

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

20/3/09

WHY AM I
AN AGNOSTIC?

BY

COLONEL R. G. INGERSOLL.

PRICE TWOPENCE.

LONDON :
FREETHOUGHT PUBLISHING COMPANY,
2 NEWCASTLE-STREET, FARRINGDON-STREET, E.C.

1902.

WORKS BY

The Late R. G. INGERSOLL.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>THE HOUSE OF DEATH. Funeral Orations and Addresses. 1s.</p> <p>MISTAKES OF MOSES. 1s. Cloth, 2s. 6d.</p> <p>THE DEVIL. 6d.</p> <p>SUPERSTITION. 6d.</p> <p>SHAKESPEARE. 6d.</p> <p>THE GODS. 6d.</p> <p>THE HOLY BIBLE. 6d.</p> <p>REPLY TO GLADSTONE. With an Introduction by G. W. Foote. 4d.</p> <p>ROME OR REASON? A Reply to Cardinal Man- ning. 4d.</p> <p>CRIMES AGAINST CRIMINALS 3d.</p> <p>ORATION ON WALT WHIT- MAN. 3d.</p> <p>ORATION ON VOLTAIRE. 3d.</p> <p>ABRAHAM LINCOLN. 3d.</p> <p>PAINÉ THE PIONEER. 2d.</p> <p>HUMANITY'S DEBT TO THOMAS PAINE. 2d.</p> <p>ERNEST RENAN AND JESUS CHRIST. 2d.</p> <p>THREE PHILANTHROPISTS. 2d.</p> <p>LOVE THE REDEEMER. 2d.</p> <p>THE GHOSTS. 3d.</p> <p>WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED? 2d.</p> | <p>WHAT IS RELIGION? 2d.</p> <p>IS SUICIDE A SIN? 2d.</p> <p>LAST WORDS ON SUICIDE. 2d.</p> <p>GOD AND THE STATE. 2d.</p> <p>FAITH AND FACT. Reply to Dr. Field. 2d.</p> <p>GOD AND MAN. Second reply to Dr. Field. 2d.</p> <p>THE DYING CREED. 2d.</p> <p>THE LIMITS OF TOLERA- TION. A Discussion with the Hon. F. D. Coudert and Gov. S. L. Woodford. 2d.</p> <p>HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH. 2d.</p> <p>ART AND MORALITY. 2d.</p> <p>DO I BLASPHEME? 2d.</p> <p>SOCIAL SALVATION. 2d.</p> <p>MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE. 2d.</p> <p>SKULLS. 2d.</p> <p>THE GREAT MISTAKE. 1d.</p> <p>LIVE TOPICS. 1d.</p> <p>MYTH AND MIRACLE. 1d.</p> <p>REAL BLASPHEMY. 1d.</p> <p>WHY AM I AN AGNOSTIC? 2d.</p> <p>CHRIST AND MIRACLES. 1d.</p> <p>CREEDS AND SPIRITUALITY. 1d.</p> <p>THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION. 3d.</p> |
|--|--|

Orders to the amount of 5s. and upwards sent post free.

LONDON:

THE FREETHOUGHT PUBLISHING Co., LTD.,
2 NEWCASTLE STREET, FARRINGDON STREET, E.C.

WHY AM I AN AGNOSTIC ?

THE same rules or laws of probability must govern in religious questions as in others. There is no subject—and can be none—concerning which any human being is under any obligation to believe without evidence. Neither is there any intelligent being who can, by any possibility, be flattered by the exercise of ignorant credulity. The man who, without prejudice, reads and understands the Old and Old Testaments will cease to be an orthodox Christian. The intelligent man who investigates the religion of any country without fear and without prejudice will not and cannot be a believer.

Most people, after arriving at the conclusion that Jehovah is not God, that the Bible is not an inspired book, and that the Christian religion, like other religions, is the creation of man, usually say : “ There must be a Supreme Being, but Jehovah is not his name, and the Bible is not his word. There must be somewhere an over-ruling Providence or Power.”

This position is just as untenable as the other. He who cannot harmonise the cruelties of the Bible with the goodness of Jehovah, cannot harmonise the cruelties of Nature with the goodness and wisdom of a supposed Deity. He will find it impossible to account for pestilence and famine, for earthquake and storm, for slavery, for the triumph of the strong over the weak, for the countless victories of injustice. He will find it impossible to account for martyrs—for the burning of the good, the noble, the loving, by the ignorant, the malicious, and the infamous.

How can the Deist satisfactorily account for the sufferings of women and children ? In what way will

he justify religious persecution—the flame and sword of religious hatred? Why did his God sit idly on his throne and allow his enemies to wet their swords in the blood of his friends? Why did he not answer the prayers of the imprisoned, of the helpless? And when he heard the lash upon the naked back of the slave, why did he not also hear the prayer of the slave? And when children were sold from the breasts of mothers, why was he deaf to the mother's cry?

It seems to me that the man who knows the limitations of the mind, who gives the proper value to human testimony, is necessarily an Agnostic. He gives up the hope of ascertaining first or final causes, of comprehending the supernatural, or of conceiving of an infinite personality. From out the words Creator, Preserver, and Providence, all meaning falls.

The mind of man pursues the path of least resistance, and the conclusions arrived at by the individual depend upon the nature and structure of his mind, on his experience, on hereditary drifts and tendencies, and on the countless things that constitute the difference in minds. One man, finding himself in the midst of mysterious phenomena, comes to the conclusion that all is the result of design; that back of all things is an infinite personality—that is to say, an infinite man; and he accounts for all that is by simply saying that the universe was created and set in motion by this infinite personality, and that it is miraculously and supernaturally governed and preserved. This man sees with perfect clearness that matter could not create itself, and therefore he imagines a creator of matter. He is perfectly satisfied that there is design in the world, and that, consequently, there must have been a designer. It does not occur to him that it is necessary to account for the existence of an infinite personality. He is perfectly certain that there can be no design without a designer, and he is equally certain that there can be a designer who was not designed. The absurdity becomes so great that it takes the place of a demonstration. He takes it for granted that matter was created, and that its creator was not. He assumes

that a creator existed from eternity, without cause, and created what is called "matter" out of nothing; or, whereas there was nothing, this creator made the something that we call substance.

Is it possible for the human mind to conceive of an infinite personality? Can it imagine a beginning-less being, infinitely powerful and intelligent? If such a being existed, then there must have been an eternity during which nothing did exist except this being; because, if the universe was created, there must have been a time when it was not, and back of that there must have been an eternity during which nothing but an infinite personality existed. Is it possible to imagine an infinite intelligence dwelling for an eternity in infinite nothing? How could such a being be intelligent? What was there to be intelligent about? There was but one thing to know—namely, that there was nothing except this being? How could such a being be powerful? There was nothing to exercise force upon. There was nothing in the universe to suggest an idea. Relations could not exist—except the relation between infinite intelligence and infinite nothing.

The next great difficulty is the act of creation. My mind is so that I cannot conceive of something being created out of nothing. Neither can I conceive of anything being created without a cause. Let me go one step further. It is just as difficult to imagine something being created with, as without, a cause. To postulate a cause does not in the least lessen the difficulty. In spite of all, this lever remains without a fulcrum. We cannot conceive of the destruction of substance. The stone can be crushed to powder, and the powder can be ground to such a fineness that the atoms can only be distinguished by the most powerful microscope, and we can then imagine these atoms being divided and subdivided again and again; but it is impossible for us to conceive of the annihilation of the least possible imaginable fragment of the least atom of which we can think. Consequently, the mind can imagine neither creation nor destruction. From this point it is very easy to reach the

generalisation that the indestructible could not have been created.

These questions, however, will be answered by each individual according to the structure of his mind, according to his experience, according to his habits of thought, and according to his intelligence or his ignorance, his prejudice or his genius.

Probably a very large majority of mankind believe in the existence of supernatural beings, and a majority of what are known as civilised nations, in an infinite personality. In the realm of thought majorities do not determine. Each brain is a kingdom, each mind is a sovereign.

The universality of a belief does not even tend to prove its truth. A large majority of mankind have believed in what is known as God, and an equally large majority have as implicitly believed in what is known as the Devil. These beings have been inferred from phenomena. They were produced for the most part by ignorance, by fear and by selfishness. Man in all ages has endeavored to account for the mysteries of life and death, of substance, of force, for the ebb and flow of things, for earth and star. The savage, dwelling in his cave, subsisting on roots and reptiles, or on beasts that could be slain with club and stone, surrounded by countless objects of terror, standing by rivers, so far as he knew, without source or end, by seas with but one shore, the prey of beasts mightier than himself, of diseases strange and fierce, trembling at the voice of thunder, blinded by the lightning, feeling the earth shake beneath him, seeing the sky lurid with the volcano's glare—fell prostrate and begged for the protection of the Unknown.

In the long night of savagery, in the midst of pestilence and famine, through the long and dreary winters, crouched in dens of darkness, the seeds of superstition were sown in the brain of man. The savage believed, and thoroughly believed, that everything happened in reference to him; that he by his actions could excite the anger, or by his worship placate the wrath, of the Unseen. He resorted to flattery and prayer. To the

best of his ability, he put in stone, or rudely carved in wood, his idea of this God. For this idol he built a hut, a hovel, and at last a cathedral. Before these images he bowed, and at these shrines, whereon he lavished his wealth, he sought protection for himself and for the ones he loved. The few took advantage of the ignorant many. They pretended to have received messages from the Unknown. They stood between the helpless multitude and the gods. They were the carriers of flags of truce. At the court of heaven they presented the cause of man, and upon the labor of the deceived they lived.

The Christian of to-day wonders at the savage who bowed before his idol; and yet it must be confessed that the god of stone answered prayer and protected his worshippers precisely as the Christian's God answers prayer and protects his worshippers to-day.

My mind is so that it is forced to the conclusion that substance is eternal; that the universe was without beginning and will be without end; that it is the one eternal existence; that relations are transient and evanescent; that organisms are produced and vanish; that forms change—but that the substance of things is from eternity to eternity. It may be that planets are born and die, that constellations will fade from the infinite spaces, that countless suns will be quenched—but the substance will remain.

The questions of origin and destiny seem to be beyond the powers of the human mind.

Heredity is on the side of superstition. All our ignorance pleads for the old. In most men there is a feeling that their ancestors were exceedingly good and brave and wise, and that in all things pertaining to religion their conclusions should be followed. They believe that their fathers and mothers were of the best, and that that which satisfied them should satisfy their children. With a feeling of reverence they say that the religion of their mother is good enough and pure enough and reasonable enough for them. In this way the love of parents and the reverence for ancestors have unconsciously bribed the reason

and put out, or rendered exceedingly dim, the eyes of the mind.

There is a kind of longing in the heart of the old to live and die where their parents lived and died—a tendency to go back to the homes of their youth. Around the old oak of manhood grow and cling these vines. Yet it will hardly do to say that the religion of my mother is good enough for me, any more than to say the geology, or the astronomy, or the philosophy of my mother is good enough for me. Every human being is entitled to the best he can obtain; and if there has been the slightest improvement on the religion of the mother, the son is entitled to that improvement, and he should not deprive himself of that advantage by the mistaken idea that he owes it to his mother to perpetuate, in a reverential way, her ignorant mistakes.

If we are to follow the religion of our fathers and mothers, our fathers and mothers should have followed the religion of theirs. Had this been done, there could have been no improvement in the world of thought. The first religion would have been the last, and the child would have died as ignorant as the mother. Progress would have been impossible, and on the graves of ancestors would have been sacrificed the intelligence of mankind.

We know, too, that there has been the religion of the tribe, of the community, and of the nation, and that there has been a feeling that it was the duty of every member of the tribe or community, and of every citizen of the nation, to insist upon it that the religion of that tribe, of that community, of that nation, was better than that of any other. We know that all the prejudices against other religions, and all the egotism of nation and tribe, were in favour of the local superstition. Each citizen was patriotic enough to denounce the religions of other nations and to stand firmly by his own. And there is this peculiar about man: he can see the absurdities of other religions while blinded to those of his own. The Christian can see clearly enough that Mohammed was an imposter. He is sure of it, because the people

of Mecca who were acquainted with him declared that he was no prophet; and this declaration is received by Christians as a demonstration that Mohammed was not inspired. Yet these same Christians admit that the people of Jerusalem who were acquainted with Christ rejected him; and this rejection they take as proof positive that Christ was the Son of God.

The average man adopts the religion of his country, or, rather, the religion of his country adopts him. He is dominated by the egotism of race, the arrogance of nation, and the prejudice called patriotism. He does not reason—he feels. He does not investigate—he believes. To him the religions of other nations are absurd and infamous, and their gods monsters of ignorance and cruelty. In every country this average man is taught, first, that there is a supreme being; second, that he has made known his will; third, that he will reward the true believer; fourth, that he will punish the unbeliever, the scoffer and the blasphemer; fifth, that certain ceremonies are pleasing to his god; sixth, that he has established a church; and seventh, that priests are his representatives on earth. And the average man has no difficulty in determining that the god of his nation is the true God; that the will of this true God is contained in the sacred scriptures of his nation; that he is one of the true believers, and that the people of other nations—that is, believing other religions—are scoffers; that the only true church is the one to which he belongs; and that the priests of his country are the only ones who have had or ever will have the slightest influence with this true God. All these absurdities to the average man seem self-evident propositions; and so he holds all the other creeds in scorn, and congratulates himself that he is a favourite of the one true God.

If the average Christian had been born in Turkey, he would have been a Mohammedan; and if the average Mohammedan had been born in New England and educated at Andover, he would have regarded the damnation of the heathen as the “tidings of great joy.”

Nations have eccentricities, peculiarities, and hallucinations, and these find expression in their laws, customs, ceremonies, morals, and religions. And these are in great part determined by soil, climate, and the countless circumstances that mould and dominate the lives and habits of insects, individuals, and nations. The average man believes implicitly in the religion of his country, because he knows nothing of any other and has no desire to know. It fits him because he has been deformed to fit it, and he regards this fact of fit as an evidence of its inspired truth.

Has a man the right to examine, to investigate, the religion of his own country—the religion of his father and mother? Christians admit that the citizens of all countries not Christians have not only this right, but that it is their solemn duty. Thousands of missionaries are sent to heathen countries to persuade the believers in other religions not only to examine their superstitions, but to renounce them, and to adopt those of the missionaries. It is the duty of a heathen to disregard the religion of his country and to hold in contempt the creed of his father and of his mother. If the citizens of heathen nations have the right to examine the foundations of their religion, it would seem that the citizens of Christian nations have the same right. Christians, however, go further than this; they say to the heathen: You must examine your religion, and not only so, but you must reject it; and, unless you do reject it, and, in addition to such rejection, adopt ours, you will be eternally damned. Then these same Christians say to the inhabitants of a Christian country: You must not examine; you must not investigate; but whether you examine or, you must believe, or you will be eternally damned.

If there be one true religion, how is it possible to ascertain which of all the religions the true one is? There is but one way. We must impartially examine the claims of all. The right to examine involves the necessity to accept or reject. Understand me, not the right to accept or reject, but the necessity. From this conclusion there is no possible escape. If, then, we

have the right to examine, we have the right to tell the conclusion reached. Christians have examined other religions somewhat, and they have expressed their opinion with the utmost freedom—that is to say, they have denounced them all as false and fraudulent, have called their gods idols and myths, and their priests impostors.

The Christian does not deem it worth while to read the Koran. Probably not one Christian in a thousand ever saw a copy of that book. And yet all Christians are perfectly satisfied that the Koran is the work of an impostor. No Presbyterian thinks it is worth his while to examine the religious systems of India; he knows that the Brahmins are mistaken, and that all their miracles are falsehoods. No Methodist cares to read the life of Buddha, and no Baptist will waste his time studying the ethics of Confucius. Christians of every sort and kind take it for granted that there is only one true religion, and that all except Christianity are absolutely without foundation. The Christian world believes that all the prayers of India are unanswered; that all the sacrifices upon the countless altars of Egypt, of Greece, and of Rome were without effect. They believe that all these mighty nations worshipped their gods in vain; that their priests were deceivers or deceived; that their ceremonies were wicked or meaningless; that their temples were built by ignorance and fraud, and that no god heard their songs of praise, their cries of despair, their words of thankfulness; that on account of their religion no pestilence was stayed; that the earthquake and volcano, the flood and storm, went on their ways of death—while the real God looked on and laughed at their calamities and mocked at their fears.

We find now that the prosperity of nations has depended, not upon their religion, not upon the goodness or providence of some god, but on soil and climate and commerce, upon the ingenuity, industry, and courage of the people, upon the development of the mind, on the spread of education, on the liberty of thought and action; and that in this mighty panorama of national life reason has built and superstition has destroyed.

Being satisfied that all believe precisely as they must, and that religions have been naturally produced, I have neither praise nor blame for any man. Good men have had bad creeds, and bad men have had good ones. Some of the noblest of the human race have fought and died for the wrong. The brain of man has been the trysting-place of contradictions. Passion often masters reason, and "the state of man, like to a little kingdom, suffers then the nature of an insurrection."

In the discussion of theological or religious questions, we have almost passed the personal phase, and we are now weighing arguments instead of exchanging epithets and curses. They who really seek for truth must be the best of friends. Each knows that his desire can never take the place of fact, and that, next to finding truth, the greatest honor must be won in honest search.

We see that many ships are driven in many ways by the same wind. So men, reading the same book, write many creeds and lay out many roads to heaven. To the best of my ability, I have examined the religions of many countries and the creeds of many sects. They are much alike, and the testimony by which they are substantiated is of such a character that to those who believe is promised an eternal reward. In all the sacred books there are some truths, some rays of light, some words of love and hope. The face of savagery is sometimes softened by a smile—the human triumphs and the heart breaks into song. But in these books are also found the words of fear and hate, and from their pages crawl serpents that coil and hiss in all the paths of men.

For my part, I prefer the books that inspiration has not claimed. Such is the nature of my brain that Shakespeare gives me greater joy than all the prophets of the ancient world. There are thoughts that satisfy the hunger of the mind. I am convinced that Humboldt knew more of geology than the author of Genesis; that Darwin was a greater naturalist than he who told the story of the Flood; that Laplace was better acquainted with the habits of the sun and moon than Joshua could have been, and that Haeckel, Huxley, and Tyndal

know more about the earth and stars, about the history of man, the philosophy of life—more that is of use, ten thousand times—than all the writers of the sacred books.

I believe in the religion of reason—the gospel of this world; in the development of the mind, in the accumulation of intellectual wealth, to the end that man may free himself from superstitious fear, to the end that he may take advantage of the forces of nature to feed and clothe the world.

Let us be honest with ourselves. In the presence of countless mysteries; standing beneath the boundless heaven sown thick with constellations; knowing that each grain of sand, each leaf, each blade of grass, asks of every mind the answerless question; knowing that the simplest thing defies solution; feeling that we deal with the superficial and the relative, and that we are forever eluded by the real, the absolute—let us admit the limitations of our minds, and let us have the courage and the candor to say: We do not know.

The Christian religion rests on miracles. There are no miracles in the realm of science. The real philosopher does not seek to excite wonder, but to make that plain which was wonderful. He does not endeavor to astonish, but to enlighten. He is perfectly confident that there are no miracles in nature. He knows that the mathematical expression of the same relations, contents, areas, numbers and proportions must forever remain the same. He knows that there are no miracles in chemistry; that the attractions and repulsions, the loves and hatreds, of atoms are constant. Under like conditions, he is certain that like will always happen; that the product has been and forever will be the same; that the atoms or particles unite in definite, unvarying proportions—so many of one kind mix, mingle, and harmonise with just so many of another, and the surplus will be forever cast out. There are no exceptions. Substances are always true to their natures. They have no caprices, no prejudices, that can vary or control their action. They are “the same yesterday, to-day, and forever.”

In this fixedness, this constancy, this eternal integrity, the intelligent man has absolute confidence. It is useless to tell him that there was a time when fire would not consume the combustible, when water would not flow in obedience to the attraction of gravitation, or that there ever was a fragment of a moment during which substance had no weight.

Credulity should be the servant of intelligence. The ignorant have not credulity enough to believe the actual, because the actual appears to be contrary to the evidence of their senses. To them it is plain that the sun rises and sets, and they have not credulity enough to believe in the rotary motion of the earth—that is to say, they have not intelligence enough to comprehend the absurdities involved in their belief, and the perfect harmony between the rotation of the earth and all known facts. They trust their eyes, not their reason. Ignorance has always been and always will be at the mercy of appearance. Credulity, as a rule, believes everything except the truth. The semi-civilised believe in astrology, but who could convince them of the vastness of astronomical spaces, the speed of light, or the magnitude and number of suns and constellations? If Hermann and Humboldt could have appeared before savages, which would have been regarded as a god?

When men knew nothing of mechanics, nothing of correlation of force, and of its indestructibility, they were believers in perpetual motion. So when chemistry was a kind of sleight-of-hand, or necromancy, something accomplished by the aid of the supernatural, people talked about the transmutation of metals, the universal solvent, and the philosopher's stone. Perpetual motion would be a mechanical miracle; and the transmutation of metals would be a miracle in chemistry; and if we could make the result of multiplying two by two five, that would be a miracle in mathematics. No one expects to find a circle the diameter of which is just one-fourth of the circumference. If one could find such a circle then there would be a miracle in geometry.

In other words, there are no miracles in any science. The moment we understand a question or subject, the miraculous necessarily disappears. If anything actually happens in the chemical world, it will under like conditions happen again. No one need take an account of this result from the mouths of others: all can try the experiment for themselves. There is no caprice, and no accident.

It is admitted, at least by the Protestant world, that the age of miracles has passed away, and, consequently, miracles cannot at present be established by miracles; they must be substantiated by the testimony of witnesses who are said by certain writers—or, rather, by uncertain writers—to have lived several centuries ago; and this testimony is given to us, not by the witnesses themselves, not by persons who say that they talked with those witnesses, but by unknown persons who did not give the sources of their information.

The question is: Can miracles be established except by miracles? We know that the writers may have been mistaken. It is possible that they may have manufactured these accounts themselves. The witnesses may have told what they knew to be untrue, or they may have been honestly deceived, or the stories may have been true as first told. Imagination may have added greatly to them, so that after several centuries of accretion a very simple truth was changed to a miracle.

We must admit that all probabilities must be against miracles, for the reason that that which is probable cannot by any possibility be a miracle. Neither the probable nor the possible, so far as man is concerned, can be miraculous. The probability therefore says that the writers and witnesses were either mistaken or dishonest.

We must admit that we have never seen a miracle ourselves, and we must admit that, according to our experience, there are no miracles. If we have mingled with the world we are compelled to say that we have known a vast number of persons—including ourselves—to be mistaken, and many others who have failed to tell

the exact truth. The probabilities are on the side of our experience, and, consequently, against the miraculous; and it is a necessity that the free mind moves along the path of least resistance.

The effect of testimony depends on the intelligence and honesty of the witness and the intelligence of him who weighs. A man living in a community where the supernatural is expected, where the miraculous is supposed to be of almost daily occurrence, will, as a rule, believe that all wonderful things are the result of supernatural agencies. He will expect providential interference, and, as a consequence, his mind will pursue the path of least resistance, and will account for all phenomena by what to him is the easiest method. Such people, with the best intentions, honestly bear false witness. They have been imposed upon by appearances, and are victims of delusion and illusion.

In an age when reading and writing were substantially unknown, and when history itself was but the vaguest hearsay handed down from dotage to infancy, nothing was rescued from oblivion except the wonderful, the miraculous. The more marvellous the story, the greater the interest excited. Narrators and hearers were alike ignorant and alike honest. At that time nothing was known, nothing suspected, of the orderly course of nature—of the unbroken and unbreakable chain of causes and effects. The world was governed by caprice. Everything was at the mercy of a being, or beings, who were themselves controlled by the same passions that dominate man. Fragments of facts were taken for the whole, and the deductions drawn were honest and monstrous.

It is probably certain that all the religions of the world have been believed, and that all the miracles have found credence in countless brains; otherwise they could not have been perpetuated. They were not all born of cunning. Those who told were as honest as those who heard. This being so, nothing has been too absurd for human credence.

All religions, so far as I know, claim to have been miraculously founded, miraculously preserved, and mira-

culously propagated. The priests of all claimed to have messages from God, and claimed to have a certain authority, and the miraculous has always been appealed to for the purpose of substantiating the message and the authority.

If men believe in the supernatural, they will account for all phenomena by an appeal to supernatural means or power. We know that formerly everything was accounted for in this way except some few simple things with which man thought he was perfectly acquainted. After a time men found that under like conditions like would happen, and as to those things the supposition of supernatural interference was abandoned; but that interference was still active as to all the unknown world. In other words, as the circle of man's knowledge grew, supernatural interference withdrew, and was active only just beyond the horizon of the known.

Now, there are some believers in universal special providence—that is, men who believe in perpetual interference by a supernatural power, this interference being for the purpose of punishing or rewarding, of destroying or preserving, individuals and nations.

Others have abandoned the idea of providence in ordinary matters, but still believe that God interferes on great occasions and at critical moments, especially in the affairs of nations, and that his presence is manifest in great disasters. This is the compromise position. These people believe that an infinite being made the universe and impressed upon it what they are pleased to call "laws," and then left it to run in accordance with those laws and forces; that as a rule it works well, and that the divine Maker interferes only in cases of accident, or at moments when the machine fails to accomplish the original design.

There are others who take the ground that all is natural; that there never has been, never will be, never can be, any interference from without, for the reason that Nature embraces all, and that there can be no without or beyond.

The first class are Theists pure and simple; the

second are Theists as to the unknown, Naturalists as to the known; and the third are Naturalists without a touch or taint of superstition.

What can the evidence of the first class be worth? This question is answered by reading the history of those nations that believed thoroughly and implicitly in the supernatural. There is no conceivable absurdity that was not established by their testimony. Every law or every fact in nature was violated. Children were born without parents; men lived for thousands of years; others subsisted without food, without sleep; thousands and thousands were possessed with evil spirits, controlled by ghosts and ghouls; thousands confessed themselves guilty of impossible offences, and in courts, with the most solemn forms, impossibilities were substantiated by the oaths, affirmations, and confessions of men, women, and children.

These delusions were not confined to ascetics and peasants, but they took possession of nobles and kings; of people who were at that time called intelligent; of the then educated. No one denied these wonders, for the reason that denial was a crime punishable generally with death. Societies, nations, became insane—victims of ignorance, of dreams, and, above all, of fears. Under these conditions human testimony is not, and cannot be, of the slightest value. We now know that nearly all of the history of the world is false, and we know this because we have arrived at that phase or point of intellectual development where and when we know that effects must have causes, that everything is naturally produced, and that, consequently, no nation could ever have been great, powerful, and rich, unless it had the soil, the people, the intelligence, and the commerce. Weighed in these scales, nearly all histories are found to be fictions.

The same is true of religions. Every intelligent American is satisfied that the religions of India, of Egypt, of Greece and Rome, of the Aztecs, were and are false, and that all the miracles on which they rest are mistakes. Our religion alone is excepted. Every

intelligent Hindoo discards all religions and all miracles except his own. The question is: When will people see the defects in their own theology as clearly as they perceive the same defects in every other?

All the so-called false religions were substantiated by miracles, by signs and wonders, by prophets and martyrs, precisely as our own. Our witnesses are no better than theirs, and our success is no greater. If their miracles were false, ours cannot be true. Nature was the same in India as in Palestine.

One of the corner-stones of Christianity is the miracle of inspiration, and this same miracle lies at the foundation of all religions. How can the fact of inspiration be established? How could even the inspired man know that he was inspired? If he was influenced to write and did write, and did express thoughts and facts that to him were absolutely new, on subjects about which he had previously known nothing, how could he know that he had been influenced by an infinite being? And if he could know, how could he convince others?

What is meant by inspiration? Did the one inspired set down only the thoughts of a supernatural being? Was he simply an instrument, or did his personality color the message received and given? Did he mix his ignorance with the divine information, his prejudices and hatreds with the love and justice of the deity? If God told him not to eat the flesh of any beast that dieth of itself, did the same infinite being also tell him to sell this meat to the stranger within his gates?

A man says that he is inspired—that God appeared to him in a dream, and told him certain things. Now, the things said to have been communicated may have been good and wise; but will the fact that the communication is good or wise establish the inspiration? If, on the other hand, the communication is absurd or wicked, will that conclusively show that the man was not inspired? Must we judge from the communication? In other words, is our reason to be the final standard?

How could the inspired man know that the communication was received from God? If God in reality should

appear to a human being, how could this human being know who had appeared? By what standard would he judge? Upon this question man has no experience; he is not familiar enough with the supernatural to know gods even if they exist. Although thousands have pretended to receive messages, there has been no message in which there was, or is, anything above the invention of man. There are just as wonderful things in the uninspired as in the inspired books, and the prophecies of the heathen have been fulfilled equally with those of the Judæan prophets. If, then, even the inspired man cannot certainly know that he is inspired, how is it possible for him to demonstrate his inspiration to others? The last solution of this question is that inspiration is a miracle about which only the inspired can have the least knowledge, or the least evidence, and this knowledge and this evidence not of a character to convince even the inspired.

There is certainly nothing in the Old or the New Testament that could not have been written by uninspired human beings. To me there is nothing of any particular value in the Pentateuch. I do not know of a solitary scientific truth contained in the five books commonly attributed to Moses. There is not, as far as I know, a line in the book of Genesis calculated to make a human being better. The laws contained in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are for the most part puerile and cruel. Surely there is nothing in any of these books that could not have been produced by uninspired men. Certainly there is nothing calculated to excite intellectual admiration in the book of Judges or in the wars of Joshua; and the same may be said of Samuel, Chronicles, and Kings. The history is extremely childish, full of repetitions, of useless details, without the slightest philosophy, without a generalisation born of a wide survey. Nothing is known of other nations; nothing imparted of the slightest value; nothing about education, discovery, or invention. And these idle and stupid annals are interspersed with myth and miracle, with flattery for kings who supported priests, and with curses

and denunciations for those who would not hearken to the voice of the prophets. If all the historic books of the Bible were blotted from the memory of mankind, nothing of value would be lost.

Is it possible that the writer or writers of First and Second Kings were inspired, and that Gibbon wrote "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" without supernatural assistance? Is it possible that the author of Judges was simply the instrument of an infinite God, while John W. Draper wrote "The Intellectual Development of Europe" without one ray of light from the other world? Can we believe that the author of Genesis had to be inspired, while Darwin experimented, ascertained, and reached conclusions for himself?

Ought not the work of a God to be vastly superior to that of a man? And if the writers of the Bible were in reality inspired, ought not that book to be the greatest of books? For instance, if it were contended that certain statues had been chiselled by inspired men, such statues should be superior to any that uninspired man has made. As long as it is admitted that the Venus de Milo is the work of man, no one will believe in inspired sculptors—at least until a superior statue has been found. So in the world of painting. We admit that Corot was uninspired. Nobody claims that Angelo had supernatural assistance. Now, if some one should claim that a certain painter was simply the instrumentality of God, certainly the pictures produced by that painter should be superior to all others.

I do not see how it is possible for an intelligent human being to conclude that the Song of Solomon is the work of God, and that the tragedy of "Lear" was the work of an uninspired man. We are all liable to be mistaken, but the Iliad seems to me a greater work than the book of Esther, and I prefer it to the writings of Haggai and Hosea. Æschylus is superior to Jeremiah, and Shakespeare rises immeasurably above all the sacred books of the world.

It does not seem possible that any human being ever tried to establish a truth—anything that really happened

—by what is called a miracle. It is easy to understand how that which was common became wonderful by accretion—by things added, and by things forgotten—and it is easy to conceive how that which was wonderful became by accretion what was called supernatural. But it does not seem possible that any intelligent, honest man ever endeavored to prove anything by a miracle.

As a matter of fact, miracles could only satisfy people who demanded no evidence; else how could they have believed the miracle? It also appears to be certain that, even if miracles had been performed, it would be impossible to establish that fact by human testimony. In other words, miracles can only be established by miracles, and in no event could miracles be evidence except to those who were actually present; and in order for miracles to be of any value, they would have to be perpetual. It must also be remembered that a miracle actually performed could by no possibility shed any light on any moral truth, or add to any human obligation.

If any man has ever been inspired, this is a secret miracle, known to no person, and suspected only by the man claiming to be inspired. It would not be in the power of the inspired to give satisfactory evidence of that fact to anybody else.

The testimony of man is insufficient to establish the supernatural. Neither the evidence of one man nor of twelve can stand when contradicted by the experience of the intelligent world. If a book sought to be proved by miracles is true, then it makes no difference whether it was inspired or not; and if it is not true, inspiration cannot add to its value.

The truth is that the Church has always—unconsciously, perhaps—offered rewards for falsehood. It was founded upon the supernatural, the miraculous, and it welcomed all statements calculated to support the foundation. It rewarded the traveller who found evidences of the miraculous, who had seen the pillar of salt into which the wife of Lot had been changed, and the tracks of Pharaoh's chariots on the sands of the Red Sea. It heaped honors on the historian who filled his pages with

the absurd and the impossible. It had geologists and astronomers of its own, who constructed the earth and the constellations in accordance with the Bible. With sword and flame it destroyed the brave and thoughtful men who told the truth. It was the enemy of investigation and of reason. Faith and fiction were in partnership.

To-day the intelligence of the world denies the miraculous. Ignorance is the soil of the supernatural. The foundation of Christianity has crumbled, has disappeared, and the entire fabric must fall. The natural is true. The miraculous is false.

FREETHOUGHT PUBLICATIONS.

- THE AGE OF REASON (The Twentieth Century Edition).
By Thomas Paine. With a Biographical Introduction
and Annotations. By G. W. Foote. And a Beautiful
Portrait of Paine. Price 6d. Postage of single copies,
2d. Bound in cloth, 1s. 6d.
- THE BIBLE HANDBOOK for Freethinkers and Inquiring
Christians. Edited by G. W. Foote and W. P. Ball.
A new edition, revised, and handsomely printed. Cheap
Edition, paper covers, 1s. 6d.; cloth, 2s. 6d.
- FLOWERS OF FREETHOUGHT. First Series. Fifty-
one Selected Articles and Essays; 221 pages. Cloth,
2s. 6d.; postage 3d. Second Series (cloth), 2s. 6d.
- BIBLE ROMANCES. By G. W. Foote. The Second
(Revised) Edition Complete. 160 Pages. Bound in
Cloth. Price Two Shillings.
- CRIMES OF CHRISTIANITY. Chapters:—(1) Christ to
Constantine. (2) Constantine to Hypatia. (3) Monks.
(4) Pious Forgeries. (5) Pious Frauds. (6) Rise of the
Papacy. (7) Crimes of the Popes. (8) Persecution of
the Jews. (9) The Crusades. 224 pp., cloth, 2s. 6d.;
postage 3d. Hundreds of references are given to
standard authorities. No pains have been spared to
make the work a complete, trustworthy, final, unanswer-
able Indictment of Christianity. The Tree is judged by
its Fruit.
- FOREIGN MISSIONS: Their Dangers and Delusions. By
C. Cohen. Price 9d.
- GRAND-OLD BOOK, THE. A Reply to the Grand Old
Man. An Exhaustive Answer to the Right Hon. W. E.
Gladstone's *Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture*, 1s.
Bound in cloth, 1s. 6d., postage 1½d.

PUBLISHED EVERY THURSDAY,

"THE FREETHINKER."

ONE OF THE LIVELIEST AND MOST OUTSPOKEN JOURNALS
IN THE WORLD.

Edited by G. W. FOOTE. Price Twopence.

Send for Specimen Copy. Post Free.

With Catalogue of the Company's Publications.

THE FREETHOUGHT PUBLISHING COMPANY, LIMITED, 2 Newcastle St.,
Farringdon St., E.C.