

The Limits Of Toleration (1888)

By Robert Green Ingersoll

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A discussion between Col. Robert G. Ingersoll, Hon. Frederick R. Coudert, Ex-Gov. Stewart L. Woodford, before the Nineteenth Century Club of New York, at the Metropolitan Opera House, May 8, 1888. The points for discussion, as submitted in advance, were the following propositions:

First. Thought is a necessary natural product -- the result of what is called impressions made through the medium of the senses upon the brain, not forgetting the fact of heredity.

Second. No human being is accountable to any being -- human or divine -- for his or her thoughts.

Third. Human beings have a certain interest in the thoughts of each other, and one who undertakes to tell his thoughts should be honest.

Fourth. All have an equal right to express their thoughts upon all subjects.

Fifth. For one man to say to another, "I tolerate you," is an assumption of authority -- not a disclaimer, but a waiver, of the right to persecute.

Sixth. Each man has the same right to express to the whole world his ideas, that the rest of the world have to express their thoughts to him.

Courtland Palmer, Esq., President of the club, in introducing Mr. Ingersoll, among other things said;

"The inspiration of the orator of the evening seems to be that of the great Victor Hugo, who uttered the august saying, 'There shall be no slavery of the mind.'

"When I was in Paris, about a year ago, I visited the tomb of Victor Hugo. It was placed in a recess in the crypt of the Pantheon. Opposite it was the tomb of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Near by, in another recess, was the memorial statue of Voltaire; and I felt, as I looked at these monuments, that had Colonel Ingersoll been born in France, and had he passed in his long life account, the acclaim of the liberal culture of France would have enlarged that trio into a quartette.

"Colonel Ingersoll has appeared in several important debates in print, notably with Judge Jeremiah S. Black, formerly Attorney- General of the United States: lately in the pages of The North American Review with the Rev. Dr. Henry M. Field, and last but not least the Right Hon. William E. Gladstone, England's greatest citizen, has taken up the cudgel

against him in behalf of his view of Orthodoxy. To-night, I believe for the first time, the colonel has consented to appear in a colloquial discussion, I have now the honor to introduce this distinguished orator,:

THE LIMITATIONS OF TOLERATION

May 8, 1888

COLONEL INGERSOLL'S OPENING

Ladies, Mr. President and Gentlemen:

I am here to-night for the purpose of defending your right to differ with me. I want to convince you that you are under no compulsion to accept my creed; that you are, so far as I am concerned, absolutely free to follow the torch of your reason according to your conscience; and I believe that you are civilized to that degree that you will extend to me the right that you claim for yourselves.

I admit, at the very threshold, that every human being thinks as he must; and the first proposition really is, whether man has the right to think. It will bear but little discussion, for the reason that no man can control his thought. If you think you can, what are you going to think to-morrow? What are you going to think next year? If you can absolutely control your thought, can you stop thinking?

The question is, has the will any power over the thought? What is thought? It is the result of nature -- of the outer world -- first upon the senses -- those impressions left upon the brain as pictures of things in the outward world, and these pictures are transformed into, or produce, thought; and as long as the doors of the senses are open, thoughts will be produced. Whoever looks at anything in nature, thinks. Whoever hears any sound -- or any symphony -- no matter what -- thinks. Whoever looks upon the sea, or on a star, or on a flower, or on the face of a fellow-man, thinks, and the result of that look is an absolute necessity. The thought produced will depend upon your brain, upon your experience, upon the history of your life.

One who looks upon the sea, knowing that the one he loved the best had been devoured by its hungry waves, will have certain thoughts; and he who sees it for the first time, will have different thoughts. In other words, no two brains are alike; no two lives have been, or are, or ever will be the same. Consequently, nature cannot produce the same effect upon any two brains, or upon any two hearts.

The only reason why we wish to exchange thoughts is that we are different. If we were all the same, we would die dumb. No thought would be expressed after we found that our thoughts were precisely alike. We differ -- our thoughts are different. Therefore the commerce that we call conversation.

Back of language is thought. Back of language is the desire to express our thought to another. This desire not only gave us language -- this desire has given us the libraries of the world. And not only the libraries; this desire to express thought, to show to others the splendid children of the brain, has written every book, formed every language, painted every picture, and chiseled every statue -- this desire to express our thought to others, to reap the harvest of the brain.

If, then, thought is a necessity, "it follows as the night the day" that there is, there can be, no responsibility for thought to any being, human or divine.

A camera contains a sensitive plate. The light flashes upon it, and the sensitive plate receives a picture. Is it in fault, is it responsible, for the picture? So with the brain. An image is left on it, a picture is imprinted there. The plate may not be perfectly level -- it may be too concave, or too convex, and the picture may be a deformity; so with the brain. But the man does not make his own brain, and the consequence is, if the picture is distorted it is not the fault of the brain.

We take then these two steps: first, thought is a necessity; and second, the thought depends upon the brain.

Each brain is a kind of field where nature sows with careless hands the seeds of thought. Some brains are poor and barren fields, producing weeds and thorns, and some are like the tropic world where grow the palm and pine -- children of the sun and soil.

You read Shakespeare. What do you get out of Shakespeare? All that your brain is able to hold. It depends upon your brain. If you are great -- if you have been cultivated -- if the wings of your imagination have been spread -- if you have had great, free, and splendid thoughts -- if you have stood upon the edge of things -- if you have had the courage to meet all that can come -- you get an immensity from Shakespeare. If you have lived nobly -- if you have loved with every drop of your blood and every fibre of your being -- if you have suffered -- if you have enjoyed -- then you get an immensity from Shakespeare. But if you have lived a poor, little, mean, wasted, barren, weedy life -- you get very little from that immortal man.

So it is from every source in nature -- what you get depends upon what you are.

Take then the second step. If thought is a necessity, there can be no responsibility for thought. And why has man ever believed that his fellow-man was responsible for his thought?

Everything that is, everything that has been, has been naturally produced. Man has acted as, under the same circumstances, we would have acted; because when you say "under the circumstances," it is the same as to say that you would do exactly as they have done.

There has always been in men the instinct of self-preservation. There was a time when men believed, and honestly believed, that there was above them a God. Sometimes they

believed in many, but it will be sufficient for my illustration to say, one. Man believed that there was in the sky above him a God who attended to the affairs of men. He believed that that God, sitting upon his throne, rewarded virtue and punished vice. He believed also, that that God held the community responsible for the sins of individuals. He honestly believed it. When the flood came, or when the earthquake devoured, he really believed that some God was filled with anger -- with holy indignation -- at his children. He believed it, and so he looked about among his neighbors to see who was in fault, and if there was any man who had failed to bring his sacrifice to the altar, had failed to kneel, it may be to the priest, failed to be present in the temple, or had given it as his opinion that the God of that tribe or of that nation was of no use, then, in order to placate the God, they seized the neighbor and sacrificed him on the altar of their ignorance and of their fear.

They believed when the lightning leaped from the cloud and left its blackened mark upon the man, that he had done something -- that he had excited the wrath of the gods.

And while man so believed, while he believed that it was necessary, in order to defend himself to kill his neighbor -- he acted simply according to the dictates of his nature.

What I claim is that we have now advanced far enough not only to think, but to know, that the conduct of man has nothing to do with the phenomena of nature. We are now advanced far enough to absolutely know that no man can be bad enough and no nation infamous enough to cause an earthquake. I think we have got to that point that we absolutely know that no man can be wicked enough to entice one of the bolts from heaven -- that no man can be cruel enough to cause a drought -- and that you could not have infidels enough on the earth to cause another flood. I think we have advanced far enough not only to say that, but to absolutely know it -- I mean people who have thought, and in whose minds there is something like reasoning.

We know, if we know anything, that the lightning is just as apt to hit a good man as a bad man. We know it. We know that the earthquake is just as liable to swallow virtue as to swallow vice. And you know just as well as I do that a ship loaded with pirates is just as apt to outride the storm as one crowded with missionaries. You know it.

I am now speaking of the phenomena of nature. I believe, as much as I believe that I live, that the reason a thing is right is because it tends to the happiness of mankind. I believe, as much as I believe that I live, that on the average the good man is not only the happier man, but that no man is happy who is not good.

If then we have gotten over that frightful, that awful superstition -- we are ready to enjoy hearing the thoughts of each other.

I do not say, neither do I intend to be understood as saying, that there is no God. All I intend to say is, that so far as we can see, no man is punished, no nation is punished by lightning, or famine, or storm. Everything happens to the one as to the other.

Now, let us admit that there is an infinite God. That has nothing to do with the sinlessness of thought -- nothing to do with the fact that no man is accountable to any being, human or divine, for what he thinks. And let me tell you why.

If there be an infinite God, leave him to deal with men who sin against him. You can trust him, if you believe in him. He has the power. He has a heaven full of bolts. Trust him. And now that you are satisfied that the earthquake will not swallow you, or the lightning strike you, simply because you tell your thoughts, if one of your neighbors differs with you, and acts improperly or thinks or speaks improperly of your God, leave him with your God -- he can attend to him a thousand times better than you can. He has the time. He lives from eternity to eternity. More than that, he has the means. So that, whether there be this Being or not, you have no right to interfere with your neighbor.

The next proposition is, that I have the same right to express my thought to the whole world, that the whole world has to express its thought to me.

I believe that this realm of thought is not a democracy, where the majority rule; it is not a republic. It is a country with one inhabitant. This brain is the world in which my mind lives, and my mind is the sovereign of that realm. We are all kings, and one man balances the rest of the world as one drop of water balances the sea. Each soul is crowned. Each soul wears the purple and the tiara; and only those are good citizens of the intellectual world who give to every other human being every right that they claim for themselves, and only those are traitors in the great realm of thought who abandon reason and appeal to force.

If now I have got out of your minds the idea that you must abuse your neighbors to keep on good terms with God, then the question of religion is exactly like every question -- I mean of thought, of mind -- I have nothing to say now about action.

Is there authority in the world of art? Can a legislature pass a law that a certain picture is beautiful, and can it pass a law putting in the penitentiary any impudent artistic wretch who says that to him it is not beautiful? Precisely the same with music. Our ears are not all the same; we are not touched by the same sounds -- the same beautiful memories do not arise. Suppose you have an authority in music? You may make men, it may be, by offering them office or by threatening them with punishment, swear that they all like that tune -- but you never will know till the day of your death whether they do or not. The moment you introduce a despotism in the world of thought, you succeed in making hypocrites -- and you get in such a position that you never know what your neighbor thinks.

So in the great realm of religion, there can be no force. No one can be compelled to pray. No matter how you tie him down, or crush him down on his face or on his knees. it is above the power of the human race to put in that man, by force, the spirit of prayer. You cannot do it. Neither can you compel anybody to worship a God. Worship rises from the heart like perfume from a flower. It cannot obey; it cannot do that which some one else commands. It must be absolutely true to the law of its own nature. And do you think any

God would be satisfied with compulsory worship? Would he like to see long rows of poor, ignorant slaves on their terrified knees repeating words without a soul -- giving him what you might call the shucks of sound? Will any God be satisfied with that? And so I say, we must be as free in one department of thought as another.

Now, I take the next step, and that is, that the rights of all are absolutely equal.

I have the same right to give you my opinion that you have to give me yours. I have no right to compel you to hear, if you do not want to. I have no right to compel you to speak if you do not want to. If you do not wish to know my thought, I have no right to force it upon you.

The next thing is, that this liberty of thought, this liberty of expression, is of more value than any other thing beneath the stars. Of more value than any religion, of more value than any government, of more value than all the constitutions that man has written and all the laws that he has passed, is this liberty -- the absolute liberty of the human mind. Take away that word from language, and all other words become meaningless sounds, and there is then no reason for a man being, and living, upon the earth.

So then, I am simply in favor of intellectual hospitality -- that is all. You come to me with a new idea. I invite you into the house. Let us see what you have. Let us talk it over. If I do not like your thought, I will bid it a polite "good day." If I do like it, I will say: "Sit down; stay with me, and become a part of the intellectual wealth of my world." That is all.

And how any human being ever has had the impudence to speak against the right to speak, is beyond the power of my imagination. Here is a man who speaks -- who exercises a right that he, by his speech, denies. Can liberty go further than that? Is there any toleration possible beyond the liberty to speak against liberty -- the real believer in free speech allowing others to speak against the right to speak? Is there any limitation beyond that?

So, whoever has spoken against the right to speak has admitted that he violated his own doctrine. No man can open his mouth against the freedom of speech without denying every argument he may put forward. Why? He is exercising the right that he denies. How did he get it? Suppose there is one man on an island. You will all admit now that he would have the right to do his own thinking. You will all admit that he has the right to express his thought. Now, will somebody tell me how many men would have to emigrate to that island before the original settler would lose his right to think and his right to express himself?

If there be an infinite Being -- and it is a question that I know nothing about -- you would be perfectly astonished to know how little I do know on that subject, and yet I know as much as the aggregated world knows, and as little as the smallest insect that ever fanned with happy wings the summer air -- if there be such a Being, I have the same right to think that he has simply because it is a necessity of my nature -- because I cannot help it.

And the Infinite would be just as responsible to the smallest intelligence living in the infinite spaces -- he would be just as responsible to that intelligence as that intelligence can be to him, provided that intelligence thinks as a necessity of his nature.

There is another phrase to which I object -- "toleration." "The limits of toleration." Why say "toleration"? I will tell you why. When the thinkers were in the minority -- when the philosophers were vagabonds -- when the men with brains furnished fuel for bonfires -- when the majority were ignorantly orthodox -- when they hated the heretic as a last year's leaf hates a this year's bud -- in that delightful time these poor people in the minority had to say to ignorant power, to conscientious rascality, to cruelty born of universal love: "Don't kill us; don't be so arrogantly meek as to burn us; tolerate us." At that time the minority was too small to talk about rights, and the great big ignorant majority when tired of shedding blood, said: "Well, we will tolerate you; we can afford to wait; you will not live long, and when the Being of infinite compassion gets hold of you we will glut our revenge through an eternity of joy; we will ask you every now and then, 'What is your opinion now?'"

Both feeling absolutely sure that infinite goodness would have his revenge, they "tolerated" these thinkers, and that word finally took the place almost of liberty. But I do not like it. When you say "I tolerate," you do not say you have no right to punish, no right to persecute. It is only a disclaimer for a few moments and for a few years, but you retain the right. I deny it.

And let me say here to-night -- it is your experience, it is mine -- that the bigger a man is the more charitable he is; you know it. The more brain he has, the more excuses he finds for all the world; you know it. And if there be in heaven an infinite Being, he must be grander than any man; he must have a thousand times more charity than the human heart can hold, and is it possible that he is going to hold his ignorant children responsible for the impressions made by nature upon their brain? Let us have some sense.

There is another side to this question, and that is with regard to the freedom of thought and expression in matters pertaining to this world.

No man has a right to hurt the character of a neighbor. He has no right to utter slander. He has no right to bear false witness. He has no right to be actuated by any motive except for the general good -- but the things he does here to his neighbor -- these are easily defined and easily punished. All that I object to is setting up a standard of authority in the world of art, the world of beauty, the world of poetry, the world of worship, the world of religion, and the world of metaphysics. That is what I object to; and if the old doctrines had been carried out, every human being that has benefited this world would have been destroyed. If the people who believe that a certain belief is necessary to insure salvation had had control of this world, we would have been as ignorant to-night as wild beasts. Every step in advance has been made in spite of them. There has not been a book of any value printed since the invention of that art -- and when I say "of value," I mean that contained new and splendid truths -- that was not anathematized by the gentlemen who

believed that man is responsible for his thought. Every step has been taken in spite of that doctrine.

Consequently I simply believe in absolute liberty of mind. And I have no fear about any other world -- not the slightest. When I get there, I will give my honest opinion of that country; I will give my honest thought there; and if for that I lose my soul. I will keep at least my self-respect.

A man tells me a story. I believe it. or disbelieve it. I cannot help it. I read a story -- no matter whether in the original Hebrew, or whether it has been translated. I believe it or I disbelieve it. No matter whether it is written in a very solemn or a very flippant manner -- I have my idea about its truth. And I insist that each man has the right to judge that for himself, and for that reason, as I have already said, I am defending your right to differ with me -- that is all. And if you do differ with me, all that it proves is that I do not agree with you. There is no man that lives to-night beneath the stars -- there is no being -- that can force my soul upon its knees, unless the reason is given. I will be no slave. I do not care how big my master is, I am just as small, if a slave, as though the master were small. It is not the greatness of the master that can honor the slave. In other words, I am going to act according to my right, as I understand it, without interfering with any other human being. And now, if you think -- any of you, that you can control your thought, I want you to try it. There is not one here who can by any possibility think only as he must.

You remember the story of the Methodist minister who insisted that he could control his thoughts. A man said to him, "Nobody can control his own mind." "Oh, yes, he can," the preacher replied. "My dear sir," said the man, "you cannot even say the Lord's Prayer without thinking of something else." "Oh, yes, I can." "Well, if you will do it, I will give you that horse, the best riding horse in this county." "Well, who is to judge?" said the preacher. "I will take your own word for it, and if you say the Lord's Prayer through without thinking of anything else, I will give you that horse." So the minister shut his eyes and began: "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done," -- "I suppose you will throw in the saddle and bridle?" I say to you to-night, ladies and gentlemen, that I feel more interest in the freedom of thought and speech than in all other questions, knowing, as I do, that it is the condition of great and splendid progress for the race; remembering, as I do, that the opposite idea has covered the cheek of the world with tears; remembering, and knowing, as I do, that the enemies of free thought and free speech have covered this world with blood. These men have filled the heavens with an infinite monster; they have filled the future with fire and flame, and they have made the present, when they have had the power, a perdition. These men, these doctrines, have carried fagots to the feet of philosophy. These men, these doctrines, have hated to see the dawn of an intellectual day. These men, these doctrines, have denied every science, and denounced and killed every philosopher they could lay their bloody, cruel, ignorant hands upon.

And for that reason, I am for absolute liberty of thought, everywhere, in every department, domain, and realm of the human mind.

REMARKS OF MR. COUDERT

Ladies and Gentlemen and Mr. President:

It is not only "the sense of the church" that I am lacking now, I am afraid it is any sense at all; and I am only wondering how a reasonably intelligent being -- meaning myself -- could in view of the misfortune that befell Mr. Kernan, have undertaken to speak to-night.

This is a new experience. I have never sung in any of Verdi's operas -- I have never listened to one through -- but I think I would prefer to try all three of these performances rather than go on with this duty which, in a vain moment of deluded vanity, I heedlessly undertook.

I am in a new field here. I feel very much like the master of a ship who thinks that he can safely guide his bark. (I am not alluding to the traditional bark of St. Peter, in which I hope that I am and will always be, but the ordinary bark that requires a compass and a rudder and a guide.) And I find that all these ordinary things, which we generally take for granted, and which are as necessary to our safety as the air which we breathe, or the sunshine that we enjoy, have been quietly, pleasantly, and smilingly thrown overboard by the gentleman who has just preceded me.

Carlyle once said -- and the thought came to me as the gentleman was speaking -- "A Comic History of England!" -- for some wretch had just written such a book -- (talk of free thought and free speech when men do such things!) -- "A Comic History of England!" The next thing we shall hear of will be "A Comic History of the Bible!" I think we have heard the first chapter of that comic history to-night; and the only comfort that I have -- and possibly some other antiquated and superannuated persons of either sex, if such there be within my hearing -- is that such things as have seemed to me charmingly to partake of the order of blasphemy, have been uttered with such charming bonhomie, and received with such enthusiastic admiration, that I have wondered whether we are in a Christian audience of the nineteenth century, or in a possible Ingersollian audience of the twenty-third.

And let me first, before I enter upon the very few and desultory remarks, which are the only ones that I can make now and with which I may claim your polite attention -- let me say a word about the comparison with which your worthy President opened these proceedings.

There are two or three things upon which I am a little sensitive: One, aspersions upon the land of my birth -- the city of New York; the next, the land of my fathers; and the next, the bark that I was just speaking of.

Now your worthy President, in his well-meant efforts to exhibit in the best possible style the new actor upon his stage, said that he had seen Victor Hugo's remains, and Voltaire's, and Jean Jacques Rousseau's, and that he thought the niche might well be filled by

Colonel Ingersoll. If that had been merely the expression of a natural desire to see him speedily annihilated, I might perhaps in the interests of the Christian community have thought, but not said, "Amen!" (Here you will at once observe the distinction I make between free thought and free speech!)

I do not think, and I beg that none of you, and particularly the eloquent rhetorician who preceded me, will think, that in anything I may say I intend any personal discourtesy, for I do believe to some extent in freedom of speech upon a platform like this. Such a debate as this rises entirely above and beyond the plane of personalities.

I suppose that your President intended to compare Colonel Ingersoll to Voltaire, to Hugo and to Rousseau. I have no retainer from either of those gentlemen, but for the reason that I just gave you, I wish to defend their memory from what I consider a great wrong. And so I do not think -- with all respect to the eloquent and learned gentleman -- that he is entitled to a place in that niche. Voltaire did many wrong things. He did them for many reasons, and chiefly because he was human. But Voltaire did a great deal to build up. Leaving aside his noble tragedies, which charmed and delighted his audiences, and dignified the stage. throughout his work was some effort to ameliorate the condition of the human race. He fought against torture; he fought against persecution; he fought against bigotry; he clamored and wrote against littleness and fanaticism in every way, and he was not ashamed when he entered upon his domains at Fernay, to erect a church to the God of whom the most our friend can say is, "I do not know whether he exists or not."

Rousseau did many noble things, but he was a madman, and in our day would probably have been locked up in an asylum and treated by intelligent doctors. His works, however, bear the impress of a religious education, and if there be in his works or sayings anything to parallel what we have heard tonight -- whether a parody on divine revelation, or a parody upon the prayer of prayers -- I have not seen it.

Victor Hugo has enriched the literature of his day with prose and poetry that have made him the Shakespeare of the nineteenth century -- poems as deeply imbued with a devout sense of responsibility to the Almighty as the writings of an archbishop or a cardinal. He has left the traces of his beneficent action all over the literature of his day, of his country, and of his race.

All these men, then, have built up something. Will anyone, the most ardent admirer of Colonel Ingersoll, tell me what he has built up?

To go now to the argument. The learned gentleman says that freedom of thought is a grand thing. Unfortunately, freedom of thought exists. What one of us would not put manacles and fetters upon his thoughts, if he only could? What persecution have any of us suffered to compare with the involuntary recurrence of these demons that enter our brain -- that bring back past events that we would wipe out with our tears, or even with our blood -- and make us slaves of a power unseen but uncontrollable and uncontrolled? Is it not unworthy of so eloquent and intelligent a man to preach before you here to-night that thought must always be free?

When in the history of the world has thought ever been fettered? If there be a page in history upon which such an absurdity is written, I have failed to find it.

Thought is beyond the domain of man. The most cruel and arbitrary ruler can no more penetrate into your bosom and mine and extract the inner workings of our brain, than he can scale the stars or pull down the sun from its seat. Thought must be free. Thought is unseen, unhandled and untouched, and no despot has yet been able to reach it, except when the thoughts burst into words. And therefore, may we not consider now, and say, that liberty of word is what he wants, and not liberty of thought which no one has ever gainsaid, or disputed?

Liberty of speech! -- and the gentleman generously tells us, "Why, I only ask for myself what I would cheerfully extend to you. I wish you to be free; and you can even entertain those old delusions which your mothers taught, and look with envious admiration upon me while I scale the giddy heights of Olympus, gather the honey and approach the stars and tell you how pure the air is in those upper regions which you are unable to reach."

Thanks for his kindness! But I think that it is one thing for us to extend to him that liberty that he asks for -- the liberty to destroy -- and another thing for him to give us the liberty which we claim -- the liberty to conserve.

Oh, destruction is so easy, destruction is so pleasant! It marks the footsteps all through our life. The baby begins by destroying his bib; the older child by destroying his horse, and when the man is grown up and he joins the regiment with the latent instinct that when he gets a chance he will destroy human life.

This building cost many thousand days' work. It was planned by more or less skillful architects (ignorant of ventilation, but well-meaning). Men lavished their thought, and men lavished their sweat for a pittance, upon this building. It took months and possibly years to build it and to adorn it and to beautify it. And yet, as it stands complete tonight with all of you here in the vigor of your life and in the enjoyment of such entertainment as you may get here this evening, I will find a dozen men who with a few pounds of dynamite will reduce it and all of us to instant destruction.

The dynamite man may say to me, "I give you full liberty to build and occupy and insure, if you will give me liberty to blow up." Is that a fair bargain? Am I bound in conscience and in good sense to accept it? Liberty of speech! Tell me where liberty of speech has ever existed. There have been free societies. England was a free country. France has struggled through crisis after crisis to obtain liberty of speech. We think we have liberty of speech, as we understand it, and yet who would undertake to say that our society could live with liberty of speech? We have gone through many crises in our short history, and we know that thought is nothing before the law, but the word is an act -- as guilty at times as the act of killing, or burglary, or any of the violent crimes that disgrace humanity and require the police.

A word is an act -- an act of the tongue; and why should my tongue go unpunished, and I who wield it mercilessly toward those who are weaker than I, escape, if my arm is to be punished when I use it tyrannously? Whom would you punish for the murder of Desdemona -- is it Iago, or Othello? Who was the villain, who was the criminal, who deserved the scaffold -- who but free speech? Iago exercised free speech. He poisoned the ear of Othello and nerved his arm and Othello was the murderer -- but Iago went scot free. That was a word.

"Oh," says the counsel, "but that does not apply to individuals; be tender and charitable to individuals." Tender and charitable to men if they endeavor to destroy all that you love and venerate and respect!

Are you tender and charitable to me if you enter my house, my castle, and debauch my children from the faith that they have been taught? Are you tender and charitable to them and to me when you teach them that I have instructed them in falsehood, that their mother has rocked them in blasphemy, and that they are now among the fools and the witlings of the world because they believe in my precepts? Is that the charity that you speak of? Heaven forbid that liberty of speech such as that, should ever invade my home or yours!

We all understand, and the learned gentleman will admit, that his discourse is but an eloquent apology for blasphemy. And when I say this, I beg you to believe me incapable of resorting to the cheap artifice of strong words to give point to a pointless argument, or to offend a courteous adversary. I think if I put it to him he would, with characteristic candor, say, "Yes, that is what I claim -- the liberty to blaspheme; the world has outgrown these things; and I claim to-day, as I claimed a few months ago in the neighboring gallant little State New Jersey, that while you cannot slander man, your tongue is free to revile and insult man's maker." New Jersey was behind in the race for progress, and did not accept his argument. His unfortunate client was convicted and had to pay the fine which the press -- which is seldom mistaken -- says came from the pocket of his generous counsel.

The argument was a strong one; the argument was brilliant, and was able; and I say now, with all my predilections for the church of my fathers, and for your church (because it is not a question of our differences, but it is a question whether the tree shall be torn up by the roots, not what branches may bear richer fruit or deserve to be lopped off) -- I say, why has every Christian State passed these statutes against blasphemy? Turning into ridicule sacred things -- firing off the Lord's Prayer as you would a joke from Joe Miller or a comic poem -- that is what I mean by blasphemy. If there is any other or better definition, give it me, and I will use it.

Now understand. All these States of ours care not one fig what our religion is. Behave yourselves properly, obey the laws, do not require the intervention of the police, and the majesty of your conscience will be as exalted as the sun. But the wisest men and the best men -- possibly not so eloquent as the orator, but I may say it without offence to him -- other names that shine brightly in the galaxy of our best men, have insisted and maintained that the Christian faith was the ligament that kept our modern society

together, and our laws have said, and the laws of most of our States say, to this day, "Think what you like, but do not, like Samson, pull the pillars down upon us all."

If I had anything to say, ladies and gentlemen, it is time that I should say it now. My exordium has been very long, but it was no longer than the dignity of the subject, perhaps, demanded.

Free speech we all have. Absolute liberty of speech we never had. Did we have it before the war? Many of us here remember that if you crossed an imaginary line and went among some of the noblest and best men that ever adorned this continent, one word against slavery meant death. And if you say that that was the influence of slavery, I will carry you to Boston, that city which numbers within its walls as many intelligent people to the acre as any city on the globe -- was it different there? Why, the fugitive, beaten, blood-stained slave, when he got there, was seized and turned back; and when a few good and brave men, in defence of free speech, undertook to defend the slave and to try and give him liberty, they were mobbed and pelted and driven through the city. You may say, "That proves there was no liberty of speech." No; it proves this: that wherever, and wheresoever, and whenever, liberty of speech is incompatible with the safety of the State, liberty of speech must fall back and give way, in order that the State may be preserved.

First, above everything, above all things, the safety of the people is the supreme law. And if rhetoricians, anxious to tear down, anxious to pluck the faith from the young ones who are unable to defend it, come forward with nickel-plated platitudes and commonplaces clothed in second-hand purple and tinsel, and try to tear down the temple, then it is time, I shall not say for good men -- for I know so few they make a small battalion -- but for good women, to come to the rescue.

GENERAL WOODFORD'S SPEECH

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:

At this late hour. I could not attempt -- even if I would -- the eloquence of my friend Colonel Ingersoll; nor the wit and rapier -- like sarcasm of my other valued friend Mr. Coudert. But there are some things so serious about this subject that we discuss to-night, that I crave your pardon if, without preface, and without rhetoric, I get at once to what from my Protestant standpoint seems the fatal logical error of Mr. Ingersoll's position.

Mr. Ingersoll starts with the statement -- and that I may not, for I could not, do him injustice, nor myself injustice, in the quotation, I will give it as he stated it -- he starts with this statement: that thought is a necessary natural product, the result of what we call impressions made through the medium of the senses upon the brain.

Do you think that is thought? Now stop -- turn right into your own minds -- is that thought? Does not will power take hold? Does not reason take hold? Does not memory take hold, and is not thought the action of the brain based upon the impression and assisted or directed by manifold and varying influences?

Secondly, our friend Mr. Ingersoll says that no human being is accountable to any being, human or divine, for his thought.

He starts with the assumption that thought is the inevitable impression burnt upon the mind at once, and then jumps to the conclusion that there is no responsibility. Now, is not that a fair logical analysis of what he has said?

My senses leave upon my mind an impression, and then my mind, out of that impression, works good or evil. The glass of brandy, being presented to my physical sense, inspires thirst -- inspires the thought of thirst -- inspires the instinct of debauchery. Am I not accountable for the result of the mind given me, whether I yield to the debauch, or rise to the dignity of self-control?

Everything of sense leaves its impression upon the mind. If there be no responsibility anywhere, then is this world blind chance. If there be no responsibility anywhere, then my friend deserves no credit if he be guiding you in the path of truth, and I deserve no censure if I be carrying you back into the path of superstition. Why, admit for a moment that a man has no control over his thought, and you destroy absolutely the power of regenerating the world, the power of improving the world. The world swings one way, or it swings the other. If it be true that in all these ages we have come nearer and nearer to a perfect liberty, that is true simply and alone because the mind of man through reason, through memory, through a thousand inspirations and desires and hopes, has ever tended toward better results and higher achievements.

No accountability? I speak not for my friend, but I recognize that I am accountable to myself; I recognize that whether I rise or fall, that whether my life goes upward or downward, I am responsible to myself. And so, in spite of all sophistry, so in spite of all dream, so in spite of all eloquence, each woman, each man within this audience is responsible first of all to herself and himself -- whether when bad thoughts, when passion, when murder, when evil come into the heart or brain he harbors them there or he casts them out.

I am responsible further -- I am responsible to my neighbor. I know that I am my neighbor's keeper, I know that as I touch your life, as you touch mine, I am responsible every moment, every hour, every day, for my influence upon you. I am either helping you up, or I am dragging you down; you are either helping me up or you are dragging me down -- and you know it. Sophistry cannot get away from this; eloquence cannot seduce us from it. You know that if you look back through the record of your life, there are lives that you have helped and lives that you have hurt. You know that there are lives on the downward plane that went down because in an evil hour you pushed them; you know, perhaps with blessing, lives that have gone up because you have reached out to them a helping hand. That responsibility for your neighbor is a responsibility and an accountability that you and I cannot avoid or evade.

I believe one thing further: that because there is a creation there is a Creator. I believe that because there is force, there is a Projector of force; because there is matter, there is

spirit. I reverently believe these things. I am not angry with my neighbor because he does not; it may be that he is right, that I am wrong; but if there be a Power that sent me into this world, so far as that Power has given me wrong direction, or permitted wrong direction, that Power will judge me justly. So far as I disregard the light that I have, whatever it may be -- whether it be light of reason, light of conscience, light of history -- so far as I do that which my judgment tells me is wrong, I am responsible and I am accountable.

Now the Protestant theory, as I understand it, is simply this: It would vary from the theory as taught by the mother church -- it certainly swings far away from the theory as suggested by my friend; I understand the Protestant theory to be this: That every man is responsible to himself, to his neighbor, and to his God, for his thought. Not for the first impression -- but for that impression, for that direction and result which he intelligently gives to the first impression or deduces from it. I understand that the Protestant idea is this: that man may think -- we know he will think -- for himself; but that he is responsible for it. That a man may speak his thought, so long as he does not hurt his neighbor. He must use his own liberty so that he shall not injure the well-being of any other one -- so that when using this liberty, when exercising this freedom. he is accountable at the last to his God. And so Protestantism sends me into the world with this terrible and solemn responsibility.

It leaves Mr. Ingersoll free to speak his thought at the bar of his conscience, before the bar of his fellowman, but it holds him in the inevitable grip of absolute responsibility for every light word idly spoken, God grant that he may use that power so that he can face that responsibility at the last!

It leaves to every churchman liberty to believe and stand by his church according to his own conviction. It stands for this; the absolute liberty of each individual man to think, to write, to speak, to act, according to the best light within him; limited as to his fellows, by the condition that he shall not use that liberty so as to injure them; limited in the other direction, by those tremendous laws which are laws in spite of all rhetoric, and in spite of all logic.

If I put my finger into the fire, that fire burns. If I do a wrong, that wrong remains. If I hurt my neighbor, the wrong reacts upon myself. If I would try to escape what you call judgment, what you call penalty, I cannot escape the working of the inevitable law that follows a cause by effect; I cannot escape that inevitable law -- not the creation of some dark monster flashing through the skies -- but, as I believe, the beneficent creation which puts into the spiritual life the same control of law that guides the material life, which wisely makes me responsible, that in the solemnity of that responsibility I am bound to lift my brother up and never to drag my brother down.

REPLY OF COLONEL INGERSOLL

The first gentleman who replied to me took the ground boldly that expression is not free - that no man has the right to express his real thoughts -- and I suppose that he acted in

accordance with that idea. How are you to know whether he thought a solitary thing that he said, or not? How is it possible for us to ascertain whether he is simply the mouthpiece of some other? Whether he is a free man, or whether he says that which he does not believe, it is impossible for us to ascertain.

He tells you that I am about to take away the religion of your mothers. I have heard that said a great many times. No doubt Mr. Coudert has the religion of his mother, and judging from the argument he made, his mother knew at least as much about these questions as her son. I believe that every good father and good mother wants to see the son and the daughter climb higher upon the great and splendid mount of thought than they reached. You never can honor your father by going around swearing to his mistakes. You never can honor your mother by saying that ignorance is blessed because she did not know everything. I want to honor my parents by finding out more than they did.

There is another thing that I was a little astonished at -- that Mr. Coudert, knowing that he would be in eternal felicity with his harp in his hand, seeing me in the world of the damned, could yet grow envious here to-night at my imaginary monument.

And he tells you -- this Catholic -- that Voltaire was an exceedingly good Christian compared with me. Do you know I am glad that I have compelled a Catholic -- one who does not believe he has the right to express his honest thoughts -- to pay a compliment to Voltaire simply because he thought it was at my expense?

I have an almost infinite admiration for Voltaire; and when I hear that name pronounced, I think of a plume floating over a mailed knight -- I think of a man that rode to the beleaguered City of Catholicism and demanded a surrender -- I think of a great man who thrust the dagger of assassination into your Mother Church, and from that wound she never will recover.

One word more. This gentleman says that children are destructive -- that the first thing they do is to destroy their bibs. The gentleman, I should think from his talk, has preserved his!

They talk about blasphemy. What is blasphemy? Let us be honest with each other. Whoever lives upon the unpaid labor of others is a blasphemer. Whoever slanders, maligns, and betrays is a blasphemer. Whoever denies to others the rights that he claims for himself is a blasphemer.

Who is a worshiper? One who makes a happy home -- one who fills the lives of wife and children with sunlight -- one who has a heart where the flowers of kindness burst into blossom and fill the air with perfume -- the man who sits beside his wife, prematurely old and wasted, and holds her thin hands in his and kisses them as passionately and loves her as truly and as rapturously as when she was a bride -- he is a worshiper -- that is worship.

And the gentleman brought forward as a reason why we should not have free speech, that only a few years ago some of the best men in the world, if you said a word in favor of

liberty, would shoot you down. What an argument was that! They were not good men. They were the whippers of women and the stealers of babes -- robbers of the trundle-bed -- assassins of human liberty. They knew no better, but I do not propose to follow the example of a barbarian because he was honestly a barbarian.

So much for debauching his family by telling them that his precepts are false. If he has taught them as he has taught us to-night, he has debauched their minds. I would be honest at the cradle. I would not tell a child anything as a certainty that I did not know. I would be absolutely honest.

But he says that thought is absolutely free -- nobody can control thought. Let me tell him: Superstition is the jailer of the mind. You can so stuff a child with superstition that its poor little brain is a bastille and its poor little soul a convict. Fear is the Jailer of the mind, and superstition is the assassin of liberty.

So when anybody goes into his family and tells these great and shining truths, instead of debauching his children they will kill the snakes that crawl in their cradles. Let us be honest and free.

And now, coming to the second gentleman. He is a Protestant. The Catholic Church says: "Don't think; pay your fare; this is a through ticket, and we will look out for your baggage." The Protestant Church says: "Read that Bible for yourselves; think for yourselves; but if you do not come to a right conclusion you will be eternally damned." Any sensible man will say, "Then I won't read it -- I'll believe it without reading it." And that is the only way you can be sure you will believe it; don't read it.

Governor Woodford says that we are responsible for our thoughts. Why? Could you help thinking as you did on this subject? No. Could you help believing the Bible? I suppose not. Could you help believing that story of Jonah? Certainly not -- it looks reasonable in Brooklyn.

I stated that thought was the result of the impressions of nature upon the mind through the medium of the senses. He says you cannot have thought without memory. How did you get the first one?

Of course I intended to be understood -- and the language is clear -- that there could be no thought except through the impressions made upon the brain by nature through the avenues called the senses. Take away the senses, how would you think then? If you thought at all, I think you would agree with Mr. Coudert.

Now, I admit -- so we need never have a contradiction about it -- I admit that every human being is responsible to the person he injures. If he injures any man, woman, or child, or any dog, or the lowest animal that crawls, he is responsible to that animal, to that being -- in other words, he is responsible to any being that he has injured.

But you cannot injure an infinite Being, if there be one. I will tell you why. You cannot help him, and you cannot hurt him. If there be an infinite Being, he is conditionless -- he does not want anything -- he has it. You cannot help anybody that does not want something -- you cannot help him. You cannot hurt anybody unless he is a conditioned being and you change his condition so as to inflict a harm. But if God be conditionless, you cannot hurt him, and you cannot help him. So do not trouble yourselves about the Infinite. All our duties lie within reach -- all our duties are right here; and my religion is simply this:

First. Give to every other human being every right that you claim for yourself.

Second. If you tell your thought at all, tell your honest thought. Do not be a parrot -- do not be an instrumentality for an organization. Tell your own thought, honor bright, what you think.

My next idea is, that the only possible good in the universe is happiness. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to try and make somebody else so.

My good friend General Woodford -- and he is a good man telling the best he knows -- says that I will be accountable at the bar up yonder. I am ready to settle that account now, and expect to be, every moment of my life -- and when that settlement comes, if it does come, I do not believe that a solitary being can rise and say that I ever injured him or her.

But no matter what they say. Let me tell you a story, how we will settle if we do get there.

You remember the story told about the Mexican who believed that his country was the only one in the world, and said so. The priest told him that there was another country where a man lived who was eleven or twelve feet high, that made the whole world, and if he denied it, when that man got hold of him he would not leave a whole bone in his body. But he denied it. He was one of those men who would not believe further than his vision extended.

So one day in his boat, he was rocking away when the wind suddenly arose and he was blown out of sight of his home. After several days he was blown so far that he saw the shores of another country. Then he said, "My Lord; I am gone! I have been swearing all my life that there was no other country, and here it is!" So he did his best -- paddled with what little strength he had left, reached the shore, and got out of his boat. Sure enough, there came down a man to meet him about twelve feet high. The poor little wretch was frightened almost to death, so he said to the tall man as he saw him coming down: "Mister, whoever you are. I denied your existence -- I did not believe you lived; I swore there was no such country as this; but I see I was mistaken, and I am gone. You are going to kill me, and the quicker you do it the better and get me out of my misery. Do it now!"

The great man just looked at the little fellow. and said nothing, till he asked, "What are you going to do with me, because over in that other country I denied your existence?" "What am I going to do with you?" said the supposed God. "Now that you have got here, if you behave yourself I am going to treat you well."

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