

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

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A
WOODEN GOD

BY

COLONEL R. G. INGERSOLL

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INTRODUCTION.

THE contents of this pamphlet are reprinted from the complete "Dresden Edition" of the works of the late Colonel Ingersoll; and the title there attached has been retained on the present title-page. "A Wooden God" was written by Colonel Ingersoll on March 27, 1880, in the form of a letter to the *Chicago Times*. It is now published in England for the first time—with just the omission of the opening words "To the Editor." The lapse of twenty-three years has not impaired its pertinence or its value. It is still a very useful criticism on the dealings of the Christian nations with China.

A WOODEN GOD

TO-DAY Messrs. Wright, Dickey, O'Connor, and Murch, of the select committee on the causes of the present depression of labor, presented the majority special report upon Chinese immigration.

These gentlemen are in great fear for the future of our most holy and perfectly authenticated religion, and have, like faithful watchmen, from the walls and towers of Zion, hastened to give the alarm. They have informed Congress that "Joss has his temple of worship in the Chinese quarters, in San Francisco. Within the walls of a dilapidated structure is exposed to the view of the faithful the god of the Chinaman, and here are his altars of worship. Here he tears up his pieces of paper; here he offers up his prayers; here he receives his religious consolations, and here is his road to the celestial land;" that "Joss is located in a long, narrow room in a building in a back alley, upon a kind of altar;" that "he is a wooden image, looking as much like an alligator as a human being;" that the Chinese "think there is such a place as heaven;" that "all classes of Chinamen worship idols;" that "the temple is open every day at all hours;" that "the Chinese

have no Sunday ;” and this heathen god has “ huge jaws, a big red tongue, large white teeth, a half-dozen arms, and big, fiery eyeballs. About him are placed offerings of meat and other eatables — a sacrificial offering.”

No wonder that these members of the committee were shocked at such an image of God, knowing as they did that the only true God was correctly described by the inspired lunatic of Patmos in the following words :—

“ And there sat in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks *one* like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and *his* hairs *were* white like wool, as white as snow ; and his eyes *were* as a flame of fire ; and his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace ; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars : and out of his mouth went a sharp, two-edged sword : and his countenance *was* as the sun shineth in his strength.”

Certainly a large mouth filled with white teeth is preferable to one used as the scabbard of a sharp, two-edged sword. Why should these gentlemen object to a god with big, fiery eyeballs, when their own Deity has eyes like a flame of fire ?

Is it not a little late in the day to object to people because they sacrifice meat and other eatables to their god ? We all know that for thousands of years the “ real ” God was exceedingly fond of roasted meat ; that he loved the savor of burning flesh, and delighted in the perfume of fresh, warm blood.

The following account of the manner in which the “ living God ” desired that his chosen people should

sacrifice, tends to show the degradation and religious blindness of the Chinese:—

“Aaron therefore went unto the altar, and slew the calf of the sin offering, which *was* for himself. And the sons of Aaron brought the blood unto him: and he dipped his finger in the blood, and put *it* upon the horns of the altar, and poured out the blood at the bottom of the altar: But the fat, and the kidneys, and the caul above the liver of the sin-offering, he burnt upon the altar; as the Lord commanded Moses. And the flesh and the hide he burnt with fire without the camp. And he slew the burnt offering; and Aaron's sons presented unto him the blood, which he sprinkled round about upon the altar.....And he brought the meat offering, and took a handful thereof, and burnt *it* upon the altar.....He slew also the bullock and the ram for a sacrifice of peace offering, which *was* for the people: and Aaron's sons presented unto him the blood, which he sprinkled upon the altar round about, and the fat of the bullock and of the ram, the rump, and that which covereth the inwards and the kidneys, and the caul above the liver, and they put the fat upon the breasts, and he burnt the fat upon the altar. And the breast and the right shoulder Aaron waved for a wave offering before the Lord, as Moses commanded.”

If the Chinese only did something like this, we would know that they worshipped the “living” God. The idea that the supreme head of the “American system of religion” can be placated with a little meat and “ordinary eatables” is simply preposterous. He has always asked for blood, and has always asserted that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin.

The world is also informed by these gentlemen that “the idolatry of the Chinese produces a demoralising

effect upon our American youth by bringing sacred things into disrespect, and making religion a theme of disgust and contempt."

In San Francisco there are some three hundred thousand people. Is it possible that a few Chinese can bring our "holy religion" into disgust and contempt? In that city there are fifty times as many churches as joss-houses. Scores of sermons are uttered every week; religious books and papers are plentiful as leaves in autumn, and somewhat dryer; thousands of Bibles are within the reach of all. And there, too, is the example of a Christian City.

Why should we send missionaries to China if we cannot convert the heathen when they come here? When missionaries go to a foreign land, the poor, benighted people have to take their word for the blessings showered upon a Christian people; but when the heathen come here they can see for themselves. What was simply a story becomes a demonstrated fact. They come in contact with people who love their enemies. They see that in a Christian land men tell the truth; that they will not take advantage of strangers; that they are just and patient, kind and tender; that they never resort to force; that they have no prejudice on account of color, race or religion; that they look upon mankind as brethren; that they speak of God as a universal Father, and are willing to work, and even to suffer, for the good not only of their own countrymen, but of the heathen as well. All this the Chinese see and know, and why they still cling to the religion of their country is to me a matter of amazement.

We all know that the disciples of Jesus do unto others as they would that others should do unto them,

and that those of Confucius do not unto others anything that they would not that others should do unto them. Surely, such peoples ought to live together in perfect peace.

Rising with the subject, growing heated with a kind of holy indignation, these Christian representatives of a Christian people most solemnly declare that:—

“Anyone who is really endowed with a correct knowledge of our religious system, which acknowledges the existence of a living God and an accountability to him, and a future state of reward and punishment, who feels that he has an apology for this abominable pagan worship is not a fit person to be ranked as a good citizen of the American Union. It is absurd to make any apology for its toleration. It must be abolished and the sooner the decree goes forth by the power of this Government the better it will be for the interests of this land.”

I take this, the earliest opportunity, to inform these gentlemen composing a majority of the committee that we have in the United States no “religious system;” that this is a secular Government; that it has no religious creed; that it does not believe or disbelieve in a future state of reward and punishment; that it neither affirms nor denies the existence of a “living God;” and that the only god, so far as this Government is concerned, is the legally expressed will of a majority of the people. Under our flag the Chinese have the same right to worship a wooden God that you have to worship any other. The Constitution protects equally the church of Jehovah and the house of Joss. Whatever their relative positions may be in heaven, they stand upon a perfect equality in the United States.

This Government is an Infidel Government. We

have a Constitution with man put in and God left out ; and it is the glory of this country that we have such a Constitution.

It may be surprising to you that I have an apology for pagan worship, yet I have. And it is the same one that I have for the writers of this report. I account for both by the word *superstition*. Why should we object to their worshipping God as they please? If the worship is improper, the protestation should come not from a committee of Congress, but from God himself. If he is satisfied that is sufficient.

Our religion can only be brought into contempt by the actions of those who profess to be governed by its teachings. This report will do more in that direction than millions of Chinese could do by burning pieces of paper before a wooden image. If you wish to impress the Chinese with the value of your religion, of what you are pleased to call "the American system," show them that Christians are better than heathens. Prove to them that what you are pleased to call the "living God" teaches higher and holier things, a grander and purer code of morals than can be found upon pagan pages. Excel these wretches in industry, in honesty, in reverence for parents, in cleanliness, in frugality; and above all by advocating the absolute liberty of human thought.

Do not trample upon these people because they have a different conception of things about which even this committee knows nothing.

Give them the same privilege you enjoy of making a God after their own fashion. And let them describe him as they will. Would you be willing to have them remain, if one of their race, thousands of years ago, had pretended to have seen God, and had written of him as follows:—

"There went up a smoke out of his nostrils, and fire
 . . . out of his mouth devoured: coals were kindled by it,
and he rode upon a cherub and did fly."

Why should you object to these people on account of their religion? Your objection has in it the spirit of hate and intolerance. Of that spirit the Inquisition was born. That spirit lighted the fagot, made the thumb-screw, put chains upon the limbs, and lashes upon the backs of men. The same spirit bought and sold, captured and kidnapped human beings; sold babes, and justified all the horrors of slavery.

Congress has nothing to do with the religion of the people. Its members are not responsible to God for the opinions of their constituents, and it may tend to the happiness of the constituents for me to state that they are in no way responsible for the religion of the members. Religion is an individual, not a national matter. And where the nation interferes with the right of conscience, the liberties of the people are devoured by the monster superstition.

If you wish to drive out the Chinese, do not make a pretext of religion. Do not pretend that you are trying to do God a favor. Injustice in his name is doubly detestable. The assassin cannot sanctify his dagger by falling on his knees, and it does not help a falsehood if it be uttered as a prayer. Religion, used to intensify the hatred of men towards men under the pretence of pleasing God, has cursed this world.

A portion of this most remarkable report is intensely religious. There is in it almost the odor of sanctity; and when reading it, one is impressed with the living piety of its authors. But on the twenty-fifth page there are a few passages that must pain the hearts of true

believers. Leaving their religious views, the members immediately betake themselves to philosophy and prediction. Listen :—

“The Chinese race and the American citizen, whether native-born or one who is eligible to our naturalisation laws and becomes a citizen, are in a state of antagonism. They cannot, or will not, ever meet upon common ground, and occupy together the same social level. This is impossible. The pagan and the Christian travel different paths. This one believes in a living God ; and that one in a type of monsters and the worship of wood and stone. Thus in the religion of the two races of men they are as wide apart as the poles of the two hemispheres. They cannot now and never will approach the same religious altar. The Christian will not recede to barbarism, nor will the Chinese advance to the enlightened belt (whatever it is) of civilisation..... He cannot be converted to those modern ideas of religious worship which have been accepted by Europe and which crown the American system.”

Christians used to believe that through their religion all the nations of the earth were finally to be blest. In accordance with that belief missionaries have been sent to every land, and untold wealth has been expended for what has been called the spread of the gospel.

I am almost sure that I have read somewhere that “Christ died for *all* men,” and that “God is no respecter of persons.” It was once taught that it was the duty of Christians to tell all people the “tidings of great joy.” I have never believed these things myself, but have always contended that an honest merchant was the best missionary. Commerce makes friends, religion makes enemies ; the one enriches, and the other impoverishes ; the one thrives best where the truth is told,

the other where falsehoods are believed. For myself, I have but little confidence in any business, or enterprise, or investment that promises dividends only after the death of the stockholders.

But I am astonished that four Christian statesmen, four members of Congress, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, who seriously object to people on account of their religious convictions, should still assert that the very religion in which they believe—and the only religion established by the “living God,” head of the American system—is not adapted to the spiritual needs of one-third of the human race. It is amazing that these four gentlemen have, in the defence of the Christian religion, announced the discovery that it is wholly inadequate for the civilisation of mankind; that the light of the cross can never penetrate the darkness of China; “that all the labors of the missionary, the example of the good, the exalted character of our civilisation, make no impression upon the pagan life of the Chinese;” and that even the report of this committee will not tend to elevate, refine, and Christianise the yellow heathen of the Pacific coast. In the name of religion these gentlemen have denied its power, and mocked at the enthusiasm of its founder. Worse than this, they have predicted for the Chinese a future of ignorance and idolatry in this world, and, if the “American system” of religion is true, hell-fire in the next.

For the benefit of these four philosophers and prophets I will give a few extracts from the writings of Confucius, that will, in my judgment, compare favorably with the best passages of their report:—

“My doctrine is that man must be true to the

principles of his nature, and the benevolent exercise of them toward others.

"With coarse rice to eat, with water to drink, and with my bended arm for a pillow, I still have joy.

"Riches and honor acquired by injustice are to me but floating clouds.

"The man who, in view of gain, thinks of righteousness; who, in view of danger, forgets life, and who remembers an old agreement, however far back it extends, such a man may be reckoned a complete man.

"Recompense injury with justice, and kindness with kindness.

"There is one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life; Reciprocity is that word."

When the ancestors of the four Christian Congressmen were barbarians, when they lived in caves, gnawed bones, and worshipped dried snakes, the infamous Chinese were reading these sublime sentences of Confucius. When the forefathers of these Christian statesmen were hunting toads to get the jewels out of their heads, to be used as charms, the wretched Chinese were calculating eclipses, and measuring the circumference of the earth. When the progenitors of these representatives of the "American system of religion" were burning women charged with nursing devils, the people "incapable of being influenced by the exalted character of our civilisation" were building asylums for the insane.

Neither should it be forgotten that, for thousands of years the Chinese have honestly practised the great principle known as Civil Service Reform—a something that even the administration of Mr. Hayes has reached only through the proxy of promise.

If we wish to prevent the immigration of the Chinese,

let us reform our treaties with the vast empire from whence they came. For thousands of years the Chinese secluded themselves from the rest of the world. They did not deem the Christian nations fit to associate with. We forced ourselves upon them. We called, not with cards, but with cannon. The English battered down the door in the names of opium and Christ. This infamy was regarded as another triumph for the gospel. At last, in self-defence, the Chinese allowed Christians to touch their shores. Their wise men, their philosophers protested, and prophesied that time would show that Christians could not be trusted. This report proves that the wise men were not only philosophers but prophets.

Treat China as you would England. Keep a treaty while it is in force. Change it if you will, according to the laws of nations, but on no account excuse a breach of national faith by pretending that we are dishonest for God's sake.

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