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Ingersoll, The Dead Lion

In the history of religious controversy it has sometimes occurred that a fool has risen and shouted out views so typical and representative as to justify a particular attention denied to his less absurd partisans. That is the situation now, relative to the logomachy raging over the warm ashes of the late Col. Robert Ingersoll. Through the ramp and roar of the churches, the thunder of the theological captains, rises the penetrating treble of a person so artlessly pious, so innocent of knowledge and free of sense, that his every utterance credentials him as a child of candor and arrests attention like the wanton shrilling of a noontide locust cutting through the interested cackle of a hundred hens. That he happens to be an editorial writer is irrelevant, for it is impossible to suspect so ingenuous a soul of designs upon what may be called the Christian vote; he simply pours out his heart with the unpremeditated sincerity of a wild ass uttering his view of the scheme of things. I take it the man was providentially “raised up,” and speaks by inspiration of the Spirit of Religion.

“Robert G. Ingersoll,” says this son of nature, “was not a great atheist, nor a great agnostic. Dissimilar though they are, he aspired in his published lectures and ... distinctions.”

As it is no distinction to be either atheist or agnostic this must mean that Col. Ingersoll “aspired” to be a great atheist and a great agnostic. Where is the evidence? May not a man state his religious or irreligious views with the same presumption of modesty and mere sincerity that attaches to other intellectual action? Because one publicly affirms the inveracity of Moses must one be charged with ambition, that meanest of all motives? By denying the sufficiency of the evidences of immortality is one self-convicted of a desire to be accounted great?

Col. Ingersoll said the thing that he had to say, as I am saying this—as a clergyman preaches his sermon, as an author writes his book: partly for the exceeding great reward of expression, partly, it may be, for the lesser profit of payment. We all move along lines of least resistance; because a few of us find that this leads us to the temple of fame it does not follow that all are seeking that edifice with a conscious effort to achieve distinction. If any American has appraised at its true and contemptible value the applause of the people Robert Ingersoll did. If there has been but one such American he was the man.

Now listen to what further this ineffable idiot of the “Call” has to say of him.

His irreverence, however, his theory of deistical brutality, was a mere fantasy, unsustained by scholarship or by reason and contradicted by every element of his personal character. His love for his wife and for his children, his tenderness toward relatives and friends, would have been spurious and repulsive if in his heart he had not accepted what in speech he derided and condemned.

Here's richness, indeed! Whatever may be said of a "theory of deistical brutality" by scholarship and reason, I do not think—I really have not the civility to admit—that it is contradicted by a blameless life. If it were really true that the God of the Christians is not a particularly nice God the love of a man for wife and child would not necessarily and because of that be spurious and repulsive. Indeed, in a world governed by such a God, and subject therefore to all the monstrous evils and perils of the Divine caprice and malevolence, such affection would be even more useful and commendable than it is in this actual world of peace, happiness and security. As the stars burn brightest in a moonless night, so in the gloom of a wrath-ruled universe all human affections and virtues would have an added worth and tenderness. In order that life might be splended with so noble and heroic sentiments as grow in the shadow of disaster and are nourished by the sense of a universal peril and sorrow one could almost wish that some malign deity, omnipotent and therefore able to accomplish his purposes without sin and suffering for his children, had resisted the temptation to do so and had made this world a Vale of Tears.

The nineteenth century has produced great agnostics. Strauss, the German, and Renan, the Frenchman, were specimens of this particular cult. But Robert G. Ingersoll belonged to a lower range of scholarship and of thought. He had never studied the great German and French critics of the Bible. His "Mistakes of Moses" were pervaded by misapprehensions of the text of the Pentateuch.

It is indubitably true that Ingersoll was inferior in scholarship to Strauss and Renan, and in that and genius to the incomparable Voltaire: but it is equally true that his deficiencies were not disabilities in the work that he undertook. He knew his limitations and did not transgress them. He was not self-tempted into barren fields of scholastic controversy where common sense is sacrificed to "odious subtlety." In the work that he undertook he had no use for the dry-as-dust erudition of the modern German school of Biblical criticism—learned, ingenious, profound, admirable and futile. He was accomplished in neither Hebrew nor Greek. Aramaic was to him an unknown tongue, and I dare say that if asked he would have replied that Jesus Christ, being a Jew, spoke Hebrew. The "text of the Pentateuch" was not "misapprehended" by him: he simply let it alone, "even as you and I." What he criticised in "The Mistakes of Moses" is the English version. If that is not a true translation let those concerned to maintain its immunity from criticism amend it. They are not permitted to hold that it is good enough for belief and acceptance, but too inaccurate to justify an inexpert dissent. Ingersoll's limitations were the source of his power; at least they confined him to methods that are "understood of the people"; and to be understood by the greatest number should be the wish of him who tries to destroy what he thinks popular delusions. By the way, I observe everywhere the immemorial, dogs-eared complaint that he could "tear down" (we Americans always prefer to say that when we mean "pull down") but could not "build up." I am not aware that he ever tried to "build up." Believing that no religion was needful, he would have thought his work gloriously perfect if all religions had been effaced. The clamor of weak minds for something to replace the errors of which they may be deprived is one that the true iconoclast disregards. What he endeavors most to destroy is not idols, but idolatry. If in the place of the image that he breaks he set up another he would be like a physician who having cured his patient of a cramp should inoculate him with an itch. It is only just to say that the devout journalist whose holy utterance I am afflicting myself with the unhappiness of criticizing nowhere makes the hoary accusation that Ingersoll could "tear down" but not "build up." He probably overlooked it.

What Ingersoll attacked was the Bible as we have it—the English Bible—not the Bible as it may, can, must, might, would or should be in Hebrew and Greek. He had no controversy with scholars—not only knew himself unable to meet them on their own ground (occupied by no feet but theirs) but was not at all concerned with their faiths and convictions, nor with the bases of them. Hoping to remove or weaken a few popular errors, he naturally examined the book in which they are to be found—the book which has the assent and acceptance of those who hold them and derive them from it. He did not “go behind the record” as it is—nobody does excepting its advocates when it has been successfully impugned. What has influenced (mischievously, Ingersoll believed) the thought and character of the Anglo-Saxon race is not the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek Testament, but the English Bible. The fidelity of that to its originals, its self-sufficiency and independence of such evidences as only scholarship can bring to its exposition, these, as Aristotle would say, are matters for separate consideration. If God has really chosen to give his law to his children in tongues that only an infinitesimal fraction of them understand—has thrown it down amongst them for ignorant translators to misread, interested priesthoods to falsify and corrupt and imaginative commentators to make ridiculous—has made no provision against all this debauchery of the text and spirit of it, that must be because he preferred it so; for whatever occurs must occur because the omniscience and omnipotence permitting it wishes it to occur. Such are not the methods of our human legislators, who take the utmost care that the laws be unambiguous, printed in the language of those who are required to obey them and accessible to them in the original text. I’m not saying that that is the better and more sensible way; I only say that if the former is God’s way the fact relieves us all of any obligation to “restore” the text before discussing it and to illuminate its obscurities with the sidelights of erudition. Ingersoll had all the scholarship needful to his work: he knew the meanings of English words.

Says the complacent simpleton again:

It was idle for a man to deny the existence of God who confessed and proclaimed the principle of fraternity. The hard conception of annihilation had no place in sentences that were infused with the glow and with the heat of immortality.

As logic this has all the charm that inheres in the syllogism. All cows are quadrupeds; this is a quadruped: therefore this is a cow. The author of that first sentence would express his thought, naturally, something like this: All men are brothers; God is their only father: therefore there is a God. The other sentence is devoid of meaning, and is quoted only to show the view that this literary lummock is pleased to think he entertains of annihilation. It is to him a “hard conception”: that is, the state of unconsciousness which he voluntarily and even eagerly embraces every night of his life and in which he remained for countless millions of centuries before birth without discomfort is a most undesirable state. It is indeed, so very unwelcome that it will not come to him—he’ll not have it so. Out of nothingness he came, but into nothingness he will not return—he’ll die (first)! Life is a new and delightful toy and, faith! He means to keep it. If you’d ask him he would say that his possession of immortality is proved by his yearning for it; but men of sense know that we yearn, not for what we have, but for what we have not—and most strongly for what we haven’t the ghost of a chance to get.