; and the next man who met him had been a cripple for years, and he touched him and he

became healthy of body; and suppose he should meet a sad procession going to a cemetery, and he should stop the procession and ask the undertaker to take the coffin out of the hearse, and take the top off the coffin, and he should say to the dead "Come forth," and the dead should arise, and the boy clasp his mother in his arms. Suppose to your cemetery he went, and found there a poor woman standing at the grave to which they had just borne her husband, and this man should restore to life the lifeless man, and he should hold her in his arms and put his kisses again upon her lips and upon those of his children; do you suppose they would crucify that man in this town? Then there is another doctrine in this business that I hate above all others, and that is the doctrine of eternal pain. If you take hell away from the orthodox churches, what have they left? Nothing. It is the backbone of orthodoxy. It is the hangman's whip to hold the wretch in order. But there is no reformation in force or fear. If there is no Devil and Hell, there is no damnation, no damnation no divine grace and no atonement, no atonement no fall, no fall no orthodox theology. Suppose there are some men on the Niagara River and they are raising a manufactory to make rope to throw to people who come over the fall. That is a reasonable business. But suppose there are no falls. What is the reason of starting another rope factory there? That is exactly what the Universalists are doing, and that is why I object to their theology, because it is unreasonable. The doctrine that eternal pain is to be the fate of most of the human race is infamous. It is the doctrine of devils and hyenas. It was born of arrogance and hatred. They tell a story of an old man who never read the Bible much. His wife got religious, and induced the old chap to read a chapter every morning. Their boy noticed that they were reading the fifteenth chapter of Corinthians: "We shall be changed," and the boy rubbed out the "c" of the word "changed" so that the old man read: "I show you a great mystery, for behold we shall all be hanged." And the old lady said: "I don't think it's hanged, is it?" And he said: "Yes, it is hanged, and I think it must be right, because the greatest sin of this world, you know, is pride, and if there is anything calculated to take pride out of a man, hanging will do it."

I am opposed to any religion that hardens the heart. I believe in the religion of the fireside. I believe in the