

Ingersoll's Influence.

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THE reply of Dr. Henry M. Field to the question of the *Review*, concerning Robert G. Ingersoll's influence in the future is, on many accounts, extraordinary. It certainly in no degree expresses the view held by Ingersoll's friends.

Dr. Field says: "When a man dies who has been for a long time at the head of a party in politics or religion, it is natural to think that his party may die with him. In no case could this seem more probable than in the sudden death of the brilliant and defiant leader of Agnostics in this country. He is gone, and we cannot but ask ourselves whether his scattered followers will rally round some new leader, or be so demoralized that they can only wrap their cloaks around them and fall with dignity." This sounds well, but the facts do not warrant the rhetoric.

Robert G. Ingersoll was not at the head of anything like a religious or Agnostic party, and his "scattered followers" have something more enduring than the personality of a leader to which to give their allegiance.

He was the last man living to say to any other, "Follow me," or "Believe what I tell you." His dependence—his weapon—his shield—his torch, was logic. His supreme object in life was to lay bare the want of logic of the orthodox creeds, and by so doing to liberate the minds of people from dogmatism.

The magnetism of his splendid courage gave him the attitude of leadership. It was this, even more than his ability, that brought him to the front. Where was there another man who dared say the things he dared to say?

His "followers"—by which objectionable word Dr. Field probably means the persons who found logic resistless—were not of the class who accept authority for truth: they were, rather, discarding authority. His audiences were made up of people who think, and, with few exceptions, of people who began to think before they ever heard Ingersoll lecture. The question of his influence cannot be summarily and arbitrarily settled by the statement that he left no Agnostic party. All of the people who thronged to hear him were neither incipient Agnostics nor Atheists. There were all sorts and conditions of men and of minds in his audiences. They represented every shade of liberal thought. There were those who had experienced the inner revolt against the old doctrines from every conceivable cause. Many had found them illogical and therefore untrue; many found them unscientific and therefore untrue; others found them unspiritual and therefore untrue. To reject them does not argue oneself irreligious. One may be devoutly religious, and not believe in infant damnation; profoundly spiritual, yet not in harmony with the teaching of original sin; one may cling to a faith in God, yet it need not be a personal God, who, solely for his own glory, predestines some men and angels to everlasting life, and foreordains others to everlasting death.

The people "heard him gladly." They found his arguments logical and scientific; they found him honest and courageous. A certain proportion agreed with his Agnosticism, but Edmund Burke was doubtless right in declaring that "all men that are ruined are ruined on the side of their natural propensities," and he never made an Agnostic out of any one who was not so naturally. Nor could he ever make a materialist out of one to whom the "Inner Light" had shown itself, although that

one would just as surely be convinced of the redundancy of creed and dogma.

Dr. Field analyses Ingersoll's character, and decides that he was a man who loved his friends and hated his enemies; that he cared neither for time nor money; that he was generous to the degree of bad judgment; that he looked with equal pity on the poor and the criminal, and that he was one of the greatest orators that our country ever produced.

But all of this—he truthfully adds—is not the real test, and asks, what wisdom had he? What have unbelievers ever done for the world? Among unbelievers he quotes Tyndall, and as proof of Tyndall's unbelief, quotes his statement that "in matter could be found the promise and potency of all life," a statement that, to one less a materialist than Dr. Field, is a recognition of the immanence of God! But Dr. Field satirically adds, "What need, then, of a Creator over our heads, when we have a creative power under our feet?" "One after another," he says, "the advocates of Atheism find the ground sinking under their feet, while in their place come the great men of science—Newton, Faraday, Kelvin—and against such authorities no glittering theories make any impression." Right here it might be well to ask what were Ingersoll's "glittering theories?"

In closing he says: "This makes an end, so far as I can see, of the fear or the hope that the followers of Ingersoll, feeling deeply, as well they may, the loss to them by death, should make an organized body of Agnostics, not only to preserve his memory, but to perpetuate his belief or unbelief."

Belief or unbelief, with thinking people, does not begin nor end with the life or death of any one else. And evidently Dr. Field does not realize a fact that has become a matter of conviction to many, namely—that the shortest way to render a belief short-lived is to tie it up with an inelastic string called "party," label it "organization," and declare that here alone is absolute truth! Agnostics have learned this from theologians!

The conclusion of Dr. Field, then, is that the influence of Ingersoll is at an end.

That Ingersoll was fighting dogmas that were obsolete, as is often charged, is certainly a mistake. There still are persons who are afraid to "give up hell," as one expressed it to me not long since, and we still, in enlightened communities, hear conservative sermons on matters of doctrine. It was because a prominent Congregational minister refused to endorse the whole story, that the Philadelphia Y.M.C.A., less than two years ago, excluded him from their lecture hall, which had been engaged for him by the Hicksite branch of the Society of Friends.

There is, however, no doubt but that there has been change and modification of the old attitude. The question then is,—to what or whom is this change due? We may thank Robert Ingersoll for much of it. I will go further and say that I believe that upon no one class of people has his influence been more telling than upon the ministers of the Gospel themselves.

Perhaps among all of the absurd and illogical dogmas which Ingersoll set himself to ventilate, none was to him more of an aggravation than that of "predestination," and so severe were his blows, and so cutting his ridicule, and so convincing his reasoning, that at last the church people themselves have begun to declare, "We do not believe it—no one believes it—it is a man of straw!"

At an early date in the history of the church, this doctrine became a cause of disquietude, but has held its own with only slight vicissitudes until within the last fifty years. "It is an