

## **The “infidelity” of abolitionism. By William Lloyd Garrison.**

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THE “INFIDELITY” OF ABOLITIONISM.

BY WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON.

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### **THE “INFIDELITY” OF ABOLITIONISM.**

Every great reformatory movement, in every age, has been subjected alike to popular violence and to religious opprobrium. The history of one is essentially that of every other. Its origin is ever in obscurity; its earliest supporters are destitute of resources, uninfluential in position, without reputation; it is denounced as fanatical, insane, destructive, treasonable, infidel. The tactics resorted to for its suppression are ever the same, whether it be inaugurated by the prophets, by Jesus and his apostles, by Wickliffe, Luther, Calvin, Fox, or any of their successors. Its opponents have scornfully asked, as touching its pedigree, “Is not this the carpenter's son?” They have patriotically pronounced it a seditious attempt to play into the hands of the Romans, to the subversion of the state and nation. They have piously exclaimed against it as open blasphemy. They have branded it as incomparably more to be feared and abhorred than robbery and murder.

No other result has been possible, under the circumstances. The wrong assailed has grown to a colossal size: its existence not only implies, but demonstrates, universal corruption. It has become organic—a part of the habits and customs of the times. It is incorporated into the State; it is nourished by the Church. Its support is the test of loyalty, patriotism, piety. It holds the reins of government with absolute mastery—rewarding the venal, stimulating the ambitious, terrifying the weak, inflaming the brutal, satisfying the pharisaical, ostracizing the incorruptible. It has its temple, its ritual, its priesthood, its divine paternity, in the prevailing religion, no matter what may be the title or pretension thereof.

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Now, to attack such a wrong, without fear or compromise,—to strip off the mask, and exhibit it in all its naked deformity,—to demand its immediate suppression, at whatever cost to reputation or worldly interest,—must, of necessity, put the reformer seemingly in antagonism to public

quietude and good order, and make the whole social, political and religious structure tremble to its foundations. He cannot be a good citizen; for he refuses to be law-abiding, and treads public opinion, legislative enactment, and governmental edict, alike under his feet. He cannot be sane; for he arraigns, tries and condemns, as the greatest sinners and the worst criminals, the most reputable, elevated, revered, and powerful members of the body politic. He cannot love his country; for he declares it to be "laden with iniquity," and liable to the retributive judgments of Heaven. He cannot possess humility; for he pays no regard to usage, precedent, authority, or public sentiment, but defies them all. He cannot be disinterested; for it is not supposable that he is actuated by any higher motive than the love of notoriety, a disposition to be factious, or the consummation of some ulterior design. He cannot be virtuous; for he is seen in the company of publicans and sinners, and is shunned by the chief priests, scribes and pharisees. He cannot be righteously sound in the faith; for he impeaches whatever is popularly accounted piety as but an empty observance, a lifeless tradition, a sanctified villany, or a miserable delusion. He ought not to live; for "it is better that one man should die, than that a whole nation should perish."

Every nation has its "peculiar institution," its vested interest, its organized despotism, its overmastering sin, distinct from every other nation. The conflict of reform is ever geographical as an issue, because the evil assailed is never world-wide: it may be universal in its tendencies, but it is local in its immediate results. It is easy to denounce Monarchy in America, Slavery in Europe, Protestantism in Italy, Democracy in Russia, Judaism in Turkey; because it is to take the popular side in every such case. An iniquitous system, which, if vigorously assailed in one country, may excite a bloody persecution, and cause the whole land to tremble with consternation and fury, in another country may be denounced not only with impunity, but to general acceptance; for the special abomination thus opposed not existing therein, it is seen in its true character. Hence, what may serve to reveal the exact moral condition of one people may not be applicable in any other case. Kossuth found that pleading for "material aid" in America was quite a different thing from contending with Austrian despotism in Hungary.

The one great, distinctive, all-conquering sin in America is its system of chattel slavery—co-existent with the settlement of the country—for a considerable time universally diffused—at first, tolerated as a necessary evil—subsequently, deplored as a calamity—now, defended in every slave State as a most beneficent institution, upheld by natural and revealed religion—in its feebleness, able to dictate terms in the formation of the Constitution—in its strength, controlling parties and sects, courts and legislative assemblies, the army and navy, Congress, the National Executive, the Supreme Court—and having at its disposal all the offices, honors and revenues of the government, wherewith to defy all opposition, and to extend its dominion indefinitely. Gradually abolished in six of the thirteen States which formed the Union, it has concentrated itself in the southern and

southwestern portion of the Republic, covering more than one-half of the national territory, and aiming at universal, empire.

The victims of this terrible system being of African extraction, it has engendered and established a complexional caste, unknown to European civilization; pervading all parts of the United States like a malaria-tainted atmosphere; in its development, more malignant at the North than at the South; poisoning the life-blood of the most refined and the most depraved alike; and making the remotest connection with the colored race a leprous taint. Its spirit is as brutal as it is unnatural; as mean as it is wicked; as relentless as it is monstrous. It is capable of committing any outrage upon the person, mind or estate of the negro, whether bond or free. It carries with it the venom of the rattlesnake, the rapacity of the wolf, the fury of the tiger. It is "set on fire of hell," and the flame is never quenched. No religious creed, no form of worship, no evangelical discipline, no heretical liberality, either mitigates or restrains it. Christian and Infidel, Calvinist and Universalist, Trinitarian and Unitarian, Episcopalian and Methodist, Baptist and 1\* 6 Swedenborgian, Old School and Now School Presbyterian, Orthodox and Hicksite Quaker, all are infected by it, and equally ready to make an innocent natural distinction the badge of eternal infamy, and a warrant for the most cruel proscription. As a nation sows, so shall it also reap. The retributive justice of God was never more strikingly manifested than in this all-pervading negrophobia, the dreadful consequence of chattel slavery.

The vitality, the strength, the invulnerability of slavery are found in the prevailing religious sentiment and teaching of the people. While it has been pronounced an evil, a calamity, wrong in the abstract, as a system to be deplored, and gradually to be exterminated,—the act of individual and general slaveholding, the right to have property in man, has been universally recognized as compatible with Christian faith and fellowship, and sanctioned by the Holy Scriptures. More than half a million of slaves at the South are owned by ministers, office-bearers, and church members, who buy, sell, bequeath, inherit, mortgage, divide, and barter slave property, as they do any other portion of their personal or real estate. At the North, every sect, desirous of national extension, can secure it only by acknowledging slaveholders as brethren in Christ. All the great, controlling ecclesiastical bodies and religious denominations in the land,—constituting the American Church, comprehensively speaking,—are one in sentiment on the subject. All the leading Bishops, Doctors of Divinity, Theological Professors, ministers, and religious journalists, find ample justification for slaveholding at the South. Professor Stuart, of Andover, found it in the Decalogue—Bishop Hedding, in the Golden Rule! Rev. Dr. Lord, President of Dartmouth College, finds it in natural and revealed religion—Rev. Dr. Nehemiah Adams, in the beneficent workings of slavery, suppressing pauperism, preventing mobocratic violence, upholding law and order, nourishing affection, cultivating the religious sentiment, and extending the kingdom of God on earth! Rev. Dr. Spring avows that if, by offering up

a single prayer, he could emancipate every slave in America, he would deem it a rash and censurable act!

Such, then, was the system,—so buttressed and defended,—to be assailed and conquered by the Abolitionists. And who were they? In point of numbers, as drops to the ocean without station or influence; equally obscure and destitute of resources. Originally, they were generally members of the various religious bodies, tenacious of their theological views, full of veneration for the organized church and ministry, but ignorant of the position in which these stood to “the sum of all villainies.” What would ultimately be required of them, by a faithful adherence to the cause of the slave, in their church relations, their political connections, their social ties, their worldly interest and reputation, they knew not. Instead of seeking a controversy with the pulpit and the church, they confidently looked to both for efficient aid to their cause. Instead of suddenly withdrawing from the pro-slavery religious and political organizations with which they were connected, they lingered long and labored hard to bring them to repentance. They were earnest, but well-balanced; intrepid, but circumspect; importunate, but long-suffering. Their controversy was neither personal nor sectional; their object, neither to arraign any sect nor to assail any party, primarily. They sought to liberate the slave, by every righteous instrumentality—and nothing more. But to their grief and amazement, they were gradually led to perceive, by the terrible revelations of the hour, that the religious forces on which they had relied were all arrayed on the side of the oppressor; that the North was as hostile to emancipation as the South; that the spirit of slavery was omnipresent, invading every sanctuary, infecting every pulpit, controlling every press, corrupting every household, and blinding every vision; that no other alternative was presented to them, except to wage war with “principalities, and powers, and spiritual wickedness in high places,” and to separate themselves from every slaveholding alliance, or else to daub with untempered mortar, substitute compromise for principle, and thus betray the rights and liberties of the millions in thralldom, at a fearful cost to their own souls. If some of them faltered, and perished by the way; if others deserted the cause, and became its bitterest enemies; if others still withdrew from the ranks, their sectarian attachment overmastering their love of humanity, and leading them basely to misrepresent and revile their old associates; the main body proved fearless and incorruptible, and, through the American Anti-Slavery Society<sup>8</sup> and its auxiliaries, have remained steadfast to the present hour. Either by way of distinction or of opprobrium, they are technically styled “Garrisonian Abolitionists.” The Southern flesh-mongers brand them as an “infidel” party; the Northern pulpits and religious bodies join in the same outcry. Those who have treacherously seceded, but yet wear an anti-slavery mask, sedulously propagate the calumny; and they have resorted to every device that malice could suggest, or bigotry execute, at home and abroad, to cripple their resources, and destroy their influence. In England and Scotland, especially, extraordinary pains have been taken, in public and in private, by an artful appeal to sectarian narrowness, to hold up the American Anti-Slavery Society as unworthy of aid

or countenance in any degree, on account of its “infidel” character. Contributions designed for its treasury have been withheld, or directed into hostile channels; and the most devoted advocates of the slave treated with coldness, suspicion, or contempt.

In all this, no strange thing has happened. It is an old device to divert attention from the true issue. It is a malicious fabrication—a “mad-dog” outcry to effect the death of the hated object.

Religion is, in every land, precisely and only what is popularly recognized as such. To pronounce it corrupt, spurious, oppressive, and especially to demonstrate it to be so, is ever a proof of “infidelity”—whether among Pagans or Mahommedans, Jews or Christians, Catholics or Protestants. In the United States, it is the bulwark of slavery—the untiring enemy of Abolitionism. How, then, has it been possible for the Abolitionists to establish a religious character, or to avoid the imputation of infidelity, while in necessary and direct conflict with such a religion? To say that they ought not to assail it, is to denounce them for refusing to go with the multitude to do evil, for being governed by the standard of eternal justice, for adhering to the Golden Rule.

To what, or to whom, have they been infidel? If to the cause of the enslaved, let it be shown. But this is not pretended; and yet this is the only test by which they are to be tried. They have but one bond of agreement—the inherent, sinfulness of slavery, and, consequently, the duty of immediate emancipation. As *individuals*, they are of all theological and political opinions; having an undeniable right to advocate those opinions, and to make as many converts to them as possible. As an *organization*, they meet for a common object in which they are agreed, to endorse nothing but the right of the slave to himself as paramount to every other claim, and to apply no other principle as a rule whereby to measure sects, parties, institutions and men. No sectarian, no party exaction can be made, without destroying unity of spirit and general cooperation. The Episcopalian, the Presbyterian, the Baptist, the Methodist, the “Infidel,” surrender not one jot or tittle of their right to be such, by uniting together for the abolition of slavery. No sectarian or party object can be sought, without a breach of good faith, and a perversion of the object ostensibly aimed at. No member can justly complain of any other member, or seek to weaken his testimony against slavery and its abettors, on account of any opinions held or promulgated by him on his individual responsibility.

Whence, then, this outcry of “infidelity” against the American Anti-Slavery Society? It has never proceeded from a manly spirit; it has never been raised by any one truly remembering the slave as bound with him; unless, indeed, it be true, that that Society has perfidiously turned aside from its original object, to accomplish some ulterior purpose, still assuming to be unchanged and undeviating. But it is not true:—though the charge has been repeated ten thousand times, at home and abroad, it is ten thousand times a calumny, uttered either through ignorance, sectarian enmity, personal jealousy, or pro-slavery malice. The Society has never arraigned or criticised any religious

body, on account of its peculiar creed; it has never taken any action on theological matters; it has never discussed, never attempted to settle the question, whether the Bible is plenary inspired, or whether the first day of the week is the Sabbath, or any other question foreign to its avowed purpose. Of the Sabbath it has declared, as Jesus did, that it is as lawful and obligatory to heal the sick, release the bound, and plead for the oppressed, on that day, as it is to succor cattle in distress. Of the Bible, as an anti-slavery instrumentality, it has made a constant and most powerful use against the pro-slavery interpretations of a time-serving clergy; though not deriving the 10 rights of man from any book, but from his own nature. Of the true Church it has ever spoken with veneration, and vindicated it as animated and controlled by the spirit of impartial liberty, to the exclusion of all tyrants. Of the Gospel it has proclaimed, that in all its doctrines, teachings and examples, it is utterly at war with slavery, and for universal freedom. Of Jesus it has affirmed, that he is ever with the down-trodden and oppressed, whose case he has literally, made his own,<sup>\*</sup> and that he has gloriously vindicated the brotherhood of the human race, to the confusion of all who desecrate the image of God. Its appeals have been unceasingly to the conscience and the heart; it has called to repentance a guilty nation, as the only condition of salvation; it has refused to compromise with sin.

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\* See Matthew, chap. xxv.

If, therefore, it be an infidel Society, it is so only in the sense in which Jesus was a blasphemer, and the Apostles, were "pestilent and seditious fellows, seeking to turn the world upside down." It is infidel to Satan, the enslaver; it is loyal to Christ, the redeemer. It is infidel to a Gospel which makes man the property of man; it is bound up with the Gospel which requires us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to call no man master. It is infidel to a Church which receives to its communion the "traffickers in slaves and the souls of men;" it is loyal to the Church which is not stained with blood, nor polluted by oppression. It is infidel to the Bible as a pro-slavery interpreted volume; it is faithful to it as construed on the side of justice and humanity. It is infidel to the Sabbath, on which it is hypocritically pronounced unlawful to extricate the millions who lie bound and bleeding in the pit of slavery; it is true to the Sabbath, on which it is well-pleasing to God to bind up the brokenhearted, and to let the oppressed go free. It is infidel to all blood-stained compromises, sinful concessions, unholy compacts, respecting the system of slavery; it is devotedly attached to whatever is honest, straightforward, invincible for the right. No Society has ever erected a higher moral standard, or more disinterestedly pursued its object, or more unfalteringly walked by faith, or more confidently trusted in the living God for succor in every extremity, and a glorious 11 victory at last. At the jubilee, its vindication shall be triumphant and universal.

In view of the treatment of the Reformer in all ages, and of the ultimate success of his cause, the Scottish poet, Mackay, well says:—

“The man is thought a knave or fool, Or bigot, plotting crime, Who, for the advancement of his kind, Is wiser than his time. For him the hemlock shall distil; For him the axe be bared; For him the gibbet shall be built; For him the stake prepared; Him shall the scorn and wrath of men Pursue with deadly aim; And malice, envy, spite and lies, Shall desecrate his name. But truth shall conquer at the last; For round and round We run, And ever the right comes uppermost, And ever is justice done.”

Genuine Abolitionism is not a hobby, got up for personal or associated aggrandizement; it is not a political ruse; it is not a spasm of sympathy, which lasts but for a moment, leaving the system weak and worn; it is not a fever of enthusiasm; it is not the fruit of fanaticism; it is not a spirit of faction. It is of heaven, not of men. It lives in the heart as a vital principle. It is an essential part of Christianity, and aside from it there can be no humanity. Its scope is not confined to the slave population of the United States, but embraces mankind. Opposition cannot weary it out, force cannot put it down, fire cannot consume it. It is the spirit of Jesus, who was sent “to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of our God.”

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SONNET TO LIBERTY.

They tell me, Liberty! that, in thy name, I may not plead for all the human race; That some are born to bondage and disgrace, Some to a heritage of wo and shame, And some to power supreme, and glorious fame. With my whole soul, I spurn the doctrine base, And, as an equal brotherhood, embrace All people, and for all fair freedom claim! Know this, O man! whate'er thy earthly fate— God never made a tyrant nor a slave: Wo, then, to those who dare to desecrate His glorious image!—for to all He gave Eternal rights, which none may violate; And by a mighty hand th' oppressed He yet shall save.

W. L. Garrison.

SONNET.

Who talks of weariness in Freedom's cause, Knows nothing of its life-sustaining power; Who in the conflict for the right would pause, Beneath a tyrant's rod was made to cower; Who something loves more than his brother man,— Holds it more sacred, at a higher price,— Fails to discern Redemption's glorious plan, Or in what sense Christ is our sacrifice; Who stands aloof from those who are agreed In charity to aid and bless mankind, Because they walk not by his narrow creed,



Himself among the fallen spirits shall find; Who would show loyalty to God must be At all times true  
in man's extremity.

W. L. Garrison.