

COL. ROBERT INGERSOLL ON "THE GODS."

A discourse delivered in Zion Church, Montreal, by Rev. Alfred J. Bray, April 4th, 1880.

Montreal has been visited within the last three days by a man who for some years now has succeeded in making himself notorious. Some over-timid people were greatly frightened at his promised visit, and even sought the authority of the Mayor to put a stop to this dangerous man, Col. Ingersoll. A very foolish proceeding, let me remark. In a free country all kinds of freedom must be allowed, and Mr. Ingersoll had just as much right to come here and say his say in his own manner, and according to his own discretion, as Mr. Hammond has to come and preach and teach in his way. If men are free to agree with us, they are also free to differ with us, to differ a little, to differ much, to differ altogether. If the Mayor had found a law by which he could prohibit Ingersoll from lecturing against our religious beliefs, I would have started an agitation at once for the repeal of that absurd and antiquated law. If hearing arguments against our faith is likely to unsettle us, then we had better be unsettled. We are badly off with all our religious literature and preaching, if we cannot endure any kind of criticism, and witticism and argument.

Having heard this champion of no-God and Ingersollianism, that is to say, nothing, I am bound to say that I do not think he would shake the faith of any fairly reasonable and well-balanced man. For although the lecturer gave evidence from the beginning to the end of the lecture that he has at command a very taking form of speech, which may be called the ornate colloquial, and has a tolerably vivid imagination, and a kind of wit which while often coarse is always comical, and although he somewhat understands the appeal *ad captandam vulgus*, he is singularly unfitted for the work he has undertaken. I mean, so far as accomplishing anything but the mere making of money for himself is concerned. I can find no signs of that culture in him for which we naturally look in the men who in these days pretend to attack our faith. Judging from appearances, I should say Mr. Ingersoll must have been brought up in some Western village, and that since leaving it he has read only the daily newspapers of New York, with occasional dips into Artemus Ward and Mark Twain to brace up the intellect, and store away a joke or two. The theology he attacks is of that kind which was hard and narrow, and opposed to all reason, but now is well-nigh obsolete. He took the most absurd and extravagant doctrines of hell, and heaven, and conversion, and prayer, and Providence ever preached by men who knew no better, but meant what they said, and against that fiery hell, and dull insipid heaven he laughed and scoffed to the content of himself and audience. He seemed utterly unaware that he was lashing dead horses. This champion, with sword of wit, made charges upon mere shadows, and every time as he came back for another dash at them would flourish his weapon, and smile, and say—do you see how I cut through them? If he has the misfortune to read a sermon, it is certain to be one by Moody, or one by Talmage, both earnest men and able to carry on their own work, but neither of them an intellectual giant, certainly. Even among preachers Mr. Ingersoll might have found men better able to expound to him the tenets of our faith. But he is no better advanced in matters of science. Poor man—he has got no further than Paley and his watch, and when he has crushed that—dial-plate, wheels and main-spring—under the heel of his light logic, he thinks he has demolished every argument we have at command which may seem to bear in the direction of science. He wound up what he evidently considered a most triumphant argument, by a most peculiar climax—to the effect, that to him God was much more curious than the watch, for while the watch had a maker, God had none. In truth, the lecturer appeared not to be quite sure whether Paley intended the watch to represent the world, or God the maker of it; but he came to the general conclusion, that if the watch had a maker and God had none, then it is very curious, and "there must be something wrong somewhere." To show how deeply versed he is in metaphysics, and science generally, he said he could not imagine that a power could create anything indestructible, and that force can only act upon matter. Six months' study in the line of philosophy and modern science would make him a wiser, and I dare say, a sadder man; but he will not take the study, for he knows that "knowledge increaseth sorrow," and his creed is: enjoy life as much as you can. If he knew a good deal more, I am sure he would enjoy his own witticism and argument a great deal less. I have no hesitation in saying that Mr. Ingersoll is just as ill-informed concerning the matters he brings under discussion, and is as narrow and bigoted in his atheism as the veriest sectarian in the City of Montreal. Yes, there is certainly "something wrong somewhere," and when Mr. Ingersoll was lecturing I felt sure that I had not far to go to lay my finger upon the spot.

Although the lecture on Thursday evening was a very ill-digested and ill-arranged affair, I picked out from the general chaos the main point upon which he dwelt and which he was anxious to carry. After much talk about the right of free speech, and that opinion is a matter of civilization, and that we need not defend an infinite God because He can defend Himself, and that we cannot sin against an infinite God because God is not conditioned on anything, but that we can do God an injustice by imputing to him the creation, or construction of what we call hell—he laid down his first thesis, that:

1. The gods of all nations have been like the nations who made them, therefore gods are things of human invention. But some confusion occurred just then in the lecturer's mind, for having made that general statement he began to tell us how that in some countries the people had made gods of animals because they thought those animals greater and more powerful than themselves. And yet the lecturer told us that we can only think of God—a personal God—as a man, for that is the highest form of intelligence known to us; we cannot even think of God as a woman—for Mr. Ingersoll is more intelligent than Mrs. Ingersoll; therefore, if any person shall try to think of God as a person, he must think of him as like Ingersoll the male. Now, reducing this to sober fact, what is it worth? Not much, if anything. Where the idea of God or gods began, no one can tell. So far as the Egyptians were concerned, their conception of gods came not from Abraham, nor from the Jewish race; and their representations were not in the form of a man. The Persians certainly never carved the image of a man to represent the god of their minds to their eyes. The gods of the Greeks? Well, there were hosts of them—forms rather than powers, representing art, beauty and pleasure. But Col. Ingersoll passed them all by with this inaccurate statement, and said he wanted to confine himself to the God of the Bible—"our God," as he called him. He says, If the Jews had not been prohibited from making graven images, they would have imaged God as a man, with black hair, black eyes, a flat face and an aquiline nose. To what period of Jewish history does he refer? We can gather no idea what conception Abraham had of God, for he only spoke of having been called out of Ur of the Chaldees; he is said to have seen angels, but God—never. Isaac meditated in the field. Jacob, at one supreme moment of his life, said a man wrestled with him. There is no sign that Joseph set up any form of God in his house in Egypt, although the Egyptians had their representations, and the decalogue had not been given forbidding any such thing to the sons of Abraham. Moses has an interview with an awful something that hides itself in a fiery bush; again, when it speaks on Sinai, it is a voice from fire and smoke. When Moses descends from the top of the lonely rock he finds his people bowing down to a golden calf, and not to the form of a man. What was the idea those people had as they stood at the foot of that rock?—a rabble suddenly become a nation; a lawless gang become an organized community. That God was an exaggerated and invisible Moses? I think not. Did they make their God? Was Jehovah—the Jehovah of Genesis and Exodus—the I AM of the Pentateuch—the Giver of the Decalogue and of that marvellous moral law and civil code which are yet the foundations of all good government—is that Jehovah the product of that disorganised and bankrupt crowd of Jews just fresh from a cruel exile? Did Moses think out that God, who keepeth mercy for thousands—forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin—and yet will visit the sins of the fathers upon the children? Did he fashion from his own mind that wonderful series of legislative enactments which in forty years civilized a people, taught them obedience to law and welded them into a compact community with equal rights for all. Did Moses evolve from his own consciousness that might must yield to right, and man must speak truth and act with strict justice? Did Moses invent the great idea that before the world was God was, and that God created the world and man, and was with man from the beginning, rewarding him when obedient and punishing him when disobedient? If Moses did not, who did? Nations have always invented their own gods and made them like themselves, have they? Who invented the Jehovah of Israel, Mr. Ingersoll, and was he like themselves? Surely you have not thought of these things at all. Surely you have evolved them out of your own prejudiced mind. The idea of God—from whence is that? How came it to be a thought in men's mind? What is the meaning of this awful struggle of mankind, everywhere and in all time, to express to themselves this inward sense of responsibility—this consciousness that they were under the rule of one who had a right to their obedience and could punish them for disobedience. As I understand humanity, if men made their own gods they would make them as less than themselves, and servants to be commanded and to do their pleasure; but instead of that, they attribute to them wondrous powers and invest them with marvellous wisdom. When they came to make an outward representation, naturally, they gave expression to their thought by making an image of that which could best represent to them the highest form of power and intelligence. The truth is that the doctrine of God is not based upon logic, for logic does not prove it; the intellect always proceeds from definite premises and must always end in definite and measured results; it can only argue from what it comprehends, from fixed points and along lines that may be traced, and from the knowable you cannot deduce the unknowable, nor from the finite can you deduce the infinite—logically; nor is it based upon revelation; this book—the Bible—assumes, but it does not prove—asserts, but does not argue; the doctrine of God is based upon individual consciousness; it comes out of a principle deep and permanent in man. Just as man has a body connected with the world of matter—ever drawing life and pleasure from it, so the soul of him is connected with the world of spirit, rooted in God, and draws from him that food which can satisfy the spiritual senses and appease the spiritual wants. Even Col. Ingersoll was compelled to confess that "there may be a God somewhere, whose every thought is a star,