

**THE FIELD-INGERSOLL  
DISCUSSION. FAITH OR  
AGNOSTICISM? A SERIES OF  
ARTICLES FROM THE NORTH  
AMERICAN REVIEW**

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The Field-Ingersoll discussion. Faith or agnosticism? A series of articles from the North American review by Henry M. Field

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**HENRY M. FIELD**

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*Henry Martyn, Field*

**THE FIELD-INGERSOLL**

**DISCUSSION**



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**FAITH OR AGNOSTICISM?**

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**A SERIES OF ARTICLES**

**FROM**

**THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW.**

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## THE FIELD-INGERSOLL DISCUSSION.

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### AN OPEN LETTER TO ROBERT G. INGERSOLL.

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DEAR SIR : I am glad that I know you, even though some of my brethren look upon you as a monster because of your unbelief. I shall never forget the long evening I spent at your house in Washington ; and in what I have to say, however it may fail to convince you, I trust you will feel that I have not shown myself unworthy of your courtesy or confidence.

Your conversation, then and at other times, interested me greatly. I recognized at once the elements of your power over large audiences, in your wit and dramatic talent—personating characters and imitating tones of voice and expressions of countenance—and your remarkable use of language, which even in familiar talk often rose to a high degree of eloquence. All this was a keen intellectual stimulus. I was, for the most part, a listener ; but as we talked freely of religious matters, I protested against your unbelief as utterly without reason. Yet there was no offence given or taken, and we parted, I trust, with a feeling of mutual respect.

Still further, we found many points of sympathy. I do not hesitate to say that there are many things in which I agree with you, in which I love what you love and hate what you hate. A man's hatreds are not the least important part of him ; they are among the best indications of his character. You love truth, and hate lying and hypocrisy—all the petty arts and deceits of the world by which men represent themselves to be other than they are—as well as the pride and arrogance, in which they assume superiority over their fellow-beings. Above all, you hate every form of injustice and oppression. Nothing moves your indigna-

tion so much as "man's inhumanity to man," and you mutter "curses, not loud but deep," on the whole race of tyrants and oppressors, whom you would sweep from the face of the earth. And yet, you do not hate oppression more than I, nor love liberty more. Nor will I admit that you have any stronger desire for that intellectual freedom, to the attainment of which you look forward as the last and greatest emancipation of mankind.

Nor have you a greater horror of superstition. Indeed, I might say that you cannot have so great, for the best of all reasons, that you have not seen so much of it; you have not stood on the banks of the Ganges, and seen the Hindoos by tens of thousands rushing madly to throw themselves into the sacred river, even carrying the ashes of their dead to cast them upon the waters. It seems but yesterday that I was sitting on the back of an elephant, looking down on this horrible scene of human degradation. Such superstition overthrows the very foundations of morality. In place of the natural sense of right and wrong, which is written in men's consciences and hearts, it introduces an artificial standard, by which the order of things is totally reversed: right is made wrong, and wrong is made right. It makes that a virtue which is not a virtue, and that a crime which is not a crime. Religion consists in a round of observances that have no relation whatever to natural goodness, but which rather exclude it by being a substitute for it. Penances and pilgrimages take the place of justice and mercy, benevolence and charity. Such a religion, so far from being a purifier, is the greatest corrupter of morals; so that it is no extravagance to say of the Hindoos, who are a gentle race, that they might be virtuous and good if they were not so religious. But this colossal superstition weighs upon their very existence, crushing out even natural virtue. Such a religion is an immeasurable curse.

I hope this language is strong enough to satisfy even your own intense hatred of superstition. You cannot loathe it more than I do. So far we agree perfectly. But unfortunately you do not limit your crusade to the religions of Asia, but turn the same style of argument against the religion of Europe and America, and, indeed, against the religious belief and worship of every country and clime. In this matter you make no distinctions: you would sweep them all away; church and cathedral must go with the temple and the pagoda, as alike manifestations of human



credulity, and proofs of the intellectual feebleness and folly of mankind. While under the impression of that memorable evening at your house, I took up some of your public addresses, and experienced a strange revulsion of feeling. I could hardly believe my eyes as I read, so inexpressibly was I shocked. Things which I held sacred you not only rejected with unbelief, but sneered at with contempt. Your words were full of a bitterness so unlike anything I had heard from your lips, that I could not reconcile the two, till I reflected that in Robert Ingersoll (as in the most of us) there were two men, who were not only distinct, but contrary the one to the other—the one gentle and sweet-tempered; the other delighting in war as his native element. Between the two, I have a decided preference for the former. I have no dispute with the quiet and peaceable gentleman, whose kindly spirit makes sunshine in his home; but it is *that other man* over yonder, who comes forth into the arena like a gladiator, defiant and belligerent, that rouses my antagonism. And yet I do not intend to *stand up* even against him; but if he will only *sit down* and listen patiently, and answer in those soft tones of voice which he knows so well how to use, we can have a quiet talk, which will certainly do him no harm, while it relieves my troubled mind.

What then is the basis of this religion which you despise? At the foundation of every form of religious faith and worship, is the idea of God. Here you take your stand; you do not believe in God. Of course you do not deny absolutely the existence of a Creative Power: for that would be to assume a knowledge which no human being can possess. How small is the distance that we can see before us! The candle of our intelligence throws its beams but a little way, beyond which the circle of light is compassed by universal darkness. Upon this no one insists more than yourself. I have heard you discourse upon the insignificance of man in a way to put many preachers to shame. I remember your illustration from the myriads of creatures that live on plants, from which you picked out, to represent human insignificance, an insect too small to be seen by the naked eye, whose world was a leaf, and whose life lasted but a single day! Surely a creature that can only be seen with a microscope, cannot *know* that a Creator does not exist!

This, I must do you the justice to say, you do not affirm. All

that you can say is, that if there be no knowledge on one side, neither is there on the other; that it is only a matter of probability; and that, judging from such evidence as appeals to your senses and your understanding, you do not *believe* that there is a God. Whether this be a reasonable conclusion or not, it is at least an intelligible state of mind.

Now I am not going to argue against what the Catholics call "invincible ignorance"—an incapacity on account of temperament—for I hold that the belief in God, like the belief in all spiritual things, comes to some minds by a kind of intuition. There are natures so finely strung that they are sensitive to influences which do not touch others. You may say that it is mere poetical rhapsody when Shelley writes :

"The awful shadow of some unseen power  
Floats, though unseen, among us."

But there are natures which are not at all poetical or dreamy, only most simple and pure, which, in moments of spiritual exaltation, are almost *conscious* of a Presence that is not of this world. But this, which is a matter of experience, will have no weight with those who do not have that experience. For the present, therefore, I would not be swayed one particle by mere sentiment, but look at the question in the cold light of reason alone.

The idea of God is, indeed, the grandest and most awful that can be entertained by the human mind. Its very greatness overpowers us, so that it seems impossible that such a Being should exist. But if it is hard to conceive of Infinity, it is still harder to get any intelligible explanation of the present order of things without admitting the existence of an intelligent Creator and Upholder of all. Galileo, when he swept the sky with his telescope, traced the finger of God in every movement of the heavenly bodies. Napoleon, when the French savants on the voyage to Egypt argued that there was no God, disdained any other answer than to point upward to the stars and ask, "Who made all these?" That is the first question, and it is the last. The farther we go, the more we are forced to one conclusion. No man ever studied nature with a more simple desire to know the truth than Agassiz, and yet the more he explored, the more he was startled as he found himself constantly face to face with the evidences of MIND.

Do you say this is "a great mystery," meaning that it is something that we do not know anything about? Of course, it is "a mystery." But do you think to escape mystery by denying the Divine existence? You only exchange one mystery for another. The first of all mysteries is, not that God exists, but that *we* exist. Here we are. How did we come here? We go back to our ancestors; but that does not take away the difficulty; it only removes it farther off. Once begin to climb the stairway of past generations, and you will find that it is a Jacob's ladder, on which you mount higher and higher until you step into the very presence of the Almighty.

But even if we know that there is a God, what can we know of His character? You say, "God is whatever we conceive Him to be." We frame an image of Deity out of our consciousness—it is simply a reflection of our own personality, cast upon the sky like the image seen in the Alps in certain states of the atmosphere—and then fall down and worship that which we have created, not indeed with our hands, but out of our minds. This may be true to some extent of the gods of mythology, but not of the God of Nature, who is as inflexible as Nature itself. You might as well say that the laws of nature are whatever we imagine them to be. But we do not go far before we find that, instead of being pliant to our will, they are rigid and inexorable, and we dash ourselves against them to our own destruction. So God does not bend to human thought any more than to human will. The more we study Him the more we find that He is *not* what we imagined Him to be; that He is far greater than any image of Him that we could frame.

But, after all, you rejoin that the conception of a Supreme Being is merely an abstract idea, of no practical importance, with no bearing upon human life. I answer, it is of immeasurable importance. Let go the idea of God, and you have let go the highest moral restraint. There is no Ruler above man; he is a law unto himself—a law which is as impotent to produce order, and to hold society together, as man is with his little hands to hold the stars in their courses.

I know how you reason against the Divine existence from the moral disorder of the world. The argument is one that takes strong hold of the imagination, and may be used with tremendous effect. You set forth in colors none too strong the injustice that prevails