

Robert G. Ingersoll: An Appreciation
By
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Robert G. Ingersoll: An Appreciation¹

... All that is best in religion is unmistakably human, while the orthodox creeds in their icy barrenness are positively inhuman. Against their harsh and really immoral doctrines the brave and honest thinker rises in revolt ... One of the greatest of all rebels against conventional religion, one of the greatest of all defenders of liberty of thought, is the subject of our discourse this morning, Robert G. Ingersoll ...

I.

... He was born in Dresden, New York, August 11, 1833. His father, the Reverend John Ingersoll, was a minister, sometimes congregational, sometimes Presbyterian; and his mother, Mary Livingston, who died at the age of 36, when Robert was only two years old, was a woman of fine and estimable character ... His father, however, was a strict disciplinarian, who took life very seriously, and with the best of intentions made things a little solemn for his family ... a factor in turning the son against the orthodox creeds and their caricatures of deity.

But according to Ingersoll's own story it was a generous sense of justice and right that first led him into unbelief. At the age of eight years he heard a minister portray in lurid terms the tortures of [the rich man] in vain begging Abraham for a drop of water to cool his tongue.² The sensitive boy was indignant. "I got up and went out," he says, "knowing in my boyish heart that that was a lie. From that day to this I have passionately hated every orthodox creed ..." His father gave him a sound whipping and then prayed with him for the guidance of the erring; but neither the whipping nor the prayer convinced the boy that human frailties were deserving of eternal torture; and it was just this doctrine of eternal damnation against which the boy had rebelled that was the center of his attacks on the popular faith as long as he lived.

... With the opening of the civil war his political point of view changed. He believed it his duty above all else to help preserve the Union; and since the Republican Party was also determined to keep the country together, he became a republican and remained so until his death. In 1866 he was appointed attorney general of Illinois, and would have been candidate for governor in 1868, had it not been for his heterodox religious opinions. The delegates were all in favor of him and desired to nominate him, if he would promise not to discuss religious issues in the campaign, which he refused to do.

... In 1877 President Hayes offered him the position of minister to Germany, but he refused. From this time he gave himself to the successful practice of law in Washington and later in

New York, and although he gained great public reputation as an advocate, he was known to the public chiefly, and became a sort of popular idol, by his popular platform lectures. He never wrote a book; he was a public speaker solely, and published nothing but his lectures.

In 1862 he had married Eva Parker, daughter of an Illinois farmer, whom he adored always, and together they built an ideal home. He had become a man of literary culture ... He was an ardent lover of music, in fact of all the arts. He had a wide and sympathetic affection for his fellows, and ended a happy life at Dobbs Ferry on the Hudson, July 21st, 1899. He had heart trouble and knew for three years before that the end might come at any moment, but never told any of his family ... And thus ended the career of a clean minded, candid, honest, brave man; whose private life was tender, sweet, loving, and peaceful; and whose public career was largely the expression of his own wish [as] he once said ... "to be out on the high seas ... to take my chances with wind, and wave, and star. And I had rather go down in the glory and grandeur of the storm that rot in an orthodox harbor."

II.

He was most popularly known as an infidel lecturer, who went up and down the land attacking the Christian religion. He had a wonderful influence during the latter half of the [19th] century in molding and shaping the religious opinions of men and freeing the human mind from the shackles of superstition. Of course, the ideas with which his name is associated and of which he was the prominent exponent, were not new ... but by his strenuous activity in spreading them, and his appealing ability as a lecturer they became identified with him in the popular mind. And so Ingersoll is looked upon today as the most outstanding opponent of orthodox religion, and the most ardent champion of freedom from superstition, that we have ever heard in this country, if not anywhere in the world.

And this is due to the fact that he was a born orator ... I believe him to be the most popular orator of his day upon earth, and probably of any day. I do not know of a man living or dead who had a mightier power over a popular audience than he had ... And the secret of his power is not hard to find. He was the master of expression, wonderful in his ability to mold and shape words to the utterance of his thought. Besides he was a poet ... his speeches ... not only rough gems of thought, but fine cut jewels of expression, beautiful as flowers, and fragrant with lovely ideas.

... he had what any popular orator must have—a deep broad sympathy with whatever is human ... there is nothing that touched the interest or the welfare of mankind that did not find echo in his heart and brain ... He was not popular merely when he dealt with the question of religion. People flocked to hear him, and were thrilled with interest, one moment shaking with laughter and another moved to tears, quite as much when he spoke for some reform movement, on some literary subject, or in a political campaign, as when he dealt with religion...

Before I discuss his religious opinions ... I think he sacrificed greatly on account of his religious opinions ... his infidelity was an expensive thing ... Men would not employ him as a lawyer because he was an infidel. Caucuses would not nominate him and people would not vote for him because he was an infidel ... asked what it cost him to publish his book containing the oration on "The Gods" he replied, "It cost me the governorship of Illinois." Everybody understood that there was hardly a position ... not excluding the presidency itself that might not have been his, if he had been willing really to keep still about religion ... But when urged to do this, he replied, "It is much more important for me to do what I can to give men light, and to break down religious superstition and bigotry, than it is to be senator from Illinois or United States minister to a foreign power." And in an age of so much dodging and positioning for effect, let us appreciate the honor and honesty that dared to speak its mind and pay the price.

III.

Now what was his religious position? ... The thing which he attacked above all was the orthodox belief in hell, because he thought it crushed the human heart, blotted out human happiness, made people afraid to think, turned the brain into a dungeon, and prevented human progress. And in regard to this let me refer to what I mentioned a moment ago, his sympathy; for this I regard as the key to his character and career. Never a man lived who was more tender, more easily touched, more quickly moved. He was as responsive to all the movements of life and thought about him as the leaves of a tree to the movements of the air ... This tremendous power of sympathy turned him into a flaming hatred of anything that seemed to him needless cruelty. So this one great horrible world-shadowing dogma of eternal hate was the thing that he devoted his life to fighting ... the cruelty with which the church threatened men after death.

... What did he believe about God? ... He felt sure of one thing ... that there is no such God as the one taught by the creeds of the Orthodox Church. He once said "I do not know whether there is a God or not. I live in one of the rural districts of the universe, and I do not know anything about it." He never fought against the idea of God. He fought only against certain partial, unworthy, un-worshipful, cruel conceptions of God ... So you will find, if you read his lecture on "The Gods" that he was an agnostic, although he frankly confessed that he could conceive of no God that satisfied either his heart or his brain.

What was his attitude in regard to the Bible? According to popular opinion he spent a large part of his time in ridiculing the bible; but he ... only ridiculed certain unfounded conceptions of the bible which he regarded as standing in the way of human freedom and of the progress of human thought ... His idea of the bible was that of all intelligent people today—that it is the early literature of the Jews, that it was no more sacred than the early literature of any other people; that it was not by any means the foundation of law and morality as taught by the Christians, that it was full of inhumanities like the early literature

of any people; and to use it as an infallible guide to conduct in this enlightened age was to make it the stumbling block of the human race. His bible, like yours and mine, contained all the worthy literature of all times and of all peoples.

What was his attitude toward Jesus? It was practically the Unitarian idea of Jesus. He did not accept the theological Christ. He believed that Jesus of Nazareth was a historical character; but that the Christ of the New Testament was a myth, that it was a legend, not a life. He believed that the historical Jesus was simply the great heretic of his time who tried to bring a new truth to his generation, and for this reason suffered death; that any man who has given his life for what he believed to be the truth and for freedom of thought has been one of the world's benefactors ... "And let me say once and for all," he said, "that for the man Jesus I have infinite respect. Wherever man has died for man is holy ground and to that great and serene man I gladly pay tribute of my admiration and tears. He was a reformer in his day. He was an infidel in his time. He was regarded as a blasphemer, and his life was destroyed by hypocrites who have in all ages done what they could to trample freedom and manhood out of the human mind. Had I lived at that time I would have been his friend, and should he come again he will not find a better friend than I will be."

What did he think about the future life? ... I shall read only a few sentences which show his belief in this regard; and you will note that here too he is an agnostic, just as we all are when we are frank and honest with ourselves ... In his remarks at the grave of a friend's child, one of the most beautiful things I have ever read, he said: "We do not know whether the grave is the end of this life or the door of another. Every cradle asks us whence, and every coffin, whether? And the poor barbarian weeping above his dead can answer these questions as intelligently and as satisfactorily as the robed priest of the most authentic creed. The tearful ignorance of the one is just as consoling as the learned but unmeaning words of the other." Again he said: "I have said a thousand times and I say again, that we do not know whether death is a wall or a door—the beginning or end of a day, the spreading of pinions to soar, or the folding forever of wings—the rise or the set of a sun, or an endless life that brings rapture and love to anyone." And again: "Is man mortal? I do not know. But one thing I do know, and that is, that neither hope nor fear, belief nor denial, can change the fact. It is as it is and it will be as it must be." ... You will note that here again he is an agnostic, saying "I do not know," and expressing his opinion that if there is a future life the best way to prepare for it is to live a noble life here; and also that it is not dependent upon the acceptance of any creed or upon membership in any organization.

... It has been said of him that he was merely a destroyer of men's faith, that he tore down without building up, that he took away a man's religion without giving him anything in return. That is the foolish accusation which is made against any man who teaches something different from that which is commonly accepted ... Personally, I do not believe that a man is under any obligation to put something in place of that which he takes away. I

do not believe that a man must keep quiet about something which he knows is untrue simply because he does not know what is true ...

But Mr. Ingersoll was very positive in his teaching. He taught what I persistently teach from this pulpit Sunday after Sunday—a belief in the religion of humanity, a faith in man, the courage to depend upon ourselves rather than upon some being in the skies ... Listen to this, which was in reality his creed: “To love justice, to long for the right, to love mercy, to pity the suffering, to assist the weak, to forget wrongs and remember benefits—to love the truth, to be sincere, to utter honest words, to love liberty, to wage relentless war against slavery in all its forms, to love wife and child and friend, to make a happy home, to love the beautiful in art and nature, to cultivate the mind, to be familiar with the mighty thoughts that genius has expressed, the noble deeds of all the world, to cultivate courage and cheerfulness, to make others happy, to feel life with the splendor of generous acts, the warmth of loving words, to discard error, to destroy prejudice, to receive new truths with gladness, to cultivate hope, to see the calm behind the storm, the dawn before the night, to do the best that can be done and then be resigned—that is the religion of reason, the creed of science. This satisfies the brain and heart.” And it ought to satisfy the brain and heart of any normal man. That he preached this religion of humanity in which we believe, let me quote again: “Man should cease to expect any aid from the supernatural source. By this time he should be satisfied that worship has not created wealth, and that prosperity is not the child of prayer. He should know that the supernatural has not suckered the oppressed, clothed the naked, fed the hungry, shielded the innocent, stayed the pestilence, or freed the slave.”

He tells us that he did not worship ... He thought it belittling to the conception of God to suppose that he wants that kind of fulsome flattery. But if I had time I could read you glittering sentence after sentence on this very theme of worship, expressing what he meant by it—worshipping that which is beautiful, that which is true, that which is high and noble in life, the consecration to duty in the midst of darkness and difficulty and sorrow.

IV.

If I were to try to find defects in the life and teaching of Ingersoll, I should have great difficulty. Of course, I could not agree with him politically or economically in many respects, for while he may be classed as a radical in religion, he was very conservative economically and politically. But I do not know one word of positive teaching by him concerning the great questions of human interest that is not noble and fine and true, as healthy as the air and as fragrant as the lilies of the field. And his life was as fine as his teaching. His relations with his fellows were based absolutely upon justice and right, and his home life was as sweet as a poem. He said “I believe in the religion of the family, that it is far more important to build a home than to erect a church. The holiest temple beneath the stars is a home that love has

built; and the holiest altar in all the wide world is the fireside around which gather father and mother and the sweet babes.”

But it is said that he had no reverence ... It used to be said over and over again that he was utterly lacking in reverence even for his parents, when he so attacked their religion. I want to give you his idea of honoring father and mother. He said: “You never can honor your father by going around swearing to his mistakes. You can never honor your mother by saying that ignorance is blessed because she did not know anything. I want to honor my parents by finding out more than they did.” ... Suppose the human race had begun back in the Stone Age to honor father and mother in such a way as to consider it wicked to learn anything that they did not know, we would be in the Stone Age still. The best way to honor father and mother is to try to make a better world for their grandchildren to live in.

Again, it is said that he was an infidel ... [But] Mr. Ingersoll ... was indeed a man of splendid and unswerving faith. He had faith and reason. He believed in inquiry and in search for truth. He believed that all truth is safe ... He had faith in right, and it was because of that faith that he ever denounced wrong, even when he found it in the bible. He had faith in justice and love, and it was because of that faith that he refused to believe in any God who could hate a part of the human race or create an eternal hell. If our churches had half as much faith in truth and right and justice as Mr. Ingersoll had, this world would be a heaven as compared with what it is today.

I have sometimes been asked what is the cause of a career like that of Mr. Ingersoll? What threw him into such extreme reaction? ... Given the teachings concerning God and man and destiny, found in the old creed; given the preachers who persist in teaching these old creeds regardless of the growing knowledge; and then given a man who thinks for himself, who has a heart to be touched, who has a sense of justice and who is brave enough to speak out, and you have a man like Ingersoll—the natural necessary reaction from old creeds ... True religion cannot be ridiculed because it is not ridiculous.

V.

When we come to estimate the real service of Mr. Ingersoll ... In the first place he did more than anyone else in all the world to popularize the general attitude of the scientific mind toward religion ... Ingersoll went up and down the land, into every state of the union, lecturing night after night to audiences of thousands ... The average person learned more about advanced thought from Ingersoll’s “Why I am an Agnostic” than [one] could have derived from reading all the works of Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin combined. In the second place, he startled his generation into thinking ... Ingersoll, more than anyone else, compelled men to think, whether they would or not. Looking about him, he saw on every hand men holding views of the bible which had no basis in fact and which fettered their lives. Views of God which made him a tyrant and a monster; views of man which were

in the highest degree depressing, and views of the future which were filled with horror; and he inquired, why do men in this enlightened age continue to believe such things ... And he said "I will do what I can to change this. No work can be more important. I will make men think." And he did. By his eloquence, by his wit, by his ridicule, by his retorts, by his scathing denunciations, by his fiery invectives, by his jokes, by his many sidedness and brilliancy in very extravagance of his speech, he set tens of thousands to thinking for themselves on religious subjects, who had never thought for themselves on these matters before ... We may well be grateful for the example of a man, who had the courage to think for himself, and who dared to speak what he believed true.

... The popularizing of scientific knowledge and making men think—brought about the third ... When he began his anti-theological propaganda there was a fiendish belief in a literal and everlasting hell. To the orthodox people of [his time] hell was a glaring, scorching, roaring reality. But a remarkable change came over even the orthodox mind by the time Ingersoll was through. As he himself wrote just before his death: "There is but little left for me to do. The fires of hell have been extinguished, the struggle with superstition is nearly over. We have passed midnight, and the great balance weighs up morning." And who had wrought this glorious change? Many people, including thousands of Unitarians and Universalists, Rationalists and Freethinkers; but above all these names there stands in seven-hued radiance the name of Robert G. Ingersoll. Of him it has truthfully been said: "He sought by constant appeal the truth, reason, mental and moral integrity, physical and intellectual liberty, justice and love—and moreover by personal example in each of all these—to make of earth a heaven; but it is his memory's richest reward that he put out the ignorant and revengeful fires of hell." So we cry today—"All hail to thee, great liberator of the human mind, great extinguisher of human fear, great prophet of human happiness—thou didst live for posterity. Posterity will remember thee."

[It is remarkable that a man of this century has used the reflections of man from the last century to introduce a man of the prior century . Posterity does indeed "remembered thee"—TE]

This address is based upon the fifth in a biographical series on famous atheist, the other subjects that Dieterich treated were Voltaire, Paine, Bradlaugh, Haeckel, and Kant; but the only other one published is the first, entitled "What is an Atheist?" It is printed because of the unusual popular interest shown in Mr. Ingersoll, and because it is believed to be a true estimate and appreciation of his life.¹

² This refers to a parable in the Gospel of Luke [16:19-31]