

# MR. GLADSTONE IN REPLY TO COLONEL INGERSOLL ON CHRISTIANITY

BY

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## MR. GLADSTONE IN REPLY TO COLONEL INGERSOLL ON CHRISTIANITY

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IN the early days of the *National Reformer* there was some reason to believe that, despite his enormous work and his utterly differing views, Mr. Gladstone was not unfrequently a reader of some of the papers appearing in its columns. Later there was on one occasion a very remarkable piece of evidence that, whilst considering as “questionable” the literature issued from the publishing office of the late Mr. Austin Holyoake, the veteran statesman did not pass it without notice. I do not know if Mr. Gladstone has, during the last dozen years or so, had time or inclination for similar acquaintance with the utterances of advanced Freethought in this country — though his critique on a recent novel gives affirmative probability — but it is clear that he watches heretical utterances across the Atlantic; for in the *North American Review* for May, Mr. Gladstone — intervening in a correspondence going on between the Rev. Dr. Field and Colonel R.G. Ingersoll — takes up his pen against the eloquent American. I have hesitated very much as to publicly noticing the *North American Review* article, for my personal reverence for Mr. Gladstone is very great. I know how very far from one another we are on questions of religion, and believing that the religious side or bent of Mr. Gladstone’s mind is stronger than any other feeling influencing him, I can conceive that I may offend much in any criticism, however respectfully worded. Yet I am sure that Mr. Gladstone’s high position entitles all he says to most attentive audience, and my duty to those in the Freethought ranks who trust me compels me that I should tender some words of comment. I venture to hope that the view of duty Mr Gladstone has felt incumbent on him may prevail on my side to prevent any appearance of impertinent interference.

It is not proposed to deal here with the points in controversy between Dr. Field and Colonel Ingersoll, or with the ease as between Mr. Gladstone and the Colonel. All that will be ventured on is a brief comment, from my own standpoint, on some of the positions adopted by Mr. Gladstone, writing as a Christian believer.

Early in the article, stating his own position, Mr. Gladstone says: “Belief in divine guidance is not of necessity belief that such guidance can never be frustrated by the laxity, the infirmity, the perversity of man alike in the domain of action and the domain of thought.” The whole effect of this sentence is governed by the meaning attached by the writer to the words “divine guidance.” If the meaning intended to be conveyed by the word “divine” includes the assumption of omnipotent omniscience for the person or influence described as divine, and if “guidance” means the in-

tentional direction of the human by the divine to a given end, then it is not easy to understand how this can be intelligently believed, and yet that the same believer shall at the same time believe that laxity or infirmity on the part of the individual guided may “frustrate” the guidance, that is, may counteract it, nullify it, or overcome it. That mental infirmity in the individual may be irremediable by Deity is a proposition which challenges the assumed omniscient omnipotence. That fallible human perversity may be more powerful than omnipotent intent is a contradiction in terms. If the affirmer of divine influence regarded the “divine” person as creator, and the individuals guided as created results, then the infirmity, *i.e.*, insufficient capacity of the created, must have been intentional on the part of an omniscient, and the “guidance” would be illusory, in that the “divine” must, even prior to creation, have planned and predesigned the frustration of his own guiding effort by means of this infirmity. Perversity on the part of the created individual, whether originated purposely by the creator or developed in spite of the omnipotent guider, such perversity, sufficient in activity to frustrate the active intent of omnipotence, involves wholesale contradiction on the part of, or utter confusion in the mind of, the believer. According to Mr. Gladstone, the “divine” may guide the individual to think *x*, intending the individual to think *x*, but knowing that the individual cannot (from infirmity) think *x*, or will not (from perversity) think *x*; and therefore the divine purpose is frustrated: the “divine,” *i.e.*, the omnipotent being, is not only unable or unwilling to cure the infirmity, or to overcome the perversity, but is actually the cause of the fatal infirmity or perversity. That Mr. Gladstone honestly believes this is manifest, but I venture to deny that such honest belief can be accepted as the equivalent for accurate thought. It may be the equivalent for a state of mind, which, existing amongst millions of human beings in diverse races, is yet consistent with the wide prevalence of irreconcilable faiths, and with faiths irreconcilable with fact. Alike in thought and action, Mr. Gladstone believes the divine guidance may be frustrated by human perversity, and thus possibly explains to himself why it is that the Christian Governments of Europe have, in this close of the nineteenth century, literally millions of men constantly ready for the work of killing those who belong to the common family of “Our Father which art in heaven.”

Taking up the words of the questioning challenge by Colonel Ingersoll to Dr. Field “What think you of Jephthah?” Mr. Gladstone writes: “I am aware of no reason why any believer in Christianity should not be free to canvass, regret, or condemn the act of Jephthah. So far as the narration which details it is concerned, there is not a word of sanction given to it more than to the falsehood of Abraham in Egypt, or of Jacob and Rebecca in the matter of the hunting (Gen. xx, 1-8, and Gen. xxiii [this is a misprint for

xxvii); or to the dissembling of St. Peter in the case of the Judaizing converts (Gal. ii, 11); I am aware of no color of approval given to it elsewhere. But possibly the author of the reply may have thought that he found such an approval in the famous eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the apostle, handling his subject with a discernment and care very different to those of the reply, writes thus (Heb. xi, 32): 'And what shall I say more? for the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah: of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets.' Jephthah, then, is distinctly held up to us by a canonical writer as an object of praise. But of praise on what account? Why should the reply assume that it is on account of the sacrifice of his child?"

I submit that to condemn the voluntary human sacrifice by Jephthah to Jehovah, it is necessary to condemn the Bible presentment. A believer in Christianity who condemned the act of Jephthah would in this necessarily condemn also the devotion to the Lord of a human being and the carrying out the vow by actual human sacrifice. But Leviticus xxvii, 28 and 29, authorises such a vow, and enacts the result in precise language. Kalisch, writing on this ("Leviticus," Part I, p. 385), says: "The fact stands indisputable that human sacrifices offered to Jehovah were possible among the Hebrews long after the time of Moses, without meeting check or censure from the teachers or leaders of the nation."

Mr. Gladstone correctly enough maintains that the Bible gives no more sanction to the conduct of Jephthah "than to the falsehood of Abraham in Egypt." I quite admit that this is accurately stated, but God frequently described himself as the "God of Abraham;" Abraham is pictured as being in heaven; special promises were made to Abraham; and if these were not as sanctioning his conduct, they nevertheless were marks of approbation without blame of that conduct. In ordinary cases where reward is given it is not unnaturally associated with the narrated conduct of the person rewarded. Abraham and Jephthah stand on much the same footing on the question of readiness to offer human sacrifice, except that in Jephthah's case the initiative is with him. In the case of Abraham, the initiative is from the Lord.

Mr. Gladstone, again, accurately says that there is no more sanction given to the act of Jephthah than is given to the trick and deliberate falsehood by which Jacob cheated blind Isaac out of the blessing intended for Esau. That is so; but, according to the Genesis narrative, God practically endorsed the fraud when he not only declared himself the God of Jacob, but by his prophet declared that he loved Jacob and hated Esau (Romans ix, 13). When the cheater is loved and the cheated hated, it is scarcely straining the text to associate sanction of the act with the love expressed for the the conduct of the person rewarded.

The narration as to Jephthah is of a distinct bargain between Jephthah and the Lord, and a bargain made under spiritual influence, or, to use Mr. Gladstone's words, under divine guidance. The text is explicit (Judges xi, 29, 30, 31):

"Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed over Gilead, and Manasseh, and passed over Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpeh of Gilead he passed over unto the children of Ammon. And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering."

After this vow the Lord does deliver the children of Ammon into Jephthah's hands, and Jephthah — who says: "I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot go back" — in return keeps his part of the agreement, "and did with her according to his vow." And yet Mr. Gladstone writes that there is no reason so far as he is aware, to prevent a Christian from condemning this act of Jephthah. No reason, except that the condemnation must include the condemning of the practice of such vows generally, though specially enacted (Leviticus xxvii, 28, 29):

"Notwithstanding no devoted thing, that a man shall devote unto the Lord of all that he hath, both of man and beast, and of the field of his possession, shall be sold or redeemed: every devoted thing is most holy unto the Lord. None devoted which shall be devoted of men, shall be redeemed but shall surely be put to death" —

and must also involve the express condemnation of the particular bargain assented to and completed alike by Jephthah and by "the Lord."

With the challenge as to Jephthah, Col. Ingersoll asked Dr. Field "What of Abraham?" and this, too, is taken up by Mr. Gladstone who says of Abraham: "He is not commended because, being a father, he made all the preparations antecedent to plunging the knife into his son. He is commended (as I read the text) because, having received a glorious promise, a promise that his wife should be the mother of nations, and that kings should be born of her (Genesis xvii, 6), and that by his seed the blessings of redemption should be conveyed to man, and the fulfilment of the promise being dependent solely upon the life of Isaac, he was nevertheless willing that the chain of these promises should be broken by the extinction of that life, because his faith assured him that the Almighty would find the way to give effect to his own designs" (Heb. xi, 16-19). But the text is surely clear on this. Abraham is praised because he offered up Isaac, that is, that he was ready and willing to offer a human sacrifice to "the Lord" similar to that which was actually offered by Jephthah. Jephthah's

sacrifice was voluntary; Abraham's uncompleted sacrifice was undertaken in obedience to the pressure of temptation by God.

Mr. Gladstone observes that "the facts . . . are grave and startling," and he might well write thus if he had before him any record of the case of a man tried in the United States for the murder of his son. The man imagined and believed, as Abraham is stated to have imagined and believed, that he heard God command him to kill his son as a sacrifice; the man obeyed what he believed to be the divine command. While Abraham only "took the knife to slay his son," the American actually killed his child. On the trial the jury found that the man was insane; that the imagined divine command was delusion; that what the man claimed to be an act of faith in God was an act of human insanity. Mr. Gladstone says that Abraham's faith "may have been qualified by a reserve of hope that God would interpose before the final act," that is, that the interposition would come before he, like Jephthah, actually killed his child as a human sacrifice to the Deity who tempted him. The Bible text gives no support to Mr. Gladstone's qualifying theory. Genesis xxii, 1, 2, says:

"God did tempt Abraham. . . . And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of."

Without hesitation, Abraham, according to the narrative, takes his son to the place, binds him to the wood, and deliberately prepares to carry out the sacrifice. Abraham either deceives the men (verse 5) and misleads his son (verses 7 and 8), or Abraham did not believe in the consummation of the sacrifice, and in the latter case the faith for which he is praised would be no more than hypocritical pretence. Nay, the text expressly represents God as affirming that Abraham was ready to carry out the sacrifice of his son (verse 16):

"By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son."

If Abraham only offered to kill his son as a sacrifice with the mental qualification that the offer would not be accepted, and that the sacrifice would not be exacted, then the Lord must have been misled into the swearing recited in the text.

Evidently Mr. Gladstone, himself a humane man and loving father, is not quite at ease in dealing with this part of Abraham's history. He says (1) "that the narrative does not supply us with a complete statement of particulars;" (2) that "the command was addressed to Abraham under conditions essentially different from those which now determine for us the limits of moral obligations;" (3) "that the estimate of human life at the time was different;" (4)

that “the position of the father in the family was different: its members were regarded as in some sense his property.” I rejoin (1) that to read into the text vital words of explanation which are not specifically expressed in the “divine revelation” — and to so read because without these words the text is incredible — is perilously near downright infidelity. And that, given the incompleteness of Genesis, the added explanation must vary with the intellect, training, and temper of the expositor, *e.g.* Mr. Gladstone, Mr. Spurgeon, or the man who killed his child in America, would fill up each imagined hiatus in very diverse fashions. (2) Mr. Gladstone’s argument can only be maintainable on the assumption that the limits of moral obligation were in the time of Abraham differently determined — for or by, “the Lord” — from such limits today, that is, that the “divine guide” is not immutable. (3) That to render this argument permissible on the part of a believer in Christianity it must be assumed that “the Lord” then estimated the value of human life differently from the manner in which he now would estimate it, because — unless “the Lord” was simply deceiving Abraham in the original direction and the subsequent swearing — “the Lord” concurred in and approved the proposed sacrifice by Abraham; as he also afterwards concurred in and approved the actual sacrifice by Jephthah. (4) [I]nvolves the assumption that the morality of family relation is now admittedly higher under modern civilisation than when specially regulated by “divine guidance.”

Mr. Gladstone grants that “there is every reason to suppose that around Abraham in ‘the land Moriah,’ the practice of human sacrifice as an act of religion was in full vigor,” and he does not fall into the error of ordinary Biblical apologists in pretending that the practice of human sacrifice was confined to “false “religions.

Mr. Gladstone fairly states that the command received by Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a human sacrifice was not only “obviously inconsistent with the promises which had preceded,” but “was also inconsistent with the morality acknowledged in later times.” I submit that this statement is really a condemnation by Mr. Gladstone of the divine command, in that it is a declaration that such a command would — in times later than Abraham, in fact, in our own times — be an immoral command. Here there ought not to be any question raised of changed conditions, for the command is from “the Lord,” that is, from the assumed immutable, omniscient Omnipotent. Mr. Gladstone, it is true, contends that “though the law of moral action is the same everywhere and always, it is variously applicable to the human being, as we know from experience; and its first form is that of simple obedience to a superior whom there is every ground to trust.” As in the article Mr. Gladstone has given no definition of what he means by morality, I have no right to go beyond his statement. Following Bentham and Mill, I should personally maintain the

utilitarian definition of morality, *i.e.*, “that that action is moral which is for the greatest good of the greatest number with the least injury to any.” But this would not in any fashion fit in with Mr. Gladstone’s contention, which in the case of a Russian, would make the act moral which is of simple obedience to the Czar, even though that act happened to be the knouting of a delicate woman; or in the case of a Roman Catholic would declare the act to be moral which was performed in simple obedience to the Pope, even though it were the applying the fire to the faggots piled round Giordano Bruno; or in the case of an English sailor would make the act moral done in obedience to the commander of his ship, even though it should be the placing a destructive torpedo in contact with a crowded vessel of an enemy; or in the case of an Irish constable, though the act should be the shooting, on the command of his superior, from the window of a Mitchelstown barrack, even though the result was the murder of an unoffending old man.

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