

**Robert G. Ingersoll: Our Most Famous Unknown Saint**  
**By Daniel R. Wiseman**  
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**Sermon Notes**

Thanks to Rev. Hillary for her Christmas Sermon reading and Rem Stoke's class on the history of Christianity this spring for igniting my interest.

**Family History:**

- Father was itinerant Presbyterian minister who was an ardent abolitionist. Often run out of church for beliefs on slavery. Served Churches in NY and Midwest
- Mother petitioned Dist of Columbia to abolish slavery. Died in 1835. RGI born August 11<sup>th</sup> 1833 in Dresden NY. Father moved constantly through out the Midwest. Read his fathers biblical commentaries with a lot of skepticism. As an example in an early lecture he said "that God so loved the world that he made up his mind to damn a large majority of the human race." I have read John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards and later called them "infinitely cruel," adding, "I have kindness and candor enough to say that [they] were both insane." "I also discovered Shakespeare, and by comparison I found that Jehovah simply was not a very good writer." "The sacred books of all the world," he said, "are worthless dross and common stones compared with Shakespeare's glittering gold and gleaming gems."
- His father was very strict and strong disciplinarian but basically a kind man.
- Little formal schooling last at age 15. Seminal moment was reading poems of Robert Burns. Had a photographic memory-could recite 30 poems from memory.

**Early History:**

- First job was itinerant teacher in Tennessee at one room school. Quickly fired for religious beliefs (biblical skepticism). When asked whether he had been baptized by one school board member he said "Well, I'll give you my opinion: With soap, baptism is a good thing."
- Moved to Illinois and taught two other places (and fired). Began to lifelong process of networking and learning. Clerked at Supreme Court justice office in Peoria. Brother Ebon has begun reading law. Robert clerked later at land office, state senators and congressman. Wound up at law office with great library. Also read law. Both passed bar exam in 1854 at age 21. Created law practice with brother in 1856. Keep up for 21 years. This funded his lecture career.
- Traveled around state doing legal work. Met Future wife, Eva Parker in Groverland IL. She was a rationalist and reader of Paine and Voltaire (very scandalous). Had a strong influence on Robert. Changed his views on women from paternalistic to suffragette. Married in Feb. 1862. Two children in 1863 and 1864.
- Eva was the daughter of wealthy railroad man. This led Ingersoll to lucrative legal work with RR's and membership boards of directorship. Home and family became very important. Loved big fancy homes. Many people commented that

they were the happiest family in the US. In-laws, grandchildren, other friends often stayed with them. Had big parties. Robert known to be drinker at times.

### **Professional History:**

- Campaigned against Lincoln and for Douglas in 1858. He was for freedom of Blacks in general. After released from Army commission changed beliefs to be totally against slavery—a frequent pattern. Always willing to change beliefs when encountering new information. Constantly reading and reflecting on his experiences.
- Mustered up a regiment of soldiers called the 11<sup>th</sup> Illinois. Named Col. In charge of Cavalry. Fought at Shiloh. Got recognized for bravery. Captured in Dec. 1862. Released three days later. Released from commission in June 1863. Very anti-war and violence after the war. He as a result detested Southern Ministers.

Brother ran for congress and won. He managed Brother's campaign. Brother won election for 4 terms. Robert became active in Republican politics. Campaigned for Lincoln. Appointed by Gov. Ogilvy to be state Attorney General in 1867. Served until 1869. Ran for Governor in 1868. Lost badly due to rapidly emerging anti-religious beliefs. "One story had it that a friend visiting Ingersoll's office saw a copy of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, a book often denounced by nineteenth-century churchmen. "How much did this cost you?" the friend asked him. "The governorship of Illinois." He vowed never to run for office again.

Gave first talk on religion in Peoria in 1866—discussed his anti-superstition propositions in the speech. Was well received. This is a typical quote in his early talks

"An honest god is the noblest work of man," Or he might concentrate on what he considered to be the Bible's absurdities. "Noah's ark, I estimate, had 175,000 birds in it, 3,616 beasts, 1,300 reptiles, and 12,000,000 insects—all being cared for by eight uncommonly busy people."

He focused his law career on land and Railroads (with help from wife's family). Became widely sought after as a litigator. Worked his way up to board of director's position in several leading railroads. Made huge sums of money. Began taking on controversial cases and receiving wide recognition. Once he gave a 6 day case closing speech.

- One seminal case he lost was the Reynolds New Jersey Blasphemy case. Later asked to lecture in New Jersey. Locals initially closed lecture hall. Later some ministers asked them to open it so he would speak and be arrested for Blasphemy. He took the bait but defeated them anyway. .

"To live on the unpaid labor of other men—that is blasphemy. To enslave your fellow-man, to put chains upon his body—that is blasphemy. To enslave the minds of men, to put manacles upon the brain, padlocks upon the lips—that is blasphemy. ..."

## Oratory Career:

- Had a power but melodious voice, well modulated but very dramatic. Could speak for hours (often did for 3 or more hours.). Used humor and wide command of English language. At his peak in the 1880 and 90's was considered without equal even when compared to William Jennings Bryan and Billy Sunday. Henry Ward Beecher said  
"the most brilliant speaker of the English word of men on the globe." "Lord, what an organ is human speech when it is played by a master," Mark Twain wrote after hearing him. Ingersoll's oratory, Walt Whitman said, was "sweet, fluid—as they say in the Bible, like precious ointment."
- An early critical event was a keynote speech with Susan B. Anthony in 1870. His legal career and winning notable cases brought him fame but a single speech catapulted him to the forefront. He was an active partisan for Republican Party candidates. He was a sought after campaigner. Senator James Blaine of Maine was a leading presidential candidate in 1876 against James Garfield. He asked Ingersoll to give his nomination speech at the 1876 convention. Ingersoll's speech captivated the house with its illusions to the nominee as a plumed knight with a shining lance leading the charge against the enemy and evil Democrats. His oratory career skyrocketed from that moment.
- He practically gave up his career in law to do nothing but give lectures on the lyceum circuit. This since 1825 had been American favorite form of entertainment. People paid unheard of sums of money to hear talks of all kinds. Ingersoll quickly jumped to the top of the heap speaking about his concerns for the social ills of politics, the irrationality of the Bible and organized religion, and advocating for human rights and woman's suffrage. One of his primary talks were about God i.e. In "The Gods," for example, he told his audiences that "men had always created a divinity in their own image: "Men hated and loved what they hated and loved, and he was invariably found on the side of those in power. Each god was intensely patriotic, and detested all nations but his own." Generally these gods were "vengeful, savage, lustful, and ignorant,"
- His fees were roughly \$1 per person or \$400-\$7000/day. For example he spoke before 20,000 people in Elkhart Indiana (my home town), 25,000 in Cleveland, and 30,000 in Chicago (all on the train circuit. He was to speak over his career in every state of the union except North Carolina and in every major city in the USA.
- His talks became increasingly anti-clerical and anti institutional (but seldom personal). Getting people to be rational and thoughtful was this focus. He became an officer in several of the most liberal organizations of the times. His fees supported many charitable groups include many run by groups he spoke again. He had a soft heart for the under privileged. He was thought to earn well above \$100-200K.
- He moved to Washington DC in late 1870's to a very large home. Later he moved to several large residences in New York City. Among his friends he counted many who disagreed with some of his beliefs. They included Andrew Carnegie, Mark Twain, Eugene V. Debs, Walt Whitman, and Henry Ward Beecher. One of his goals was to be appointed to a cabinet position or ambassador job (ala Germany). For all his relationship and campaign debts

owed to him by Republican Presidents, this was not to be, as he was hindered by his own effectiveness as an anti-Christian speaker.

- Many a prominent Clergy or layman made determined efforts to convert him. The Salvation Army of Cleveland assembled 5000 people on Thanksgiving 1895 to devote a whole day to pray for his soul and insist that he change his mind or face eternal damnation. This of course was graciously rejected and became fodder for future talks. Called many names: Pope Bob, the great infidel, and Royal Robert. Can find no record of attending any UU congregations but did resonate with our philosophy. Would likely have been respected, envied, and maybe reviled at the same time in many UU congregations. He was aware of and in synch with many seminal UU clergy. He said “ Had it not been for Thomas Paine I could not have delivered this lecture, It is still fashionable to denigrate this man and yet Channing, Parker, Longfellow, and Emerson and in fact all the Unitarians and Universalists of the world have adopted the opinions of Thomas Paine.” Yes he is one of us.
- He died in his home with his many extended family present a month before his 66<sup>th</sup> birthday on July 1899.

## **Part Two: Why Can We Learn from the Life of Robert G. Ingersoll**

1. Heresy, Blasphemy and being an Infidel can be both good but it will definitely irritate others.

“With heresy there would be no progress. Every heretic has been a ray of life. Heresy has been a cradle, Orthodoxy has been a coffin.”

2. Happiness is import:

“Love is the only Priest, Ignorance is the only slavery. Happiness is the only good. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make others so. Wisdom is the science of happiness.”

“Reason, observation and Experience-the Holy Trinity of Science-have taught us that happiness is the only good. This is enough for us. In this belief, we are content to live and die. If by any possibility the existence of a superior power to and independent of nature shall be demonstrated, there will then be time enough to kneel. Until then I stand erect.”

3. Being an atheist can be problematic for having a political career both then and now.

“Goodbye Gentleman. I am not asking to be Governor of Illinois. I have in my composition that which I declared to the world as my views upon religion. My position I would not, under any circumstances, not even for my life, seem to renounce. I would rather refuse to be president of the US than to do so. My religious belief is my own. It belongs to me not the State of Illinois. I would not smother one sentiment of my heart to be the Emperor of the round world.” He had been asked to be silent on his beliefs to run for Governor.

4. Being against things is not enough. You all have to be for something (and he was). He supported charities, human rights; woman's voting rights and many humanitarian causes.
5. You can make a real difference even if you are not in charge of anything. He held only one office and was never elected to anything. He was never in a management position although he did serve on boards of corporations and charitable organizations or free thought groups.
6. If you talk enough and effectively people will listen, and actually take you seriously if touch them, use humor and speak to their realities. He said "No man with a sense of humor ever founded a religion."
7. You can disagree with out being disagreeable. He had great love for people even those who strongly disagreed with him.
8. Freedom to think for yourself is essential for society to function but it may irritate many people in power.  
"Intelligence is the only moral guide"
9. You can change your mind and get away with it. It's better to be right than consistent. He continued to grow, change, learn, and evolve his positions.
10. Good to be learned, highly literate and well read even if under educated. Either will work. Worse is to overeducated and underlearned.

We own much to our adopted patron saint. You now can't say you have never heard of him. Thank you Rem and Rev. Hillary!!

## **ROBERT G. INGERSOLL READINGS**

### **#1 Freedom of thought**

the mechanic, when a wheel refuses to turn, never thinks of dropping on his knees and asking the assistance of some divine power. He knows there is a reason. He knows that something is too large or too small; that there is something wrong with his machine; and he goes to work and he makes it larger or smaller, here or there, until the wheel will

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 to-day. 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 to-day -- 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.

-- **Robert Green Ingersoll**, "God In The Constitution"

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.

-- Robert Green Ingersoll, "Reply To Dr. Lyman Abbott" (This unfinished article was written as a reply to the Rev Lyman Abbott's article entitled, "Flaws in Ingersollism," which was printed in the April 1890 number of the *North American Review*.)

**There has never been upon the earth a generation of free men and women. It is not yet time to write a creed.** Wait until the chains are broken — until dungeons are not regarded as temples. Wait until solemnity is not mistaken for wisdom — until mental cowardice ceases to be known as reverence. Wait until the living is considered the equal of the dead — until the cradle takes precedence of the coffin. Wait until what we know can be spoken without regard to what others may believe. Wait until teachers take the place of preachers — until followers become investigators. **Wait until the world is free before you write a creed.**

**In this creed there will be but one word — Liberty.**

## **Reading #2 Heaven and Hell**

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 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." What man, who ever thinks, can believe that blood can appease God? And yet, our entire system of religion is based upon that belief. The Jews pacified Jehovah with the blood of animals, and according to the Christian system, the blood of Jesus softened the heart of God a little, and rendered possible the salvation of a fortunate few. It is hard to conceive how the human mind can give assent to such terrible ideas, or how any sane man can read the Bible and still believe in the doctrine of inspiration.

-- **Robert Green Ingersoll**, *The Gods*

If there is a God who will damn his children forever, I would rather go to hell than to go to heaven and keep the society of such an infamous tyrant. I make my choice now. I despise that doctrine. It has covered the cheeks of this world with tears. It has polluted the hearts of children, and poisoned the imaginations of men.... What right have you, sir, Mr. clergyman, you, minister of the gospel to stand at the portals of the tomb, at the vestibule of eternity, and fill the future with horror and with fear? I do not believe this doctrine, neither do you. If you did, you could not sleep one moment. Any man who believes it, and has within his breast a decent, throbbing heart, will go insane. A man who believes that doctrine and does not go insane has the heart of a snake and the conscience of a hyena.

-- **Robert Green Ingersoll**, "The Liberty Of All" (1877)

Is it a small thing to quench the flames of hell with the holy tears of pity -- to unbind the martyr from the stake -- break all the chains -- put out the fires of civil war -- stay the sword of the fanatic, and tear the bloody hands of the Church from the white throat of Science?

Is it a small thing to make men truly free -- to destroy the dogmas of ignorance, prejudice and power -- the poisoned fables of superstition, and drive from the beautiful face of the earth the fiend of fear?

-- **Robert Green Ingersoll**, "Thomas Paine" (1870)

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?"

### **Reading #3 Religion and Politics**

*Churches are becoming political organizations....*

It probably will not be long until the churches will divide as sharply upon political, as upon theological questions; and when that day comes, if there are not liberals enough to hold the balance of power, this Government will be destroyed. The liberty of man is not safe in the hands of any church. Wherever the Bible and sword are in partnership, man is a slave.

All laws for the purpose of making man worship God, are born of the same spirit that kindled the fires of hell, and lovingly built the dungeons of the Inquisition. All laws defining and punishing blasphemy -- making it a crime to give your honest ideas about the Bible, or to laugh at the ignorance of the ancient Jews, or to enjoy yourself on the Sabbath, or to give your opinion of Jehovah, were passed by impudent bigots, and should be at once repealed by honest men. An infinite God ought to be able to protect himself, without going in partnership with State Legislatures. Certainly he ought not so to act that laws become necessary to keep him from being laughed at. No one thinks of protecting Shakespeare from ridicule, by the threat of fine and imprisonment. It strikes me that God might write a book that would not necessarily excite the laughter of his

children. In fact, I think it would be safe to say that a real God could produce a work that would excite the admiration of mankind. Surely politicians could be better employed than in passing laws to protect the literary reputation of the Jewish God.

-- **Robert Green Ingersoll**, proving himself a prophet, of sorts, while discrediting prophesy itself! quoted from, *Some Mistakes of Moses*, Section III, "The

It is contended by many that ours is a Christian government, founded upon the Bible, and that all who look upon the book as false or foolish are destroying the foundation of our country. The truth is, our government is not founded upon the rights of gods, but upon the rights of men. Our Constitution was framed, not to declare and uphold the deity of Christ, but the sacredness of humanity. Ours is the first government made by the people and for the people. It is the only nation with which the gods have had nothing to do. And yet there are some judges dishonest and cowardly enough to solemnly decide that this is a Christian country, and that our free institutions are based upon the infamous laws of Jehovah.

-- **Robert Green Ingersoll**, "Individuality" (1873)

Speech on *Religious Intolerance* as presented at the Pittsburgh Opera House (14 October 1879)