

Individuality (1873)

By Robert Green Ingersoll

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"HIS SOUL WAS LIKE A STAR AND DWELT APART"

On every hand are the enemies of individuality and mental freedom. Custom meets us at the cradle and leaves us only at the tomb. Our first questions are answered by ignorance, and our last by superstition. We are pushed and dragged by countless hands along the beaten track, and our entire training can be summed up in the word -- suppression. Our desire to have a thing, or to do a thing, is considered as conclusive evidence that we ought not to have it, and ought not to do it. At every turn we run against cherubim and a flaming sword guarding some entrance to the Eden of our desire. We are allowed to investigate all subjects in which we feel no particular interest, and to express the opinions of the majority with the utmost freedom. We are taught that liberty of speech should never be carried to the extent of contradicting the dead witnesses of a popular superstition. Society offers continual rewards for self-betrayal, and they are nearly all earned and claimed, and some are paid.

We have all read accounts of Christian gentlemen remarking, when about to be hanged, how much better it would have been for them if they had only followed a mother's advice. But after all, how fortunate it is for the world that the maternal advice has not always been followed. How fortunate it is for us all that it is somewhat unnatural for a human being to obey. Universal obedience is universal stagnation; disobedience is one of the conditions of progress. Select any age of the world and tell me what would have been the effect of implicit obedience. Suppose the church had had absolute control of the human mind at any time, would not the words liberty and progress have been blotted from human speech? In defiance of advice, the world has advanced.

Suppose the astronomers had controlled the science of astronomy; suppose the doctors had controlled the science of medicine; suppose kings had been left to fix the forms of government; suppose our fathers had taken the advice of Paul, who said, "be subject to the powers that be, because they are ordained of God;" suppose the church could control the world to-day, we would go back to chaos and old night. Philosophy would be branded as infamous; Science would again press its pale and thoughtful face against the prison bars, and round the limbs of liberty would climb the bigot's flame.

It is a blessed thing that in every age some one has had individuality enough and courage enough to stand by his own convictions, -- some one who had the grandeur to say his say. I believe it was Magellan who said, "The church says the earth is flat; but I have seen its shadow on the moon, and I have more confidence even in a shadow than in the church." On the prow of his ship were disobedience, defiance, scorn, and success.

The trouble with most people is, they bow to what is called authority; they have a certain reverence for the old because it is old. They think a man is better for being dead, especially if he has been dead a long time. They think the fathers of their nation were the greatest and best of all mankind. All these things they implicitly believe because it is popular and patriotic, and because they were told so when they were very small, and remember distinctly of hearing mother read it out of a book. It is hard to over-estimate the influence of early training in the direction of superstition. You first teach children that a certain book is true -- that it was written by God himself -- that to question its truth is a sin, that to deny it is a crime, and that should they die without believing that book they will be forever damned without benefit of clergy. The consequence is, that long before they read that book, they believe it to be true. When they do read it their minds are wholly unfitted to investigate its claims. They accept it as a matter of course.

In this way the reason is overcome, the sweet instincts of humanity are blotted from the heart, and while reading its infamous pages even justice throws aside her scales, shrieking for revenge, and charity, with bloody hands, applauds a deed of murder. In this way we are taught that the revenge of man is the justice of God; that mercy is not the same everywhere. In this way the ideas of our race have been subverted. In this way we have made tyrants, bigots, and inquisitors. In this way the brain of man has become a kind of palimpsest upon which, and over the writings of nature, superstition has scrawled her countless lies. One great trouble is that most teachers are dishonest. They teach as certainties those things concerning which they entertain doubts. They do not say, "we think this is so." but "we know this is so." They do not appeal to the reason of the pupil, but they command his faith. They keep all doubts to themselves; they do not explain, they assert. All this is infamous. In this way you may make Christians, but you cannot make men; you cannot make women. You can make followers, but no leaders; disciples, but no Christs. You may promise power, honor, and happiness to all those who will blindly follow, but you cannot keep your promise.

A monarch said to a hermit, "Come with me and I will give you power."

"I have all the power that I know how to use," replied the hermit.

"Come," said the king, "I will give you wealth."

"I have no wants that money can supply." said the hermit.

"I will give you honor," said the monarch.

"Ah, honor cannot be given, it must be earned," was the hermit's answer. "Come," said the king, making a last appeal, "and I will give you happiness." "No," said the man of solitude, "there is no happiness without liberty, and he who follows cannot be free."

"You shall have liberty too," said the king. "Then I will stay where I am," said the old man.

And all the king's courtiers thought the hermit a fool.

Now and then somebody examines, and in spite of all keeps his manhood, and has the courage to follow where his reason leads. Then the pious get together and repeat wise saws, and exchange knowing nods and most prophetic winks. The stupidly wise sit owl-like on the dead limbs of the tree of knowledge, and solemnly hoot. Wealth sneers, and fashion laughs, and respectability passes by on the other side, and scorn points with all her skinny fingers, and all the snakes of superstition writhe and hiss, and slander lends her tongue, and infamy her brand, and perjury her oath, and the law its power, and bigotry tortures, and the church kills.

The church hates a thinker precisely for the same reason a robber dislikes a sheriff, or a thief despises the prosecuting witness. Tyranny likes courtiers, flatterers, followers, fawners, and superstition wants believers, disciples, zealots, hypocrites, and subscribers. The church demands worship -- the very thing that man should give to no being, human or divine. To worship another is to degrade yourself. Worship is awe and dread and vague fear and blind hope. It is the spirit of worship that elevates the one and degrades the many; that builds palaces for robbers, erects monuments to crime, and forges manacles even for its own hands. The spirit of worship is the spirit of tyranny. The worshiper always regrets that he is not the worshiped. We should all remember that the intellect has no knees, and that whatever the attitude of the body may be, the brave soul is always found erect. Whoever worships, abdicates. Whoever believes at the command of power, tramples his own individuality beneath his feet, and voluntarily robs himself of all that renders man superior to the brute.

The despotism of faith is justified upon the ground that Christian countries are the grandest and most prosperous of the world. At one time the same thing could have been truly said in India, in Egypt, in Greece, in Rome, and in every other country that has, in the history of the world, swept to empire. Numberless circumstances and countless conditions have produced the prosperity of the Christian world. The truth is, we have advanced in spite of religious zeal, ignorance, and opposition. The church has won no victories for the rights of man. Luther labored to reform the church -- Voltaire, to reform men. Over every fortress of tyranny has waved, and still waves, the banner of the church.

Wherever brave blood has been shed, the sword of the church has been wet. On every chain has been the sign of the cross. The altar and throne have leaned against and supported each other.

All that is good in our civilization is the result of commerce, climate, soil, geographical position, industry, invention, discovery, art, and science. The church has been the enemy of progress, for the reason that it has endeavored to prevent man thinking for himself. To prevent thought is to prevent all advancement except in the direction of faith.

Who can imagine the infinite impudence of a church assuming to think for the human race? Who can imagine the infinite impudence of a church that pretends to be the mouthpiece of God, and in his name threatens to inflict eternal punishment upon those

who honestly reject its claims and scorn its pretensions? By what right does a man, or an organization of men, or a god, claim to hold a brain in bondage? When a fact can be demonstrated, force is unnecessary; when it cannot be demonstrated, an appeal to force is infamous. In the presence of the unknown all have an equal right to think.

Over the vast plain, called life, we are all travelers, and not one traveler is perfectly certain that he is going in the right direction. True it is that no other plain is so well supplied with guide-boards. At every turn and crossing you will find them, and upon each one is written the exact direction and distance. One great trouble is, however, that these boards are all different, and the result is that most travelers are confused in proportion to the number they read. Thousands of people are around each of these signs, and each one is doing his best to convince the traveler that his particular board is the only one upon which the least reliance can be placed, and that if his road is taken the reward for so doing will be infinite and eternal, while all the other roads are said to lead to hell, and all the makers of the other guide-boards are declared to be heretics, hypocrites and liars. "Well," says a traveler, "you may be right in what you say, but allow me at least to read some of the other directions and examine a little into their claims. I wish to rely a little upon my own judgment in a matter of so great importance." "No, sir," shouts the zealot, "that is the very thing you are not allowed to do. You must go my way without investigation, or you are as good as damned already." "Well," says the traveler, "if that is so, I believe I had better go your way." And so most of them go along, taking the word of those who know as little as themselves. Now and then comes one who, in spite of all threats, calmly examines the claims of all, and as calmly rejects them all. These travelers take roads of their own, and are denounced by all the others as infidels and atheists.

Around all of these guide-boards, as far as the eye can reach, the ground is covered with mountains of human bones, crumbling and bleaching in the rain and sun. They are the bones of martyrs, murdered men and women -- fathers, mothers and babes.

In my judgment, every human being should take a road of his own. Every mind should be true to itself -- should think, investigate and conclude for itself. This is a duty alike incumbent upon pauper and prince. Every soul should repel dictation and tyranny no matter from what source they come -- from earth or heaven from men or gods. Besides, every traveler upon this vast plain should give to every other traveler his best idea as to the road that should be taken. Each is entitled to the honest opinion of all. And there is but one way to get an honest opinion upon any subject whatever. The person giving the opinion must be free from fear. The merchant must not fear to lose his custom, the doctor his practice, nor the preacher his pulpit. There can be no advance without liberty. Suppression of honest inquiry is retrogression, and must end in intellectual night. The tendency of orthodox religion to-day is toward mental slavery and barbarism. Not one of the orthodox ministers dare preach what he thinks if he knows a majority of his congregation think otherwise. He knows that every member of his church stands guard over his brain with a creed, like a club, in his hand. He knows that he is not expected to search after the truth, but that he is employed to defend the creed. Every pulpit is a pillory, in which stands a hired culprit, defending the justice of his own imprisonment.

Is it desirable that all should be exactly alike in their religious convictions? Is any such thing possible? Do we not know that there are no two persons alike in the whole world? No two trees, no two leaves, no two anything that are alike? Infinite diversity is the law. Religion tries to force all minds into one mould. Knowing that all cannot believe, the church endeavors to make all say they believe. She longs for the unity of hypocrisy, and detests the splendid diversity of individuality and freedom.

Nearly all people stand in great horror of annihilation, and yet to give up your individuality is to annihilate yourself. Mental slavery is mental death, and every man who has given up his intellectual freedom is the living coffin of his dead soul. In this sense, every church is a cemetery and every creed an epitaph.

We should all remember that to be like other people is to be unlike ourselves, and that nothing can be more detestable in character than servile imitation. The great trouble with imitation is, that we are apt to ape those who are in reality far below us. After all, the poorest bargain that a human being can make, is to give his individuality for what is called respectability.

There is no saying more degrading than this: It is better to be the tail of a lion than the head of a dog. It is a responsibility to think and act for yourself. Most people hate responsibility; therefore they join something and become the tail of some lion. They say, My party can act for me -- my church can do my thinking. It is enough for me to pay taxes and obey the lion to which I belong, without troubling myself about the right, the wrong, or the why or the wherefore of anything whatever. These people are respectable. They hate reformers, and dislike exceedingly to have their minds disturbed. They regard convictions as very disagreeable things to have. They love forms and enjoy beyond everything else, telling what a splendid tail their lion has and what a troublesome dog their neighbor is. Besides this natural inclination to avoid personal responsibility, is and always has been, the fact that every religionist has warned men against the presumption and wickedness of thinking for themselves. Reason has been denounced by all Christendom as the only unsafe guide. The church has left nothing undone to prevent man following the logic of his brain. The plainest facts have been covered with the mantle of mystery. The grossest absurdities have been declared to be self-evident facts. The order of nature has been as it were, reversed, that the hypocritical few might govern the honest many. The man who stood by the conclusion of his reason was denounced as a scorner and hater of God and his holy church. From the organization of the first church until this moment, to think your own thoughts has been inconsistent with membership. Every member has borne the marks of collar and chain, and whip. No man ever seriously attempted to reform a church without being cast out and hunted down by the hounds of hypocrisy. The highest crime against a creed is to change it. Reformation is treason.

Thousands of young men are being educated at this moment by the various churches. What for? In order that they may be prepared to investigate the phenomena by which we are surrounded? No! The object, and the only object, is that they may be prepared to defend a creed; that they may learn the arguments of their respective churches, and repeat them in the dull ears of a thoughtless congregation. If one, after being thus trained at the

expense of the Methodists, turns Presbyterian or Baptist, he is denounced as an ungrateful wretch. Honest investigation is utterly impossible within the pale of any church, for the reason, that if you think the church is right you will not investigate, and if you think it wrong, the church will investigate you. The consequence of this is, that most of the theological literature is the result of suppression, of fear, tyranny and hypocrisy.

Every orthodox writer necessarily said to himself; If I write that, my wife and children may want for bread. I will be covered with shame and branded with infamy; but if I write this, I will gain position, power, and honor. My church rewards defenders, and burns reformers.

Under these conditions all your Scotts, Henrys, and McKnights have written; and weighed in these scales, what are their commentaries worth? They are not the ideas and decisions of honest judges, but the sophisms of the paid attorneys of superstition. Who can tell what the world has lost by this infamous system of suppression? How many grand thinkers have died with the mailed hand of superstition upon their lips? How many splendid ideas have perished in the cradle of the brain, strangled in the poison-coils of that python, the Church!

For thousands of years a thinker was hunted down like an escaped convict. To him who had braved the church, every door was shut, every knife was open. To shelter him from the wild storm, to give him a crust when dying, to put a cup of water to his cracked and bleeding lips; these were all crimes, not one of which the church ever did forgive; and with the justice taught of her God, his helpless children were exterminated as scorpions and vipers.

Who at the present day can imagine the courage, the devotion to principle, the intellectual and moral grandeur it once required to be an infidel, to brave the church, her racks, her fagots, her dungeons, her tongues of fire, -- to defy and scorn her heaven and her hell -- her devil and her God? They were the noblest sons of earth. They were the real saviors of our race, the destroyers of superstition and the creators of Science. They were the real Titans who bared their grand foreheads to all the thunderbolts of all the gods.

The church has been, and still is, the great robber. She has rifled not only the pockets but the brains of the world. She is the stone at the sepulchre of liberty; the upas tree, in whose shade the intellect of man has withered; the Gorgon beneath whose gaze the human heart has turned to stone. Under her influence even the Protestant mother expects to be happy in heaven, while her brave boy, who fell fighting for the rights of man, shall writhe in hell.

It is said that some of the Indian tribes place the heads of their children between pieces of bark until the form of the skull is permanently changed. To us this seems a most shocking custom: and yet, after all, is it as bad as to put the souls of our children in the strait-jacket of a creed? to so utterly deform their minds that they regard the God of the Bible as a being of infinite mercy, and really consider it a virtue to believe a thing just because it seems unreasonable? Every child in the Christian world has uttered its wondering protest

against this outrage. All the machinery of the church is constantly employed in corrupting the reason of children. In every possible way they are robbed of their own thoughts and forced to accept the statements of others. Every Sunday school has for its object the crushing out of every germ of individuality. The poor children are taught that nothing can be more acceptable to God than unreasoning obedience and eyeless faith, and that to believe God did an impossible act, is far better than to do a good one yourself. They are told that all religions have been simply the John-the-Baptists of ours; that all the gods of antiquity have withered and shrunk into the Jehovah of the Jews; that all the longings and aspirations of the race are realized in the motto of the Evangelical Alliance. "Liberty in non-essentials;" that all there is, or ever was, of religion can be found in the apostles' creed; that there is nothing left to be discovered; that all the thinkers are dead, and all the living should simply be believers; that we have only to repeat the epitaph found on the grave of wisdom; that grave-yards are the best possible universities and that the children must be forever beaten with the bones of the fathers.

It has always seemed absurd to suppose that a god would choose for his companions, during all eternity, the dear souls whose highest and only ambition is to obey. He certainly would now and then be tempted to make the same remark made by an English gentleman to his poor guest. The gentleman had invited a man in humble circumstances to dine with him. The man was so overcome with the honor that to everything the gentleman said he replied Yes. Tired at last with the monotony of acquiescence, the gentleman cried out, "For God's sake, my good man, say 'no,' just once, so there will be two of us."

Is it possible that an infinite God created this world simply to be the dwelling-place of slaves and serfs? simply for the purpose of raising orthodox Christians? That he did a few miracles to astonish them; that all the evils of life are simply his punishments, and that he is finally going to turn heaven into a kind of religious museum filled with Baptist barnacles, petrified Presbyterians and Methodist mummies? I want no heaven for which I must give my reason; no happiness in exchange for my liberty, and no immortality that demands the surrender of my individuality. Better rot in the windowless tomb, to which there is no door but the red mouth of the pallid worm, than wear the jeweled collar even of a god.

Religion does not, and cannot, contemplate man as free. She accepts only the homage of the prostrate, and scorns the offerings of those who stand erect. She cannot tolerate the liberty of thought. The wide and sunny fields belong not to her domain. The star-lit heights of genius and individuality are above and beyond her appreciation and power. Her subjects cringe at her feet, covered with the dust of obedience. They are not athletes standing posed by rich life and brave endeavor like antique statues, but shriveled deformities, studying with furtive glance the cruel face of power.

No religionist seems capable of comprehending this plain truth. There is this difference between thought and action: for our actions we are responsible to ourselves and to those injuriously affected; for thoughts, there can, in the nature of things, be no responsibility to gods or men, here or hereafter. And yet the Protestant has vied with the Catholic in

denouncing freedom of thought; and while I was taught to hate Catholicism with every drop of my blood, it is only justice to say, that in all essential particulars it is precisely the same as every other religion. Luther denounced mental liberty with all the coarse and brutal vigor of his nature; Calvin despised, from the very bottom of his petrified heart, anything that even looked like religious toleration, and solemnly declared that to advocate it was to crucify Christ afresh. All the founders of all the orthodox churches have advocated the same infamous tenet. The truth is, that what is called religion is necessarily inconsistent with free thought.

A believer is a bird in a cage, a Freethinker is an eagle parting the clouds with tireless wing. At present, owing to the inroads that have been made by liberals and infidels, most of the churches pretend to be in favor of religious liberty. Of these churches we will ask this question: How can a man, who conscientiously believes in religious liberty, worship a God who does not? They say to us: We will not imprison you on account of your belief, but our God will. We will not burn you because you throw away the sacred Scriptures, but their author will. We think it an infamous crime to persecute our brethren for opinion's sake, -- but the God, whom we ignorantly worship, will on that account, damn his own children forever.

Why is it that these Christians not only detest the infidels, but cordially despise each other? Why do they refuse to worship in the temples of each other? Why do they care so little for the damnation of men, and so much for the baptism of children? Why will they adorn their churches with the money of thieves and flatter vice for the sake of subscriptions? Why will they attempt to bribe Science to certify to the writings of God? Why do they torture the words of the great into an acknowledgment of the truth of Christianity? Why do they stand with hat in hand before presidents, kings, emperors, and scientists, begging, like Lazarus, for a few crumbs of religious comfort? Why are they so delighted to find an allusion to Providence in the message of Lincoln? Why are they so afraid that some one will find out that Paley wrote an essay in favor of the Epicurean philosophy, and that Sir Isaac Newton was once an infidel? Why are they so anxious to show that Voltaire recanted; that Paine died palsied with fear; that the Emperor Julian cried out "Galilean, thou hast conquered"; that Gibbon died a Catholic; that Agassiz had a little confidence in Moses; that the old Napoleon was once complimentary enough to say that he thought Christ greater than himself or Caesar; that Washington was caught on his knees at Valley Forge; that blunt old Ethan Allen told his child to believe the religion of her mother; that Franklin said, "Don't unchain the tiger, and that Volney got frightened in a storm at sea?

Is it because the foundation of their temple is crumbling, because the walls are cracked, the pillars leaning, the great dome swaying to its fall and because Science has written over the high altar its MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN -- the old words, destined to be the epitaph of all religions?

Every assertion of individual independence has been a step toward infidelity. Luther started toward Humboldt, -- Wesley, toward John Stuart Mill. To really reform the church

is to destroy it. Every new religion has a little less superstition than the old, so that the religion of Science is but a question of time.

I will not say the church has been an unmitigated evil in all respects. Its history is infamous and glorious. It has delighted in the production of extremes. It has furnished murderers for its own martyrs. It has sometimes fed the body, but has always starved the soul. It has been a charitable highwayman -- a profligate beggar -- a generous pirate. It has produced some angels and a multitude of devils. It has built more prisons than asylums. It made a hundred orphans while it cared for one. In one hand it has carried the alms-dish and in the other a sword. It has founded schools and endowed universities for the purpose of destroying true learning. It filled the world with hypocrites and zealots, and upon the cross of its own Christ it crucified the individuality of man. It has sought to destroy the independence of the soul and put the world upon its knees. This is its crime. The commission of this crime was necessary to its existence. In order to compel obedience it declared that it had the truth, and all the truth; that God had made it the keeper of his secrets; his agent and his vicegerent. It declared that all other religions were false and infamous. It rendered all compromise impossible and all thought superfluous. Thought was its enemy, obedience was its friend. Investigation was fraught with danger; therefor investigation was suppressed. The holy of holies was behind the curtain. All this was upon the principle that forgers hate to have the signature examined by an expert, and that imposture detests curiosity.

He that hath ears to hear, let him hear has always been the favorite text of the church.

In short, Christianity has always opposed every forward movement of the human race. Across the highway of progress it has always been building breastworks of Bibles, tracts, commentaries, prayer-books, creeds, dogmas and platforms, and at every advance the Christians have gathered together behind these heaps of rubbish and shot the poisoned arrows of malice at the soldiers of freedom.

And even the liberal Christian of to-day has his holy of holies, and in the niche of the temple of his heart has his idol. He still clings to a part of the old superstition, and all the pleasant memories of the old belief linger in the horizon of his thoughts like a sunset. We associate the memory of those we love with the religion of our childhood. It seems almost a sacrilege to rudely destroy the idols that our fathers worshiped, and turn their sacred and beautiful truths into the fables of barbarism. Some throw away the Old Testament and cling to the New, while others give up everything except the idea that there is a personal God, and that in some wonderful way we are the objects of his care.

Even this, in my opinion, as Science, the great iconoclast, marches onward, will have to be abandoned with the rest. The great ghost will surely share the fate of the little ones. They fled at the first appearance of the dawn, and the other will vanish with the perfect day. Until then the independence of man is little more than a dream. Overshadowed by an immense personality, in the presence of the irresponsible and the infinite, the individuality of man is lost, and he falls prostrate in the very dust of fear. Beneath the frown of the absolute, man stands a wretched, trembling slave, -- beneath his smile he is

at best only a fortunate serf. Governed by a being whose arbitrary will is law, chained to the chariot of power, his destiny rests in the pleasure of the unknown. Under these circumstances, what wretched object can he have in lengthening out his aimless life?

And yet, in most minds, there is a vague fear of the gods -- a shrinking from the malice of the skies. Our fathers were slaves, and nearly all their children are mental serfs. The enfranchisement of the soul is a slow and painful process. Superstition, the mother of those hideous twins, Fear and Faith, from her throne of skulls, still rules the world, and will until the mind of woman ceases to be the property of priests.

When women reason, and babes sit in the lap of philosophy, the victory of reason over the shadowy host of darkness will be complete.

In the minds of many, long after the intellect has thrown aside as utterly fabulous the legends of the church, there still remains a lingering suspicion, born of the mental habits contracted in childhood, that after all there may be a grain of truth in these mountains of theological mist, and that possibly the superstitious side is the side of safety.

A gentleman, walking among the ruins of Athens, came upon a fallen statue of Jupiter; making an exceedingly low bow he said: "O Jupiter! I salute thee." He then added: "Should you ever sit upon the throne of heaven again, do not, I pray you, forget that I treated you politely when you were prostrate."

We have all been taught by the church that nothing is so well calculated to excite the ire of the Deity as to express a doubt as to his existence, and that to deny it is an unpardonable sin. Numerous well-attested instances are referred to of atheists being struck dead for denying the existence of God. According to these religious people, God is infinitely above us in every respect, infinitely merciful, and yet he cannot bear to hear a poor finite man honestly question his existence. Knowing, as he does, that his children are groping in darkness and struggling with doubt and fear; knowing that he could enlighten them if he would he still holds the expression of a sincere doubt as to his existence, the most infamous of crimes. According to orthodox logic, God having furnished us with imperfect minds, has a right to demand a perfect result.

Suppose Mr. Smith should overhear a couple of small bugs holding a discussion as to the existence of Mr. Smith, and suppose one should have the temerity to declare, upon the honor of a bug, that he had examined the whole question to the best of his ability, including the argument based upon design, and had come to the conclusion that no man by the name of Smith had ever lived. Think then of Mr. Smith flying into an ecstasy of rage, crushing the atheist bug beneath his iron heel, while he exclaimed "I will teach you, blasphemous wretch, that Smith is a diabolical fact!" What then can we think of a God who would open the artillery of heaven upon one of his own children for simply expressing his honest thought? And what man who really thinks can help repeating the words of Ennius: "If there are gods they certainly pay no attention to the affairs of man."

Think of the millions of men and women who have been destroyed simply for loving and worshiping this God. Is it possible that this God, having infinite power, saw his loving and heroic children languishing in the darkness of dungeons; heard the clank of their chains when they lifted their hands to him in the agony of prayer; saw them stretched upon the bigot's rack, where death alone had pity; saw the serpents of flame crawl hissing round their shrinking forms -- saw all this for sixteen hundred years and sat as silent as a stone?

From such a God, why should man expect assistance? Why should he waste his days in fruitless prayer? Why should he fall upon his knees and implore a phantom -- a phantom that is deaf, and dumb, and blind?

Although we live in what is called a free government, -- and politically we are free, -- there is but little religious liberty in America. Society demands, either that you belong to some church, or that you suppress your opinions. It is contended by many that ours is a Christian government, founded upon the Bible, and that all who look upon that book as false or foolish are destroying the foundation of our country. The truth is, our government is not founded upon the rights of gods, but upon the rights of men. Our Constitution was framed, not to declare and uphold the deity of Christ, but the sacredness of humanity. Ours is the first government made by the people and for the people. It is the only nation with which the gods have had nothing to do. And yet there are some judges dishonest and cowardly enough to solemnly decide that this is a Christian country, and that our free institutions are based upon the infamous laws of Jehovah. Such judges are the Jeffries of the church. They believe that decisions, made by hirelings at the bidding of kings, are binding upon man forever. They regard old law as far superior to modern justice. They are what might be called orthodox judges. They spend their days in finding out, not what ought to be, but what has been. With their backs to the sunrise they worship the night. There is only one future event with which they concern themselves, and that is their reelection. No honest court ever did, or ever will decide that our Constitution is Christian. The Bible teaches that the powers that be, are ordained of God. The Bible teaches that God is the source of all authority, and that all kings have obtained their power from him. Every tyrant has claimed to be the agent of the Most High. The Inquisition was founded, not in the name of man, but in the name of God. All the governments of Europe recognize the greatness of God, and the littleness of the people. In all ages, hypocrites, called priests, have put crowns upon the heads of thieves called kings.

The Declaration of Independence announces the sublime truth, that all power comes from the people. This was a denial, and the first denial of a nation, of the infamous dogma that God confers the right upon one man to govern others. It was the first grand assertion of the dignity of the human race. It declared the governed to be the source of power, and in fact denied the authority of any and all gods. Through the ages of slavery -- through the weary centuries of the lash and chain, God was the acknowledged ruler of the world. To enthrone man, was to dethrone God.

To Paine, Jefferson, and Franklin, are we indebted, more than to all others, for a human government, and for a Constitution in which no God is recognized superior to the legally expressed will of the people.

They knew that to put God in the Constitution was to put man out. They knew that the recognition of a Deity would be seized upon by fanatics and zealots as a pretext for destroying the liberty of thought. They knew the terrible history of the church too well to place in her keeping, or in the keeping of her God, the sacred rights of man. They intended that all should have the right to worship, or not to worship; that our laws should make no distinction on account of creed. They intended to found and frame a government for man, and for man alone. They wished to preserve the individuality and liberty of all; to prevent the few from governing the many, and the many from persecuting and destroying the few.

Notwithstanding all this, the spirit of persecution still lingers in our laws. In many of the States, only those who believe in the existence of some kind of God, are under the protection of the law.

The supreme court of Illinois decided, in the year of grace 1856, that an unbeliever in the existence of an intelligent First Cause could not be allowed to testify in any court. His wife and children might have been murdered before his very face, and yet in the absence of other witnesses the murderer could not have even been indicted. The atheist was a legal outcast. To him, Justice was not only blind, but deaf. He was liable, like other men, to support the Government, and was forced to contribute his share towards paying the salaries of the very judges who decided that under no circumstances could his voice be heard in any court. This was the law of Illinois and so remained until the adoption of the new Constitution. By such infamous means has the church endeavored to chain the human mind, and protect the majesty of her God. The fact is, we have no national religion, and no national God; but every citizen is allowed to have a religion and a God of his own, or to reject all religions and deny the existence of all gods. The church, however, never has, and never will understand and appreciate the genius of our Government.

Last year, in a convention of Protestant bigots, held in the city of New York for the purpose of creating public opinion in favor of a religious amendment to the Federal Constitution, a reverend doctor of divinity, speaking of atheists, said: What are the rights of the atheist? I would tolerate him as I would tolerate a poor lunatic. I would tolerate him as I would tolerate a conspirator. He may live and go free, hold his lands and enjoy his home -- he may even vote; but for any higher or more advanced citizenship, he is, as I hold, utterly disqualified. These are the sentiments of the church to-day.

Give the church a place in the Constitution, let her touch once more the sword of power, and the priceless fruit of all the ages will turn to ashes on the lips of men.

In religious ideas and conceptions there has been for ages a slow and steady development. At the bottom of the ladder (speaking of modern times) is Catholicism, and

at the top is Science. The intermediate rounds of this ladder are occupied by the various sects, whose name is legion.

But whatever may be the truth upon any subject has nothing to do with our right to investigate that subject, and express any opinion we may form. All that I ask is the same right I freely accord to all others.

A few years ago a Methodist clergyman took it upon himself to give me a piece of friendly advice. "Although you may disbelieve the Bible," said he, "you ought not to say so. That, you should keep to yourself."

"Do you believe the Bible," said I.

He replied, "Most assuredly."

To which I retorted, "Your answer conveys no information to me. You may be following your own advice. You told me to suppress my opinions. Of course a man who will advise others to dissimulate will not always be particular about telling the truth himself."

There can be nothing more utterly subversive of all that is really valuable than the suppression of honest thought -- No man, worthy of the form he bears, will at the command of church or state solemnly repeat a creed his reason scorns.

It is the duty of each and every one to maintain his individuality. "This above all, to thine own-self be true, and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man." It is a magnificent thing to be the sole proprietor of yourself. It is a terrible thing to wake up at night and say, "There is nobody in this bed." It is humiliating to know that your ideas are all borrowed; that you are indebted to your memory for your principles; that your religion is simply one of your habits, and that you would have convictions if they were only contagious. It is mortifying to feel that you belong to a mental mob and cry "crucify him," because the others do; that you reap what the great and brave have sown and that you can benefit the world only by leaving it.

Surely every human being ought to attain to the dignity of the unit. Surely it is worth something to be one, and to feel that the census of the universe would be incomplete without counting you. Surely there is grandeur in knowing that in the realm of thought, at least, you are without a chain; that you have the right to explore all heights and all depths; that there are no walls nor fences, nor prohibited places, nor sacred corners in all the vast expanse of thought; that your intellect owes no allegiance to any being, human or divine; that you hold all in fee and upon no condition and by no tenure whatever; that in the world of mind you are relieved from all personal dictation, and from the ignorant tyranny of majorities. Surely it is worth something to feel that there are no priests, no popes, no parties, no governments, no kings, no gods, to whom your intellect can be compelled to pay a reluctant homage. Surely it is a joy to know that all the cruel ingenuity of bigotry can devise no prison, no dungeon, no cell in which for one instant to confine a thought; that ideas cannot be dislocated by racks, nor crushed in iron boots, nor burned with fire.

Surely it is sublime to think that the brain is a castle, and that within its curious bastions and winding halls the soul, in spite of all worlds and all beings, is the supreme sovereign of itself.

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