

Robert Ingersoll – Ideas and Ideals  
*Text of a talk by Robert Stovold, given to the  
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Introduction

Robert Ingersoll was an American politician. Known also as “The Great Agnostic”, he popularized the higher criticism of the Bible, a humanistic philosophy and scientific rationalism. He is well known in the States, and is generally reckoned to be one of the best orators that the country has produced. In this country, he is known primarily through his freethought writings. Freethinkers are those who form opinions on the basis of reason, independently of authority. Ingersoll published literally hundreds of talks, and what follows is based on few that I have read. Although he was born in 1833 and died in 1899, most of what I’ve read remains very relevant today.

I’m mindful of the fact that you probably don’t want to hear about one of the world’s best orators in the words of one of the world’s worst, so I thought I’d describe the man’s views in his own words wherever possible. Some of his speeches were over three hours long, yet Ingersoll committed many of them to memory. Unfortunately, I haven’t committed my speech to memory, and I’ll have to read it. Fortunately, it goes on for less than three hours.

Ingersoll was adept at expressing profound truths in a clear, yet poetic manner, and also had a humorous approach to life. “No man with a sense of humour ever founded a religion”, he observed. “I believe in the medicine of mirth, and in what I shall call the longevity of laughter”. His opponents may not have believed in it, but they were made to swallow the medicine all the same.

Religion

Robert Ingersoll’s early experiences of the Christian religion will probably ring bells with many:

“When I was a boy, Sunday was considered altogether too holy to be happy in.... The minister asked us if we knew that we all deserved to go to hell, and we all answered, "Yes." Then we were asked if we would be willing to go to hell if it was God's will, and every little liar shouted, "Yes."..... When we got home, if we had been good boys, and the weather was warm, sometimes they would take us out to the graveyard to cheer us up a little. It did cheer me. When I looked at the sunken tombs and the leaning stones, and read the half-effaced inscriptions through the moss of silence and forgetfulness, it was a great comfort. The reflection came to my mind that the observance of the Sabbath could not last always”.

Ingersoll worked as a teacher. He was a great believer in education, but not in traditional teaching methods. He had little formal education himself, and wryly observed, “For the most part, colleges are places where pebbles are polished and diamonds are dimmed”. “It is a thousand times better to have common sense without education than to have education without common sense”.

His unorthodox views on religion were probed by a curious adult, and Ingersoll’s reply was to earn him the sack.

“What do you think of baptism, Mr. Ingersoll?”

“With soap, baptism is a good thing”.

Ingersoll went on to become a lawyer, and, in the state of Illinois, won 99% of his cases. In the United States, he became the most famous lawyer of his day. When a man called C.B. Reynolds stood trial for blasphemy, Ingersoll gave his own thought-provoking definitions of the term. With an ill-conceived religious hatred law hanging over us today, these words are as relevant now as they ever were:

“What is real blasphemy? To enslave the minds of men, to put manacles on the mind; that is blasphemy. To deny what you believe to be true, to admit to be true what you believe to be a lie; that is blasphemy. To strike the weak and unprotected, in order that you may gain the applause of the ignorant and superstitious mob; that is blasphemy. To persecute the intelligent few at the command of the ignorant many; that is blasphemy. To forge chains, to build dungeons, for your honest fellow-men; that is blasphemy. To pollute the souls of children with the dogma of eternal pain; that is blasphemy. To violate your conscience, that is blasphemy. The jury that gives an unjust verdict, and the judge who pronounces an unjust sentence, are blasphemers. The man who bows to public opinion and against his honest conviction, is a blasphemer”.

“I deny the right of any man, of any number of men, of any Church, of any State, to put a padlock on the lips – to make the tongue a convict. I passionately deny the right of the Herod of authority to kill the children of the brain....”

“For thousands of years, people have been trying to force other people to think their way. Did they succeed? No. Will they succeed? No. Why? Because brute force is no argument. You can stand with the lash over a man, or you can stand by the prison door, or beneath the gallows, or by the stake.... And so the man recants. Is he convinced? Not at all. Have you produced a new argument? Not the slightest. And yet the ignorant bigots of this world have been trying for thousands of years to rule the minds of men by brute force.... Suppose we put Mr. Reynolds in gaol. The *argument* has not been sent to gaol. That is still doing the rounds, free as the winds. Suppose you kept him at hard labour for a year; all the time that he is there, hundreds and thousands of people will be reading some account, or some fragment of this trial. There is the trouble. If you could only *imprison an argument*, then intellectual tyranny might succeed. If you could only take *an argument*, and put a striped suit of clothes upon it; if you could only take a good, splendid, shining fact, and lock it up in some dungeon of ignorance so that its light would never again enter the mind of man, then you might succeed in stopping human progress..... If another human has not a right to think, you have not even the right to think that he thinks wrong.”

In spite of his eloquence, Ingersoll lost the case. It was, after all, primarily about whether the blasphemy law had been broken, and not about whether the blasphemy law was a good one. There were few blasphemy trials after that one, however, and Ingersoll is generally reckoned to have discredited the blasphemy law. Reynolds was ordered to pay a \$25 fine and \$50 costs, but it was Reynolds who had the last laugh. Ingersoll paid the money for him, and \$75 hardly broke the bank. Ingersoll’s law practice and lecturing earned him a large income – he could receive as much as \$3,500 for a single evening’s performance – and he gave most of the money away. “Few rich men own their property; their property owns them”.

### Politics

Robert Ingersoll was a politician. Given the present incumbent of the White House, I was amazed to learn that Ingersoll was a Republican. He was an effective party spokesman in presidential campaigns, but his unorthodox views on religion deterred Republican administrations from appointing him to the Cabinet, or to the diplomatic posts that he desired. When it was suggested that he would have done better had he concealed his agnosticism, Ingersoll replied, “He who dishonours himself [by lying about his opinions] for the sake of being honoured by others will find that two mistakes have been made - one by himself, and the other, by the people.”

## Family

Ingersoll was a happily married man, and his writings frequently emphasized the importance of family life.

“I despise a stingy man.... Do you know that I have known men who would trust their wives with their hearts and their honour, but not with their pocket book, not with a dollar? When I see a man of that kind, I always think he knows which of these articles is of the most value! Think of making your wife a beggar. Think of her having to ask you every day for a dollar, for two dollars, for fifty cents.... What kind of children do you expect to have with a beggar and a coward for a mother?”

“You cannot show real respect to your parents by perpetuating their errors.... Do you consider that the inventor of a steel plough cast a slur upon his father who scratched the ground with a wooden one? I do not consider that an invention by the son is a slander upon the father; I regard each invention simply as an improvement; and every father should be exceedingly proud of an ingenious son.”

“I do not believe that it is showing real respect to our parents to believe something simply because they did. Every good father and every good mother wish their children to find out more than they knew. Every good father wants his son to overcome some obstacle that he could not grapple with, and if you wish to reflect credit on your father and mother, do it by accomplishing more than they did, because you live in a better time.”

In a work called “Rome or Reason”, Ingersoll responded to many claims made for the Catholic Church, including the claim that the Church was responsible for creating the “purity and peace of domestic life”.

“The Church degraded woman - made her the property of the husband, and trampled her beneath its brutal feet. The "fathers" denounced woman as a perpetual temptation, as the cause of all evil. The Church worshiped a God who had upheld polygamy, and had pronounced his curse on woman, and had declared that she should be the serf of the husband. This church followed the teachings of St. Paul. It taught the uncleanness of marriage, and insisted that all children were conceived in sin. This church pretended to have been founded by one who offered a reward in this world, and eternal joy in the next, to husbands who would forsake their wives and children and follow him. Did this tend to the elevation of woman? Did this detestable doctrine "create the purity and peace of domestic life"? Is it true that a monk is purer than a good and noble father - that a nun is holier than a loving mother?”

“....The good man is useful, the best man is the most useful. Those who fill the nights with barren prayers and holy hunger torture themselves for their own good, and not for the benefit of others. They are earning eternal glory for themselves - they do not fast for their fellow-men - their selfishness is only equalled by their foolishness. Compare the monk in his selfish cell, counting beads and saying prayers for the purpose of saving his barren soul, with a husband and father sitting by his fireside with wife and children. Compare the nun with the mother and her babe.”

### Religion in society

As an atheist today, I go to Alpha Courses and argue with Christians, and invite unsuspecting Jehovah's Witnesses in off the doorstep for a cup of tea. I'm often asked why I bother to talk to believers, and Ingersoll gave an answer that struck a few chords:

"Now and then, someone asks me why I am endeavouring to interfere with the religious faith of others, and why I try to take from the world the consolation naturally arising from a belief in eternal fire. And I answer, I want to do what little I can to make my country truly free. I want to broaden the intellectual horizon of our people. I want it so that we can differ upon all those questions, and yet grasp each other's hands in genuine friendship. I want in the first place to free the clergy. I am a great friend of theirs, but they don't seem to have found it out generally. I want it so that every minister will be not a parrot, not an owl sitting upon the limb of the tree of knowledge and hooting the hoots that have been hooted for eighteen hundred years. But I want it so that each one can be an investigator, a thinker; and I want to make his congregation grand enough so that they will not only allow him to think, but will demand that he shall think, and give to them the honest truth of his thought."

"I want to free the schools of our country. I want it so that when a professor in a college finds some fact inconsistent with Moses, he will not hide the fact. I wish to see an eternal divorce and separation between church and schools. The common school is the bread of life, but there should be nothing taught except what somebody knows; and anything else should not be maintained by a system of general taxation. I want its professors so that they will tell everything they find; that they will be free to investigate in every direction, and will not be trammelled by the superstitions of our day. What has religion to do with facts? Nothing. Is there any such thing as Methodist mathematics, Presbyterian botany, Catholic astronomy or Baptist biology? What has any form of superstition or religion to do with a fact or with any science? Nothing but to hinder, delay or embarrass. I want, then, to free the schools; and I want to free the politicians, so that a man will not have to pretend he is a Methodist, or his wife a Baptist, or his grandmother a Catholic; so that he can go through a campaign, and when he gets through will find none of the dust of hypocrisy on his knees."

"We are satisfied that there can be but little liberty on earth while men worship a tyrant in heaven."

"Honest investigation is utterly impossible within the pale of any church, for the reason that if you think the church is right you will not investigate, and if you think it wrong, the church will investigate you."

### Agnosticism and atheism

Robert Ingersoll was known as "The Great Agnostic", and described his views in the following way:

"Standing in the presence of the Unknown, all have the same right to think, and all are equally interested in the great questions of origin and destiny. All I claim, all I plead for, is liberty. Liberty of thought and expression. That is all. I do not pretend to tell what is absolutely true, but what I think is true. I do not pretend to tell all the truth."

"The agnostic does not simply say, "I do not know." He goes another step, and he says, with great emphasis, that *you* do not know. He insists that you are trading on the ignorance of others, and on the fear of others. He is not satisfied with saying that you do not know - he *demonstrates* that you do not know, and he drives you from the field of fact - he drives you from the realm of reason - he drives you from the light, into the darkness of conjecture - into the world of dreams and shadows, and he compels you to say, at last, that your faith has no foundation in fact."

The distinction between agnosticism and atheism can come down to a difference between “You don’t know that God exists” and “It’s not reasonable to suppose that God does exist”. The two philosophies overlap. Ingersoll’s brand of agnosticism seems also to have been a form of atheism, as he said,

“To me, it seems easy to account for these ideas concerning gods and devils. They are a perfectly natural production. Man has created them all, and under the same circumstances would create them again. Man has not only created all these gods, but he has created them out of the materials by which he has been surrounded. Generally he has modelled them after himself, and has given them hands, heads, feet, eyes, ears, and organs of speech. Each nation made its gods and devils speak its language not only, but put in their mouths the same mistakes in history, geography, astronomy, and in all matters of fact, generally made by the people. No god was ever in advance of the nation that created him. The Negroes represented their deities with black skins and curly hair. The Mongolian gave to his a yellow complexion and dark almond-shaped eyes. The Jews were not allowed to paint theirs, or we should have seen Jehovah with a full beard, an oval face, and an aquiline nose. Zeus was a perfect Greek, and Jove looked as though a member of the Roman senate. The gods of Egypt had the patient face and placid look of the loving people who made them. The gods of northern countries were represented warmly clad in robes of fur; those of the tropics were naked. The gods of India were often mounted upon elephants; those of some islanders were great swimmers, and the deities of the Arctic zone were passionately fond of whale's blubber.”

“Few nations have been so poor as to have but one god. Gods were made so easily, and the raw material cost so little, that generally the god market was fairly glutted and heaven crammed with these phantoms”.

“A few years ago the Deists denied the inspiration of the Bible on account of its cruelty. At the same time they worshiped what they were pleased to call the God of Nature. Now we are convinced that Nature is as cruel as the Bible; so that, if the God of Nature did not write the Bible, this God at least has caused earthquakes and pestilence and famine, and this God has allowed millions of his children to destroy one another. So that now we have arrived at the question – not as to whether the Bible is inspired and not as to whether Jehovah is the real God, but whether there is a God or not”.

“They tell us now that all is good; that evil is but blessing in disguise, that pain makes strong and virtuous men – makes character - while pleasure enfeebles and degrades. If this be so, the souls in hell should grow to greatness, while those in heaven should shrink and shrivel.”

“There are in nature neither rewards nor punishments, there are consequences”.

With regards to the claim that we should love God, Ingersoll asked:

“Can it be our duty to love anybody? It is our duty to act justly, honestly, but it cannot be our duty to love. We cannot be under obligation to admire a painting - to be charmed with a poem - or thrilled with music. Admiration cannot be controlled. Taste and love are not the servants of the will. Love is, and must be free. It rises from the heart like perfume from a flower.”

### The conflict between religion and science

Robert Ingersoll's consistent use of scientific rationalism put him on a collision course with religion. He explained the difference between the two ways of thinking:

"The instant we admit that a book is too sacred to be doubted, or even reasoned about, we are mental serfs. It is infinitely absurd to suppose that a god would address a communication to intelligent beings, and yet make it a crime, to be punished in eternal flames, for them to use their intelligence for the purpose of understanding his communication. If we have the right to use our reason, we certainly have the right to act in accordance with it, and no god can have the right to punish us for such action.

The doctrine that future happiness depends upon belief is monstrous. It is the infamy of infamies. The notion that faith in Christ is to be rewarded by an eternity of bliss, while a dependence upon reason, observation and experience merits everlasting pain, is too absurd for refutation, and can be relieved only by that unhappy mixture of insanity and ignorance, called "faith".

"The Church still faithfully guards the dangerous tree of knowledge, and has exerted in all ages her utmost power to keep mankind from eating the fruit thereof. The priests have never ceased repeating the old falsehood and the old threat: "Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die." From every pulpit comes the same cry, born of the same fear: "Lest they eat and become as gods, knowing good and evil." For this reason, religion hates science, faith detests reason, theology is the sworn enemy of philosophy, and the church with its flaming sword still guards the hated tree, and like its supposed founder, curses to the lowest depths the brave thinkers who eat and become as gods".

"As long as every question is answered by the word "God," scientific inquiry is simply impossible."

"The ministers, who preached [at these revivals] were in earnest. They were zealous and sincere. They were not philosophers. To them, science was the name of a vague dread - a dangerous enemy. They did not know much, but they believed a great deal".

"We have already compared the benefits of theology and science. When the theologian governed the world, it was covered with huts and hovels for the many, palaces and cathedrals for the few. To nearly all the children of men, reading and writing were unknown arts. The poor were clad in rags and skins - they devoured crusts, and gnawed bones. The day of Science dawned, and the luxuries of a century ago are the necessities of today. Men in the middle ranks of life have more of the conveniences and elegancies than the princes and kings of the theological times. But above and over all this, is the development of mind. There is more of value in the brain of an average man of today - of a master-mechanic, of a chemist, of a naturalist, of an inventor, than there was in the brain of the world four hundred years ago.

These blessings did not fall from the skies. These benefits did not drop from the outstretched hands of priests. They were not found in cathedrals or behind altars - neither were they searched for with holy candles. They were not discovered by the closed eyes of prayer, nor did they come in answer to superstitious supplication. They are the children of freedom, the gifts of reason, observation and experience - and for them all, man is indebted to man".

"The man who invented the telescope found out more about heaven than the closed eyes of prayer ever discovered"

"The ministers who are answering me are turning their guns in the wrong direction. These reverend gentlemen should attack the astronomers. They should malign and vilify Kepler, Copernicus, Newton, Herschel and Laplace. These men were the real destroyers of the sacred story. Then, after

having disposed of them, they can wage a war against the stars, and against Jehovah himself for having furnished evidence against the truthfulness of his book.”

“You know the watch argument was Paley's greatest effort. A man finds a watch and it is so wonderful that he concludes that it must have had a maker. He finds the maker, and he is so much more wonderful than the watch that he says *he* must have had a maker. Then he finds God, the maker of the man, and he is so much more wonderful than the man that he *could not have had a maker*. This is what the lawyers call a departure in pleading. According to Paley there can be no design without a designer - but there can be a designer without a design. The wonder of the watch suggested the watchmaker, and the wonder of the watchmaker, suggested the creator, and the wonder of the creator demonstrated that he was *not* created - but was uncaused and eternal”.

“I read Paley's Evidences and found that the evidence of ingenuity in producing the evil, in contriving the hurtful, was at least equal to the evidence tending to show the use of intelligence in the creation of what we call good.”

“This century will be called Darwin's century. He was one of the greatest men who ever touched this globe. He has explained more of the phenomena of life than all of the religious teachers. Write the name of Charles Darwin on the one hand and the name of every theologian who ever lived on the other, and from that name has come more light to the world than from all of those. His doctrine of evolution, his doctrine of the survival of the fittest, his doctrine of the origin of species, has removed in every thinking mind the last vestige of orthodox Christianity. He has not only stated, but he has demonstrated, that the inspired writer knew nothing of this world, nothing of the origin of man, nothing of geology, nothing of astronomy, nothing of nature; that the Bible is a book written by ignorance - at the instigation of fear. Think of the men who replied to him. Only a few years ago there was no person too ignorant to successfully answer Charles Darwin; and the more ignorant he was, the more cheerfully he undertook the task. He was held up to the ridicule, the scorn and contempt of the Christian world, and yet when he died, England was proud to put his dust with that of her noblest and her grandest. Charles Darwin conquered the intellectual world, and his doctrines are now accepted facts.”

“The founder of a religion must be able to turn water into wine - cure with a word the blind and lame, and raise with a simple touch the dead to life. It was necessary for him to demonstrate to the satisfaction of his barbarian disciple, that he was superior to nature. In times of ignorance this was easy to do. The credulity of the savage was almost boundless. To him the marvellous was the beautiful, the mysterious was the sublime. Consequently, every religion has for its foundation a miracle - that is to say, a violation of nature - that is to say, a falsehood.”

“A fact never went into partnership with a miracle. Truth scorns the assistance of wonders. A fact will fit every other fact in the universe, and that is how you can tell whether it is or is not a fact. A lie will not fit anything except another lie”.

Jesus is alleged to have said, “Swear not at all; neither by Heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the Earth, for it is his footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is his holy city”. As Ingersoll satirically remarked, “Here we find the astronomy and geology of Christ. Heaven is the throne of God, the monarch; the earth is his footstool. A footstool that turns over at the rate of a thousand miles an hour, and sweeps through space at the rate of over a thousand miles a minute!”

In Churchill Square recently, Greg and I told a Creationist pastor that this verse implied a flat earth.

“No it doesn't”, he replied, “you can have a spherical footstool”

“No you can't.”

“Why not?”

“Because your feet would fall off, and the footstool would roll away!”

One the stupidity of that response has dawned on you, you'll appreciate the truth of what Ingersoll said concerning theologians:

“The old lady who said there must be a devil, else how could they make pictures that looked exactly like him, reasoned like a trained theologian - like a doctor of divinity”.

“It may be that ministers really think that their prayers do good, and it may be that frogs imagine that their croaking brings spring”.

“It is told that the great Angelo, in decorating a church, painted some angels wearing sandals. A cardinal looking at the picture said to the artist: "Whoever saw angels with sandals?" Angelo answered with another question: "Whoever saw an angel barefooted?"

Robert Ingersoll had great admiration for science, referring to “Reason, observation, and experience; the holy trinity of science”. But he was no intellectual snob. As you can deduce from this address to farmers, he believed that everyone could play a valuable role in society:

“Farmers cannot get along without the mechanic. You are not independent of the man of genius. Your prosperity depends upon the inventor. The world advances by the assistance of all labourers; and all labour is under obligations to the inventions of genius. The inventor does as much for agriculture as he who tills the soil. All labouring men should be brothers. You are in partnership with the mechanics who make your reapers, your mowers and your ploughs; and you should take into your granges all the men who make their living by honest labour. The labouring people should unite and should protect themselves against all idlers. You can divide mankind into two classes: the labourers and the idlers, the supporters and the supported, the honest and the dishonest. Every man is dishonest who lives upon the unpaid labour of others, no matter if he occupies a throne. All labourers should be brothers. The labourers should have equal rights before the world and before the law. And I want every farmer to consider every man who labours either with hand or brain as his brother. Until genius and labour formed a partnership there was no such thing as prosperity among men. Every reaper and mower, every agricultural implement, has elevated the work of the farmer, and his vocation grows grander with every invention. In the olden time the agriculturist was ignorant; he knew nothing of machinery, he was the slave of superstition. He was always trying to appease some imaginary power by fasting and prayer. He supposed that some being, actuated by malice, sent the untimely frost, or swept away with the wild wind his rude abode. To him the seasons were mysteries. The thunder told him of an enraged god - the barren fields of the vengeance of heaven. The tiller of the soil lived in perpetual and abject fear. He knew nothing of mechanics, nothing of order, nothing of law, nothing of cause and effect. He was a superstitious savage. He invented prayers instead of ploughs, creeds instead of reapers and mowers. He was unable to devote all his time to the gods, and so he hired others to assist him, and for their influence with the gentlemen supposed to control the weather, he gave one-tenth of all he could produce. The farmer has been elevated through science and he should not forget the debt he owes to the mechanic, to the inventor, to the thinker. He should remember that all labourers belong to the same grand family - that they are the real kings and queens, the only true nobility.”

I'll close now with a summary of Ingersoll's philosophy, in his own words:

“Happiness is the only good. The place to be happy is here. The time to be happy is now. The way to be happy is to make others so”.