

My Infidelity and What Became of It

By

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I cannot remember when I began to be an infidel. Certainly at a very early age-- even before I knew what infidelity meant. There was nothing in my home life to beget or suggest it. My father was a self-educated Baptist minister, preaching -- mainly without compensation -- to village or country churches. My mother was a devoted Christian of deep and humble piety. There were no infidel books in our home library, nor in any other accessible to me. My teachers were Christians -- generally preachers. There were no infidels of my acquaintance, and no public sentiment in favor of them. My infidelity was never from without, but always from within. I had no precept and no example. When, later in life, I read infidel books, they did not make me an infidel, but because I was an infidel I sought, bought, and read them. Even when I read them I was not impressed by new suggestions, but only when occasionally they gave clearer expression of what I had already vaguely felt. No one of them nor all of them sounded the depths of my own infidelity or gave an adequate expression of it. They all fell short of the distance in doubt over which my own troubled soul had passed.

From unremembered time this skepticism progressed, though the progress was not steady and regular. Sometimes in one hour, as by far-shining flashes of inspiration, there would be more progress in extent and definiteness than in previous months. Moreover, these short periods of huge advances were without preceding intentions or perceptible preparations. They were always sudden and startling. Place and circumstances had but little to do with them. The doubt was seldom germane to the topic under consideration.

It always leaped far away to a distant and seemingly disconnected theme, in a way unexplained by the law of the association of ideas. At times I was in the Sunday-school or hearing a sermon or bowed with others in family prayer -- more frequently when I waked at night after healthful sleep, and still more frequently when rambling alone in the fields or in the woods. To be awake in the stillness of the night while others slept, or to be alone in forest depths, or on boundless prairies, or on mountain heights has always possessed for me a weird fascination. Even to this day there are times when houses and people are unbearable. Frequently have I been intoxicated with the thoughts of immensity of space and the infinity of nature. Now these were the very times when skepticism made such enormous progress. "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou has ordained ; what is man, that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man, that thou visitest him."

Thus, before I knew what infidelity was, I was an infidel. My child-mind was fascinated by strange and sometimes horrible questionings concerning many religious subjects. Long before I had read the experiences of others, I had been borne far beyond sight of any shore, wading and swimming beyond my depth after solutions to such questions as the "philosopher's stone," the "elixir of life," and "the fountain of youth," but mainly the "chief good." I understand now much better than then the character and direction of the questionings of that early period. By a careful retrospect and analysis of such of them as memory preserves, I now know that I never doubted the being, personality, and government of God. I was never an atheist or pantheist. I never doubted the existence and ministry of angels -- pure spirits never embodied: I could never have

been a Sadducee. I never doubted the essential distinction between spirit and matter: I could never have been a materialist.

And as to the origin of things, the philosophy of Democritus, developed by Epicurus, more developed by Lucretius, and gone to seed in the unverified hypothesis of modern evolutionists -- such a godless, materialistic anti-climax of philosophy never had the slightest attraction or temptation for me. The intuitions of humanity preserved me from any ambition to be descended from either beast or protoplasm. The serious reception of such a speculative philosophy was not merely a mental, but mainly a moral impossibility. I never doubted the immortality of the soul and conscious future existence. This conviction antedated any reading of "Plato, thou reasonest well." I never doubted the final, just judgment of the Creator of the world.

But my infidelity related to the Bible and its manifest doctrines. I doubted that it was God's book; that it was an inspired revelation of his will to man. I doubted miracles. I doubted the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth. But more than all, I doubted his victorious expiation for the sins of men. I doubted any real power and vitality in the Christian religion. I never doubted that the Scriptures claimed inspiration, nor that they taught unequivocally the divinity and vicarious expiation of Jesus. If the Bible does not teach these, it teaches nothing. The trifling expedient of accepting the Bible as "inspired in spots," never occurred to me. To accept, with Renan, its natural parts and arbitrarily deny its supernatural, or to accept with some the book as from God, and then strike at its heart by a false interpretation that denied, the divinity and vicarious expiation of Jesus -- these were follies of which I was never guilty -- follies for which even now I have never seen

or heard a respectable excuse. To me it was always “Aut Casear, aut nihil.” What anybody wanted, in a religious way, with the shell after the kernel was gone I never could understand.

While the beginnings of my infidelity cannot be recalled, by memory, I can give the date when it took tangible shape. I do know just when it emerged from chaos and outlined itself in my consciousness with startling distinctness. An event called it out of the mists and shadows into conscious reality. It happened on this wise:

There was a protracted meeting in our vicinity. A great and mysterious influence swept over the community. There was much excitement. Many people, old and young, joined the church and were baptized. Doubtless in the beginning of the meeting the conversions were what I would now call genuine. Afterward many merely went with the tide. They went because others were going. Two things surprised me. First, that I did not share the interest or excitement. To me it was only a curious spectacle. The second was that so many people wanted me to join the church. I had manifested no special interest except once or twice mechanically and experimentally. I had no conviction for sin. I had not felt lost and did not feel saved. First one and then another catechized me, and that categorically. Thus: “Don’t you believe the Bible?” “Yes.” “Don’t you believe in Jesus Christ?” “Y-e-s.” “Well, doesn’t the Bible say that whosoever believes in Jesus Christ is saved?” “Yes.” Now, mark three things: First, this catechizing was by zealous church-members before I presented myself for membership. Second, the answers were historical, Sunday-school answers, as from a text-book. Third, I was only thirteen years old. These answers were reported to the preachers somewhat after this fashion: “Here is

a lad who believes the Bible, believes in Jesus Christ, and believes that he is saved. Ought not such a one to join the church?" Now came the pressure of well-meant but unwise persuasion. I will not describe it. The whole thing would have been exposed if, when I presented myself for membership, I had been asked to tell my own story without prompting or leading questions. I did not have any to tell, and would have told none. But many had joined, the hour was late, and a few direct questions elicited the same historical, stereotyped answers. Thus the die was cast.

Until after my baptism everything seemed unreal, but walking home from the baptism the revelation came. The vague infidelity of all the past took positive shape, and would not down at my bidding. Truth was naked before me. My answers had been educational. I did not believe that the Bible was God's revelation. I did not believe its miracles and doctrines. I did not believe, in any true sense, in the divinity or victorious sufferings of Jesus. I had no confidence in professed conversion and regeneration. I had not felt lost nor did I feel saved. There was no perceptible, radical change in my disposition or affections. What I once loved, I still loved; what I once hated, I still hated. It was no temporary depression of spirit following a previous exaltation, such as I now believe sometimes comes to genuine Christians. This I knew. Joining the church, with its assumption of obligations, was a touchstone. It acted on me like the touch of Ithuriel's spear. I saw my real self. I knew that either I had no religion or it was not worth having. This certainty was to my state had no intermittence. The sensation of actual and positive infidelity was so new to me that I hardly knew what to say about it. I felt a repugnance to parade it. I wanted time and trial for its verification. I knew that its avowal would pain

and horrify my family and the church, yet honesty required me to say something. And so I merely asked that the church withdraw from me on the ground that I was not converted. This was not granted, because the brethren thought that I mistook temporary mental depression for lack of conversion. They asked me to wait and give it a trial; to read the Bible and pray. I could not make them understand, but from that time on I read the Bible as never before -- read it all; read it many times; studied it in the light of my infidelity; marked its contradictions and fallacies, as they seemed to me, from Genesis to Revelation. Two years passed away. In this interval we moved to Texas. In a meeting in Texas, when I was fifteen years old, I was persuaded to retain membership for further examination. Now came the period of reading Christian apologies and infidel books. What a multitude of them of both kinds! Hume, Paine, Volney, Bolingbroke, Rousseau, Voltaire, Taylor, Gibbon, *et al*, over against Watson, Nelson, Horn, Calvin, Walker, and a host of others. In the meantime I was at college, devouring the Greek, Roman, and Oriental philosophies. At seventeen, being worn out in body and mind, I joined McCullough's Texas Rangers, the first regiment mustered into the Confederate service, and on the remote, uninhabited frontier pursued the investigation with unabated ardor.

But now came another event. I shall not name it. It came from no sin on my part, but it blasted every hope and left me in Egyptian darkness. The battle of life was lost. In seeking the field of war, I sought death. By peremptory demand I had my church connection dissolved, and turned utterly away from every semblance of Bible belief. In the hour of my darkness I turned unreservedly to infidelity. This time I brought it a broken heart and a disappointed life, asking for light and peace and rest. It was now no

curious speculation; no tentative intellectual examination. It was a stricken soul, tenderly and anxiously and earnestly seeking light. As I was in the first Confederate regiment, so I was in the last corps that surrendered; but while armies grappled and throttled each other, a darker and deadlier warfare raged within me. I do know this: my quest for the truth was sincere and unintermittent. Happy people whose lives are not blasted, may affect infidelity, may appeal to its oracles from a curious, speculative interest, and may minister to their intellectual pride by seeming to be odd. It was not so with me. With all the earnestness of a soul between which and happiness the bridges were burned, I bought a broken and bleeding, but honest heart to every reputed oracle of infidelity. I did not ask life or fame or pleasure. I merely asked light to shine on the path of right. Once more I viewed the antichristian philosophies no longer to admire them in what they destroyed, but to inquire what they built up, what they offered to a hungry heart and a blasted life. There now came to me a revelation as awful as when Mokanna, in Moore's "Lalla Rookh," lifted his veil for Zelica.

Why had I never seen it before? How could I have been blind to it? These philosophies, one and all, were mere negations. They were destructive, but not constructive. They overturned and overturned and overturned; but, as my soul liveth, they built up nothing under the whole heaven in the place of what they destroyed. I say nothing; I mean nothing. To the unstricken, curious soul, they are as beautiful as the aurora borealis, shining on arctic icebergs. But to me they warmed nothing and melted nothing. No flowers bloomed and no fruit ripened under their cheerless beams. They looked down on my bleeding heart as the cold, distant, pitiless stars have ever looked

down on all human suffering. Whoever, in his hour of real need, makes abstract philosophy his pillow, makes cold, hard granite his pillow. Whoever looks trustingly into any of its false faces, looks into the face of a Medusa, and is turned to stone. They are all wells without water, and clouds without rain. I have witnessed a drought in Texas. The earth was iron and the heavens brass. Dust clouded the thoroughfares and choked the travelers. Water courses ran dry, grass scorched and crackled, corn leaves twisted and wilted, stock died around the last water holes, the ground cracked in fissures, and the song of birds died out in parched throats. Men despaired. The whole earth prayed: "Rain, rain, rain! O heaven, send rain!" Suddenly a cloud rises above the horizon and floats into vision like an angel of hope. It spreads a cool shade over the burning and glowing earth. Expectation gives life to desire. The lowing herds look up. The shriveled flowers open their tiny cups. The corn leaves untwist and rustle with gladness. And just when all trusting, suffering life opens her confiding heart to the promise of relief, the cloud, the cheating cloud, like a heartless coquette, gathers her drapery about her and floats scornfully away, leaving the angry sun free to dart his fires of death into the open heart of all suffering life. Such a cloud without rain is any form of infidelity to the soul in its hour of need.

Who then can conjure by the name of Voltaire? Of what avail in that hour is Epicurus or Zeno, Huxley or Darwin? Here now was my case: I had turned my back on Christianity, and had found nothing in infidelity; happiness was gone, and death would not come. The Civil War had left me a wounded cripple on crutches, utterly poverty-stricken and loaded with debt. The internal war of infidelity, after making me roll

hopelessly the ever-falling stone of Sisyphus, vainly climb the revolving wheel of Ixion, and stoop like Tantalus to drink waters that ever receded, or reach out for fruit that could not be grasped, now left me bound like Prometheus on the cold rock, while vultures tore with beak and talons a life that could suffer, but could not die.

At this time two books of the Bible took hold of me with unearthly power. I had not a thought of their inspiration, but I knew from my experience that they were neither fiction nor allegory -- the book of Job and the book of Ecclesiastes. Some soul had walked those paths. They were histories; not dreams and not mere poems. Like Job, I believed in God; and like him, had cried: "Oh that I knew where I might find him! That I might come even to his seat!...Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: on the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him: but he knoweth the way that I take." Like Job, I could not find answers in nature to the heart's sorest need and the most important questions; and, like Job, regarding God as my adversary, I had cried out for a revelation: "Oh that one would hear me! Behold, my desire is, that the Almighty would answer me, and that mine adversary had written a book. Surely I would take it upon my shoulder, and bind it as a crown to me." Like Job, I felt the need of a mediator, who as a man could enter into my case, and as divine could enter into God's case; and, like Job, I had complained: "He is not a man, as I am, that I should answer him, and we should come together in judgment. Neither is there any daysman betwixt us, that might lay his hand upon us both." And thus I approached my twenty-second year.

I had sworn never to put my foot in another church. My father had died believing me lost. My mother -- when does a mother give up a child? -- came to me one day and begged, for her sake, that I would attend one more meeting. It was a Methodist camp meeting, held in the fall of 1865. I had not an atom of interest in it. I liked the singing, but the preaching did not touch me. But one day, I shall never forget. It was Sunday at 11 o'clock. The great, wooden shed was crowded. I stood on the outskirts, leaning on my crutches, wearily and somewhat scornfully enduring. The preacher made a failure even for him. There was nothing in his sermon. But when he came down, as I supposed to exhort as usual, he startled me not only by not exhorting, but by asking some questions that seemed meant for me. He said: "You that stand aloof from Christianity and scorn as simple folks, what have you got? Answer honestly before God, have you found anything worth having where you are?" My heart answered in a moment: "Nothing under the whole heaven; absolutely nothing." As if he had heard my unspoken answer, he continued: "Is there anything else out there worth trying, that has any promise in it?" Again my heart answered: "Nothing; absolutely nothing. I have been to the jumping-off place on all these roads. They all lead to a bottomless abyss." Well, then, he continued, "admitting there's nothing there, if there be a God, mustn't there be a something somewhere? If so, do you know it is not here? Are you willing to test it? Have you the fairness and courage to try it? I don't ask you to read any book, nor study any evidences, nor make any difficult and tedious pilgrimages; that way is too long and time is too short. Are you willing to try it now; to make a practical, experimental test, you to be the judge of the result?" These cool, calm, and pertinent questions hit me with tremendous force,

but I didn't understand the test. He continued: "I base my test on these two scriptures: 'If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God;' 'Then shall we know if we follow on to know the Lord.'" For the first time I understood the import of these scriptures. I had never before heard of such a translation for the first and had never examined the original text. In our version it says: "If any man will do the will of God." But the preacher quoted it: "Whosoever willeth to do the will of God," showing that the knowledge as to whether the doctrine was of God depended not upon external action and not upon exact conformity with God's will, but upon the internal disposition -- "whosoever willeth or wishes to do God's will." The old translation seemed to make knowledge impossible; the new, practicable. In the second scripture was also new light: "Then shall we know if we follow on to know the Lord," which means that true knowledge follows persistence in the prosecution of it -- that is, it comes not to temporary and spasmodic investigation.

So, when he invited all who were willing to make an immediate experimental test to come forward and give him their hands, I immediately went forward. I was not prepared for the stir which this action created. My infidelity and my hostile attitude toward Christianity were so well known in the community that such action on my part developed quite a sensation. Some even began to shout. Whereupon, to prevent any misconception, I arose and stated that I was not converted, that perhaps they misunderstood what was meant by my coming forward; that my heart was as cold as ice; my action meant no more than that I was willing to make an experimental test of the truth

and power of the Christian religion, and that I was willing to persist in subjection to the test until a true solution could be found. This quieted matters.

The meeting closed without any change upon my part. The last sermon had been preached, the benediction pronounced, and the congregation was dispersing. A few ladies only remained, seated near the pulpit and engaged in singing. Feeling that the experiment was ended and the solution not found, I remained to hear them sing. As their last song, they sang:

O land of rest, for thee I sigh,
When will the moment come?
When I shall lay my armor by
And dwell in peace at home.

The singing made a wonderful impression upon me. Its tones were as soft as the rustling of angels' wings. Suddenly there flashed upon my mind, like a light from heaven, this scripture: "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." I did not see Jesus with my eye, but I seemed to see him standing before me, looking reproachfully and tenderly and pleadingly, seeming to rebuke me for having gone to all other sources for rest but the right one, and now inviting me to come to him. In a moment I went, once and forever, casting myself unreservedly and for all time at Christ's feet, and in a moment the rest came, indescribable and unspeakable, and it has remained from that day until now.

I gave no public expression of the change which had passed over me, but spent the night in the enjoyment of it and wondering if it would be with me when morning came. When the morning came it was still with me, brighter than the sunlight and

sweeter than the song of birds, and now, for the first time, I understood the scripture which I had often heard my mother repeat: “Ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” (Isa. 55:12).

When I reached home, I said nothing about the experience through which I had passed, hiding the righteousness of God in my own heart: but it could not be hidden. As I was walking across the floor on my crutches, an orphan boy whom my mother had raised noticed and called attention to the fact that I was both whistling and crying. I knew that my mother heard him, and, to avoid observation, I went at once to my room, lay down on the bed, and covered my face with my hands. I heard her coming. She pulled my hands away from my face and gazed long and steadfastly upon me without a word. A light came over her face that made it seem to me as the shining on the face of Stephen; and then, with trembling lips, she said: “My son, you have found the Lord.” Her happiness was indescribable. I don’t think she slept that night. She seemed to fear that with sleep she might dream and wake to find that the glorious fact was but a vision of light. I spent the night at her bedside reading Bunyan’s “Pilgrim’s Progress.” I read it all that night, and when I came with the pilgrims to the Beulah Land, from which Doubting Castle could be seen no more forever, and which was in sight of the heavenly city and within sound of the heavenly music, my soul was filled with such a rapture and such an ecstasy of joy as I had never before experienced. I knew then as well as I know now that I would preach; that it would be my life-work; that I would have no other work.

