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Ryan M. Winter

Illinois Wesleyan University, rwinter@iwu.edu

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The Morality of an American Infidel

Abstract

Never in American history has an outspoken freethinker gained so much widespread attention as Robert Green Ingersoll. One of the greatest orators in American history, Ingersoll traveled across the country entrancing audiences with his astonishing speaking skills, quick wit, and genuine concern for humanity. Despite the religiosity of his audiences, Ingersoll's ability as an orator allowed him to speak freely about his nonbelief at a time when it was usually dangerous to do so. Some Christians like to think they have a monopoly on virtue and that nonbelievers must be tempted by sin, so Ingersoll debunked this misconception with logic in his speeches and impeccable behavior in his personal affairs. Ingersoll became famous for uncovering the inconsistencies and dangers of religion; however, he also devoted considerable efforts to outlining his own secular philosophy.

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Never in American history has an outspoken freethinker gained so much widespread attention as Robert Green Ingersoll. One of the greatest orators in American history, Ingersoll traveled across the country entrancing audiences with his astonishing speaking skills, quick wit, and genuine concern for humanity. Despite the religiosity of his audiences, Ingersoll's ability as an orator allowed him to speak freely about his nonbelief at a time when it was usually dangerous to do so. Some Christians like to think they have a monopoly on virtue and that nonbelievers must be tempted by sin, so Ingersoll debunked this misconception with logic in his speeches and impeccable behavior in his personal affairs. Ingersoll became famous for uncovering the inconsistencies and dangers of religion; however, he also devoted considerable efforts to outlining his own secular philosophy. In the following pages, I examine his views on what constituted a virtuous life as well as his argument for how one could be good without God. The main primary sources I employ are public speeches given by Ingersoll. These speeches are useful for assessing his personal beliefs, but relying on them too heavily can be dangerous because sometimes people do not reveal their true feelings in public. Also, because of the difficulties involved in expressing complex, personal beliefs, I must consider the possibility that I have misinterpreted Ingersoll's words. Therefore, finding the truth of what this extraordinary man really believed presents considerable historical challenges.

Robert Ingersoll was indisputably the most gifted orator of his generation. Born in 1833 to a Presbyterian minister, he turned aside from his father's path early in life and was instead inspired by such rogues as Paine and Voltaire.¹ A true skeptic and agnostic, Ingersoll became convinced that reason and compassion were the foundations of true morality. He read voraciously and had a photographic memory, undoubtedly an indispensable tool later in life when he would deliver two-hour-long speeches without notes. In his early career, Ingersoll served as a colonel in the Civil War, a lawyer in Southern Illinois, and a failed Republican politician. It was in this last capacity that his career as orator began. Although Ingersoll was much too forthright and uncompromising about his religious views to make a good politician, the Republican Party quickly noticed his oratorical skill and put him to use endorsing other candidates. In 1876, he was chosen to give a speech in support of presidential candidate James G. Blaine at the Republican National Convention. In what has been called the greatest nominating speech ever given, the unknown Illinoisan rocketed out of obscurity overnight. *The Cincinnati Enquirer* enthused, "Men may come and go; flowers may wither, and conventions may shrivel and pass into history. . . . but the

1. Mark A. Plummer, *Robert G. Ingersoll: Peoria's Pagan Politician* (Macomb: Western Illinois Monograph Series, 1984), 10.

eloquence of that smooth-faced individual from Peoria will live forever.”² From that point on, Ingersoll became the Republican Party’s leading stump speaker and the nation’s most beloved orator. Although he remained a lifelong supporter of the Party of Lincoln and continued to endorse his favorite candidates with memorable speeches, Ingersoll primarily used his newfound position of prominence to explore his true passion: free thought.

In a historical sense, Ingersoll’s timing was perfect. His rise coincided with the period of 1875 to 1914, which Susan Jacoby labels “The Golden Age of Freethought” in her book *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*.³ Doubtless, much of the success of the golden age came from Ingersoll himself, but there were other factors at work that made his appearance on the national stage in 1876 especially fortuitous. Jacoby argues that the spread of free thought can best be described as a national phenomenon in which a spirit of intellectual curiosity and an environment supportive to free speech, even unorthodox speech, prevailed.⁴ In other words, it was a time of open-mindedness, when people were willing to learn from those they disagreed with. This mentality gave atheism and free thought fertile ground to work with; Ingersoll and others were delighted to be given a chance to employ reason against the church.

Distinguished first as a political orator, Ingersoll earned the respect and trust of wealthy, intellectual, and influential friends and was therefore given the luxury to speak his mind about religious matters. Using this springboard of respectability, he was able to talk about subjects that would otherwise have ruined his career. If he had begun by ridiculing the irrationality of faith, it is likely his audience would have been limited to the miniscule group of freethinkers who already agreed with him. Instead, Ingersoll drew huge crowds, including dutifully faithful Christians and more liberal-minded progressives. He entertained them with an effortless speaking style and a sarcastic wit. A Des Moines newspaper reported, “Strange to relate, a majority of the attendants were strictly orthodox; and how they did roar. Foreordination laughs jostled freewill smiles; Baptist cachinations floated out to join apostolic roars, and there was a grand unison of orthodox cheers for the most unorthodox jokes.”⁵ Ingersoll’s ability to draw audiences, especially from the groups he critiqued, situated him in the unprecedented position of being able to deliver the message of free thought to millions of people who would never have heard it otherwise.

Whenever news reports are chief primary sources, the historian should proceed with caution and examine whose biases are being reported, especially when the subject is as polarizing a figure as Ingersoll. Editors of Christian newspapers found Ingersoll guilty of almost every crime imaginable. One religious weekly went so far as to claim that they had it on “good authority” that the Great Agnos-

2. C. H. Cramer, *Royal Bob: The Life of Robert G. Ingersoll* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1952), 15.

3. Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 151.

4. Ibid.

tic's only son had become addled from reading too many trashy novels and had died in a private asylum. In response, Robert listed:

1. My only son was not a great novel reader;
2. He did not go insane;
3. He was not sent to an asylum;
4. He did not die; and
5. I never had a son! ⁶

Evidently, anything was fair game when it came to discrediting an unbeliever, even nonexistent family members with nonexistent mental conditions. Because he was both well known and despised by a sizeable portion of the country, a great number of other lies were told about Ingersoll as well. But what just about everyone agreed on was his incredible stage presence and enchanting voice. Praise for Ingersoll did not come from a few isolated and overexcited voices. Harry Houdini considered Ingersoll a fellow magician; Mark Twain, after hearing one of Ingersoll's speeches, remarked that it was the "supremest combination of English words that was ever put together since the world began."⁷ Clarence Darrow, one of the most skilled lawyers in American history, who became immortalized for his defense in the *Scopes Monkey Trial*, attempted to copy Ingersoll's style but gave up, concluding that no one could really speak as well as Bob.⁸

While his life itself is remarkable enough, Ingersoll's beliefs are even more interesting and complex. So much is said about what Ingersoll disbelieved that what he actually did believe is often left untouched. A firm believer in the equality of the sexes, Ingersoll was also an incurable romantic who gushed about old-fashioned chivalry.⁹ A militant abolitionist, he nonetheless opposed expanding the power of the central government.¹⁰ Despite what many have said, he was neither an atheist nor a pagan, but an agnostic. The word agnostic, like those who ascribe themselves to it, is uncertain and Ingersoll's belief must be further qualified. He most certainly did not believe in the God of Christianity, or of any other orthodox religion. The word orthodoxy was sickening to him. Reason was his religion, truth his higher power. Any religion requiring belief for salvation was false since "No man can control his belief. . . . My brain. . . . is the only light I have from Nature, and if there be a God, it is the only torch that this God has given me by which to find my way."¹¹ Judging from his speeches, Ingersoll was not prepared to declare authoritatively that no god existed. He just saw no evidence that one did. Far from being weak or indecisive, Ingersoll's position is

6. Ibid., 158.

7. Ibid., 100.

8. Ibid., 101.

9. Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, 164.

10. Robert G. Ingersoll, "Liberty of Man, Woman and Child," in *Complete Lectures of Robert G. Ingersoll*, ed. David McKay (Philadelphia, 1935), 66; Plummer, *Peoria's Pagan Politician*, 20.

11. Robert G. Ingersoll, "Orthodoxy," in *Complete Lectures of Robert G. Ingersoll*, ed. David McKay (Philadelphia, 1935), 384.

that of a rational skeptic. "I do not deny," he wrote, "I do not know—but I do not believe."¹² Similarly, he did not know if there was an afterlife, though he sincerely hoped so. The idea of reuniting with loved ones, he believed, transcends religion and is felt at a basic human level.¹³ However, the Christian heaven was not to his liking because it promoted selfishness and disregard for others in this life. What joy could we take in heaven when religious authorities ensure us that the greatest minds in history are burning in eternal fire?¹⁴ Ingersoll's beliefs then, extended no further than the reach of his senses. He believed in whatever could be proved to his satisfaction, but he did not deny that which had yet to be proven.

Historically, those who doubt the existence of God or deny the authority of the church have been misinterpreted, to say the least. Besides having to live in peril of persecution by the "righteous," atheists and agnostics have always been mistrusted and shunned. Even John Locke, one of the foremost advocates of liberalism and toleration, wrote, "[T]hose are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of a God. Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist."¹⁵ Locke does not even consider the possibility that a believer could break a promise—or that an atheist could keep one—but we know that both of these events occur routinely. Sensible or not, Ingersoll had to address this prejudice with an explanation of where morality comes from, if not from God or the Bible.

Ingersoll's approach to solving this problem was to explain morality in a way religious believers would understand. Rather than erasing spirituality from morality, he simply shifted the object of reverence from the unknown to what we can know. If a religious view can be defined as an opinion about the purpose, point, or value of life, then Ingersoll was as religious as anyone. His devotion was just focused differently - on reason rather than blind faith, humanity rather than deity. His choice to use religious terminology in describing what morality meant to him was telling. In his "Decoration Day Eulogy," Ingersoll stated, "Human Liberty is the shrine at which I worship. Progress is the religion in which I believe."¹⁶ He was not so blinded by his disdain for religion as to deny that reverence, sanctity, or deep feelings of purpose could be useful if applied correctly. Similarly, in the thundering finale of his lecture "On the Gods," Ingersoll proclaims, "We are laying the foundations of the grand temple of the future—not the temple of all the gods, but of all the people—wherein, with appropriate rites, will be celebrated the religion of Humanity."¹⁷ Of course,

12. Cramer, *Royal Bob*, 148.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Ingersoll, "Orthodoxy," 385-6.

15. John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration," in *The Second Treatise of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Tom Crawford (New York: Dover, 2002), 145.

16. Plummer, *Peoria's Pagan Politician*, 57.

17. Robert G. Ingersoll, "The Gods," in *On the Gods and Other Essays*, ed. Paul Kurz (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1990), 56.

much of Ingersoll's speaking was intended to drive home a point with dramatic imagery. Therefore, taking his hyperbolic language as a sincere expression of belief might be unwise in some cases, but his consistent usage of sacred words in describing his love for humanity was certainly no coincident. While he despised faith, Ingersoll spoke in religious language to promote liberty, progress, and kindness.

Responding directly to the question of what would happen if we got rid of the Bible, Ingersoll replied that since no two people agree on what the Bible means, or what it means to be a Christian, the word of God is not a real source of morality.¹⁸ With all its contradictions, the Bible cannot be taken as a serious moral guide; here it says do one thing, there another. In order to follow the morality of the Bible, we must ignore other parts of it. Ingersoll joked, "We are told that no nation has ever been civilized without a Bible. The Jews had one, and they crucified a perfectly innocent man. They couldn't have done much worse without a Bible."¹⁹ Ingersoll believed religion to be one of the most pernicious enemies of liberty, responsible for some of the worst crimes of human history. His argument went even further than claiming that there can be goodness and virtue without God. Actually, Ingersoll countered, God is a source of immorality.

Although well-known for railing against religion, Ingersoll's personal philosophy was not radical. In the end, it amounted to something close to the secular humanist school of thought, which holds that we can lead meaningful, ethical lives without appeals to the supernatural. Even if there was a god, he would care much more about how we treated others than whether we believed in him or how much time we spent praying. Simply put:

One world at a time is my doctrine. Let us make some one happy here. Happiness is the interest that a decent action draws, and the more decent actions you do, the larger your income will be. Let every man try to make his wife happy, his children happy. Let every man try to make every day a joy, and God cannot afford to damn such a man. I cannot help God; I cannot injure God. I can help people; I can injure people. Consequently humanity is the only real religion.²⁰

By all accounts, this is how Ingersoll lived his life. He lived with passion and with the intent to make the most of it, because he recognized that it might be the only life he had. He lived to be happy and to make others happy. Ingersoll was no hermit; he owned a mansion, loved a good feast—he weighed well over two hundred pounds—and took expensive trips to Europe with his family. His sense of humor and contagious laugh were enjoyed by loved ones and audiences

18. Robert G. Ingersoll, "Hell," in *Complete Lectures of Robert G. Ingersoll*, ed. David McKay (Philadelphia, 1935), 58.

19. Robert G. Ingersoll, "Some Reasons Why," in *Complete Lectures of Robert G. Ingersoll*, ed. David McKay (Philadelphia, 1935), 313.

20. Robert G. Ingersoll, "Mistakes of Moses," in *Complete Lectures of Robert G. Ingersoll*, ed. David McKay (Philadelphia, 1935), 19.

alike. Following the Golden Rule more closely than most Christians, Ingersoll supported equal rights for women and minorities and free speech for all, not just those he agreed with. Genuinely kindhearted and the model family man, Robert loved his wife and children dearly. However, none of the accounts I have read has addressed the difficulty of living a family life while traveling across the country to speak in different towns each night. Cramer writes that at his peak the great orator gave fifty lectures in sixty days, and at other times over one hundred per year.²¹ Surely this packed schedule caused at least a little family distress, especially during an age when long-distance communication was inconvenient. However, none of his biographers leave the slightest doubt that the Ingersoll family was a happy one.

People's views on the purpose and value of life are not simply sound bites to be easily summarized and packaged into a sentence. Sometimes, we do not even know how to express our own beliefs about the meaning of life or the nature of God. Sometimes we change our minds. These are some of the most complicated thoughts we have, and articulating them aloud can be difficult. Even a man as skilled with words as Ingersoll could not always express himself exactly the way he wanted, adding a further layer of interpretation which historians must consider when reconstructing beliefs. When Ingersoll told his audience to make others happy, they might have had a different idea of what this entails than he did. What biographers and news reporters have said about Ingersoll is verifiable, at least to a point, yet what this great man truly believed only he will ever know. Any attempt to reconstruct Ingersoll's beliefs and intentions is inherently flawed. Therefore, what I have represented as Ingersoll's core beliefs about God, virtue, or the source of morality could easily be disputed or presented in a different light. Perhaps by focusing more heavily on alternate sources, another historian would come to completely different conclusions about Ingersoll than I have. But I feel confident that any historian who studies Ingersoll will immediately be impressed by his electrifying oration, his humble yet eloquent appeal to reason, and his unceasing efforts to help people realize that it is this world, and not the next, which we should make our paradise.

21. Cramer, *Royal Bob*, 97.