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THE WORST ATHEISM.

An Address delivered in the Unitarian Church,
Houlton, Maine, Oct. 14, 1900, by G. E.

MACILWAINE, Minister in
" the Church.

God is Love and God is Beauty ;
 God is Music, Truth and Right ;
 God is Hope and God is Duty ;
 God is Morning, Noon and Night ;
 God is Joy and God is Sorrow ;
 God is pleasure, God is Pain ;
 God is Yesterday and Morrow ;
 God is Loss and God is Gain.
 God is Patience, Trust and Trial ;
 God is Waiting, God is Zest ;
 God is Promise and Denial ;
 Purity and Peace and Rest.

God is Star and Mount and Valley ;
 God is River, Lake and Sea ;
 God is Field and crowded Alley ;
 God, the Lily on the lea.
 God is Body, God is Spirit ;
 God is Whole and God is Part ;
 God is Word and All who hear it ;
 God is Mind and Soul and Heart.
 God is All Things that he sendeth
 To the creatures of his love ;
 Sun and Storm he wisely blendeth,
 Earth below and sky above.

THE WORST ATHEISM.

*“To put more faith in lies and hate than truth and love,
is the worst atheism.”* Lowell.—*Sonnets XVII.*

To say of a man that he is or was an atheist is the worst thing that organized religion can say about a man. Perhaps the man was a good man. Perhaps he was, so far as usefulness goes, the most useful man in the community. Perhaps he filled all the functions of a man in home, in society, everywhere. But he was an atheist. Organized religion is only perplexed by such virtues in an atheist. To be an atheist is to be bad. It is to commit the worst crime against organized religion that can be committed. If a man could be an atheist in the judgment of organized religion and *still* be a good man, organized religion must confess its failure and its falseness. So organized religion admits. And whenever there is an instance of undoubted goodness and supposed atheism, organized religion endeavors to show that the atheism does not exist.

For atheism is to *believe in no God*. The atheist says in his heart: ‘There is no God.’ That is what the word means. You notice that it is the word *theism* which means belief in God and the letter “a” prefixed, (which was the Greek way of saying “no”) and making the word a-theism, or the failure to believe in God.

Now one would believe that were simple enough. Is there a God? This man says: Yes, and he is a theist. That man says: No, and he is an atheist. But that is not the way of it. There was a time when organized religion was just about as stiff about it as that. Here for instance is a great statement: “There is one living and true God; everlasting, without body or parts; of infinite power, wisdom and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, visible and invisible.

And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance power and eternity—the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.” That famous article from the creeds has been sworn to in this town by more Protestants than any other statement about God. It is still one of the tests of admission to two of the churches in this town. It is one of the least objectionable articles about God. Now I say there was a time when, if a man had said flatly: “I do not believe in that, I do not believe there is any such being as the one you are describing,” he would have been pronounced an atheist. There was a time when if a man wished to say he believed in God, he was expected to express his belief by assenting to this creed or to some other creed-statement about the nature of God. And in those days if a man said: “This creed and all the rest of them are lies; there is no such being as the one they tell about,” his friends and neighbors would have said: “This man is an atheist,” and the man would have probably agreed with them and professed atheism; for curiously, the men that the world has called atheists have commonly been men of courage. But that has changed. And the reason why it has changed is largely the reason I have referred to. The world has seen that the men that were called atheists and who accepted the name because they said: “The creeds are lies” have quite commonly been good men and often have been the best men in their communities. So religion, *organized religion*, has modified its strictness. It has commonly ceased to ask these men if they believed the creed articles about God. It has taken to asking them if they believed in a Supreme Power, in a Supreme Being, or if they believed in a Moral Order or something like that. Sometimes, even, the churches will bring a man to say that he does not believe that the universe had gone mad and then they will say: “This man is not an atheist; for he says him-

self that he thinks the universe is sane." Now I think that there are some lodges that require of their members faith in God as a test of admission. Belief in God was formerly considered as essential to taking an oath and to this day jurors in this county are required to take an oath in the name of God. But I am quite sure that in all of these places, as in the case of the churches, there has been this change that I have spoken of. Men are nowadays accepted as believers in God who would one day, and that not long ago, have been put down, with their own consent, as Atheists.

Now *that* kind of atheism is not the kind of atheism that I wish to speak to you about. Mr. Lowell says to us that there is more than *one* kind of atheism, for he says: "To put more faith in lies and hate than truth and love is the *worst* atheism." I wish to speak to you about this "*worst* atheism" and to consider the question of what makes a man the worst kind of an atheist, upon another plane than the plane that is commonly held to by organized religion, even in these days when the demands of organized religion have been so much diluted.

But let me say a word about this old, and to my mind not very bad kind of atheism. This world makes some impression upon us all. We can not avoid that, for we all have to deal with it. And men have always been trying to express the impression that the world made upon them. They have changed their expression as they have advanced in knowledge or in experience. Now what I wish to say is that the only important item is that a man shall tell the truth about this matter. If he undertakes to say what this world means to him, he should be as honest about it as about anything else. If a man gathers, for instance, the impression that this world is like a delicate machine, like a watch, and that there must have been somewhere in the past some sort of a being

like an infinite watchmaker who made this world, it is the man's duty, if he undertakes to say *anything* about the matter, to say honestly and openly as he can, that the world is like a watch and that some great Contriver planned it and put it together and set it going. If again a man concludes after living in the world a while that it was not a watch maker that made the world; but that it is a sort of pilot that is running the world like a ship, it is AS CLEARLY the duty of the man, if he undertakes to say *anything* about this matter, to say that the world is steered like a ship at sea, by an ever present pilot as it would be the duty of the other man to say that there was a watch-maker behind it. And if he thought that the pilot, though ever present, was not altogether familiar with the rocks and sands, it would be the man's duty to express his thought fully or else to be silent entirely.

If again a man concluded from the world, as it appeared to him, that as Browning said :

"This world's no blot nor blank to me :
It means intensely and it means good ;
To find its meaning is my meat and drink,"

it is the man's duty, if he undertakes to say what the world means to him, to say what Browning has said about it. And on the other hand, if a man gathers from the world that it is an aimless thing, no plan, no pilot, no purpose, no reason, it is the man's duty, if he undertakes to express himself, to say this and say it plainly. IT IS NOT WRONG TO HOLD ANY OF THESE VIEWS. The only wrong that comes in is in a man's being *afraid to say* what he thinks. It is not needful for a man to say *anything* about it, if he does not wish to speak. But if he does speak, it is his business to say the truth about this matter just as he would about any other matter. This whole subject is a matter of theory, a matter of philosophising. Omnipotence has not, so far as we know, set its approv-

al upon *any one* of the views of the universe that have been or are current in the world. If, for example, Omnipotence HAD set it's approval upon the view that I quoted from the creed, then, in my opinion, it would rest with Omnipotence to make the view palatable to the human mind. If an honest man should say : I do not quite see the truth of this approved idea about God, it would rest with Omnipotence to *make* him see it. And it would, to my mind, be quite as reasonable to punish Omnipotence for not making the man see the thing, as to punish the man for not being able to see it. If there is a certain theory about this universe and its origin and nature that is fundamental in life and if the Omnipotent Power that is behind it all and knows all about it, persists in making such demonstrations that honest men, anxious to know the truth and free from prejudice as men can be, continuously and in numbers draw wrong conclusions, about the origin and nature of this universe, then I say that it is not only a matter of great injustice for this Omnipotence to punish the men for drawing such conclusions but that we might reasonably insist upon punishing this Great Power for making such impressions upon us. It is as Omar Khayyam says :

“Oh thou who man of baser Earth didst make,
And making Eden, fashioned too the snake,
For all the sin with which the earth is blackened,
Man's forgiveness give and take.”

That is good reasoning.

Let us acknowledge then that Atheism—this old fashioned *kind* of Atheism, may sometimes be the duty of a man. It may sometimes be a man's duty to stand out among his fellows and say : “I do not believe that your God exists. The world does not seem to me to be in the hands of any such being as you describe and so far as this matter goes, I am an atheist.” In my opinion if there is any such thing as religion in the world, it would be religious for the man who came

to such conclusions about things to frankly avow them and take the name. And under such circumstances the name becomes an honor and an ornament to him that takes it upon himself.

But I am here to speak about "The Worst Atheism." And I believe that you can tell what a man believes by what he does and that you can tell about it much better in that way than by examining the creeds the man signs. Now I said that in public not long ago in this town and lest someone may suppose that I did not mean it, I wish to say again that the best way to tell what a man believes is to see what the man does. Do I believe that this is a moral universe, that it runs upon laws of goodness and truth? Perhaps I may *say* that I do. Perhaps I may be loud in my profession that I believe in that. But if I try to get success or pleasure out of life by living a life that is unmoral and that does not run upon laws of goodness and truth, then I have shown in the most conclusive way that I do not believe in the moral order of the universe. Nothing that I can say, though I kneel when I say it and put my hands upon all the Bibles of all nations, nothing that I can *say* can overbalance the fact that when I *act* I am an unbeliever. There is an atheism that is wicked. It is not an atheism that says: I don't believe in any God. It is not an atheism that takes this side or that side in these matters of discussion or doctrine. It is an atheism of make up, an atheism of the whole man; a spirit in the man that says: No, to things when the world demands: Yes! a spirit of unwillingness to live the world's life; a feeling of defiance that says: My own way at all costs. THAT is the nature of the *worst atheism* that I know anything about.

That which has commonly gone by the name of atheism has gotten its name by refusing to believe certain statements about the origin or about the destiny of the universe. Now,

in my opinion, a man may have come to the point where he says and says strongly : "I do not believe that this universe had its origin in God. I do not believe in any God back there at the beginning, as the source of things and I do not either believe in any God at the *other end* as the goal of things " I say a man may come to the place where he thinks in this way about these things and the organized religious bodies will have to say : This man is an Atheist. But to *my* understanding that kind of Atheism is not very bad. It is bad at all if the man is honest in it. But in this view of the matter all this *middle ground*, *between* the origin of things and the end of things is left out. And it seems to me that the *worst* atheism is the atheism that concerns this middle ground, this life of daily experience that the churches have had so little to say about. They say there are no Gods but one. But shall we not say : There *are* more Gods than one ? There is this God at the beginning and there is this God at the end and there ARE these other Gods in them present. There ARE these Gods of this world ; there ARE these Gods of things as they are, as Kipling says. And the *worst* Atheism is unbelief in this God of the present, daily-occurring world.

How shall we tell whether this man is an atheist in this *worst* sense ? Well, there are a myraid manifestations of this atheism. Lowell's way of deciding is *one* way. A man that puts more faith in lies and hate than in truth and in love is the *worst* kind of an atheist. Perhaps that rule will cover more ground than any one rule we could set up on. It is lies and hate that mark the unbeliever. It is truth and love that mark the believer.

But there are *more* gods than one. This God of the present, this God that is actually occurring is indeed a God of infinite parts and to find a man that does not believe *at all* in

this present God is, it seems to me, a task that you will find very taxing. There are Atheists in Aroostook county that bring potatoes to market and gets the highest price for them. The church *calls* them atheists. But here are the potatoes. That man has gotten *hold* of one part of this God of to-day. He has learned the ways of this God in this one matter. He has come to have unbounded faith in *this part* of this God. Year after year he shows his faith in the fact that this God does not change and has no shadow of turning. And he shows his faith by what he does.

There are Atheists in Aroostook County that have notes at our banks. Regularly, when the notes become due these atheists appear, face their obligations and go back again to their work. Their names on the face of a note satisfies the men in the Banks that their money is safe. The same thing is not true of some of those that believe loudly in the God of yesterday. But these men have learned about this God of honesty and faith-keeping. They believe in him. They are not atheists.

There are so-called atheists in Aroostook that believe in men. Again and again they have invested their money in men, their interest. They have said to some young fellow that was going off to school: "You get on as well as you can, earn what you can, be as economical as you can, and what money you lack I will let you have till you can get it to pay back." These same men do not know anything about the God of yesterday, but they have got hold of the God that goes about in this present world, in the form of young men that look for better things and are willing to work for them. And they show their faith in that God by what they do for that God.

There are men and women in Aroostook, atheists men call them, who do not raise crops, who do not borrow money

nor lend it, for it is not theirs, but they have found out something about the God that goes about in self-sacrifice. Now if there is anything that takes faith it is that: to give up myself for the sake of another. But there are atheists that have done that uncomplainingly, through long years and with little or no return. Perhaps that is the one thing about their lives. It has consumed all their energy. They know nothing else. They have poured out their life for the sake of somebody else. Shall we who have signed the creed about the God of tomorrow say to these that they do not believe in God? I think not.

And do not we know Atheists that are acquainted with the God of high ideals? Men and women that have loved high things, great pictures, great music, nobility of character and have shown their faith by their deeds? Is a man an atheist that can sing a great song? Is a man an atheist that can be thrilled to duty by a great song. Does not the singing or the *thrill* show that between this man and the God of the song there is a cord of connection, deep-lying and real? I think so.

Oh, this God of to-day is a God of infinite parts. To find a man that has gotten him *all* is indeed a task. But to find a man that has gotten hold of *several of his parts* is not hard and *can* you find a man that does not hold within him *some* faith in *some* part of this great, living God of to-day? and should not religion and religious men be positive and not negative in their attitude to this world? Should not we, instead of declaring the man an *atheist* who, for instance, does not believe in the God of *yesterday* or *to-morrow* or who does not embrace in his faith the *whole* of this *God of to-day*, should we not rather sieze gladly on the *one element* of God-faith that most men contain? Why a man that *LIVES* is not lost. For life, acting, is faith. And the great fundamental thing is that we shall have *acting men* and that their action shall

be of the sort that the world loves and helps. The great thing about you, the thing that you should seek after for yourself, is to have some *one* thing, at least, that you do with entire faith.

Notice that I say; Not one thing that you *believe* with entire faith: but one thing that you *do* with entire faith. That is the test. The involuntary, inevitable response that life's need brings from us shows what we believe in.

And the natural way is from faith, *acting* faith, in *ONE* thing to acting faith in *another* thing. Men get faith in that way. Men become believers in more Gods (or in more *OF* God) in that way. It is first the blade then the ear and after that the full corn in the ear. And we need not crusade about it either. Men always *act* up to the limits of their faith. That's the beauty of it. The man may write out his creed and he may be careful to not say too much for fear of *saying* that he believes in something that he does not believe in. But here comes a great moment, a time of stress and durance and the man, without thought leaps over the sounds of his written creed and *shows* a faith that he would not have dared claim. And if failure to believe in the present God of emergencies and hard struggle is the *worst atheism*, then this kind of *belief in God* the belief that comes naturally out of the life, is perhaps, the *best* kind of theism. And for my part, I believe that to be the truth.