

Ingersoll On The Liberty of Man, Woman and Child

by Roger E. Greeley

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Robert Green Ingersoll was the greatest champion and spokesman for the liberty of man, woman and child in the 19th century. Consistently he led the attack on the superstitions and cruelties of orthodox theology. It is estimated that he spoke to more than five million people in a lecture tour that crisscrossed America from 1875 to his untimely death in the summer of 1899.

Can this author assume that the readers of this publication are all well informed as to the facts surrounding the life of Robert Green Ingersoll? Probably not, though surely, there will be a few bona fide aficionados among the subscribers! For the benefit of those who are not well-acquainted with Ingersoll, here is a very brief biography.

Ingersoll was born in Dresden, N. Y., a sleepy little town of 600 on the banks of Seneca Lake. There was nothing remarkable about his birthplace, an ordinary frame house built early in the 19th century!

Ingersoll's father was an itinerant Presbyterian minister. It is said that he had but two sermons to give. The first dealt with the temperature of Hell and the second was a ringing endorsement of the cause of abolition. As an adult, Ingersoll would reject the first and spend a lifetime endorsing the second. While he did not have a particularly distinguished record in the Civil War (he surrendered his entire outfit in the second engagement!) he retained for the rest of his life the title of Colonel which had been his rank. He also deeply admired the first Republican President, Abraham Lincoln and the cause of emancipation.

He had entered the Civil War without any formal military training. He was by choice and preparation an attorney. Following the end of the war he became Attorney General of the State of Illinois. Married, to the daughter of the "village atheist," Eva Parker was a strong influence on Ingersoll. Putting his law practice on the back burner, Ingersoll hit the public lecture circuit. Always known for a magnificent speaking voice, a keen wit and an imposing physical presence, he was an immediate hit. In the 19th century the public lecturer, the vaudeville troupe and the travelling Shakespeare company were very popular forms of entertainment. There was no radio, TV or even a public address system, yet Ingersoll drew crowds in excess of 50,000! People often ask, "Without a PA system, how many could actually hear what he was saying?" That is the wrong question! The important question is, "What manner of man was this that 50,000 would turn out HOPING to be close enough to hear him?" He was a charismatic, humorous, rational, and emotional man. For three decades his satirical shafts shot from the bow of reason struck the corpse of orthodoxy. Ingersoll was particularly incensed by the cruelties of Calvinism, particularly the doctrines of predestination and original sin. In Ingersoll's view, these two mainstays of Calvinist doctrine, produced great misery in the lives of women and children. No man was as advanced in his



thinking where women and children were concerned. He was at least one hundred years ahead of his time for many of his views have not yet become commonplace in our culture. A reporter posed the following question to him:

"Colonel today women want the right to attend higher institutions of learning and also gain the right to vote. Many men, including many clergymen see this as a bad development, that there is a distinct danger in women knowing too much or becoming too intellectual. Your views please."

"I do not think that there is the slightest danger of women becoming too intellectual or knowing too much. In fact—I know of no men in immediate peril from that source. Husbands as a rule do not know a great deal and it will not do for any woman to depend on the ignorance of her worst half!" This is a view that altogether too many males today would find difficult to express.

It is suggested that because Ingersoll lost his mother before he was three years of age that he tended throughout his adult life to hold a somewhat romanticized view of women. That is an injustice to his basic humanitarianism which crossed all boundaries of race, color, national origin or sex. One way to estimate a person's value is to consider those who admired him. The saintly Eugene Debs, Socialist Labor leader and five times Presidential candidate, worshipped Ingersoll. At the same time, Andrew Carnegie had nothing but praise for Ingersoll and they often drank Scotch together in the privacy of each other's homes. How could one person, speaking one message be beloved by two individuals as far apart in their thinking as were Debs and Carnegie? It was Ingersoll's compassionate humanitarianism that endeared him to all but the orthodox clergy.

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1. Today, thanks largely to the efforts of Paul Kurtz, owner/editor of Prometheus Books, The Robert G. Ingersoll Memorial Committee is in the process of raising funds to restore the birthplace and open it up to the public as a small museum, library and conference center. The state of N.Y. recently provided more than \$25,000 for this worthy project!

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While Ingersoll never attempted to write out a systematic philosophy, he — nevertheless, can be correctly identified as America's pioneer Humanist. While he did not use the term Humanist, Ingersoll aligned himself with what he called the "Religion of Humanity." Simply put, it was a secular religion. He was an intensely moral man, temperate, monogamous and a loving husband, father and grandfather. He rejected nearly all churches because of their hypocrisy, ignorance, superstition and cruelty. Late in his life he was asked:

"Colonel, now that you have passed sixty is it true that you are thinking of joining a church or at least supporting one?"

"No, I will not invest in any corporation that does not pay dividends until after you are dead!"

"No man of the 19th century do I more reverently worship than Robert Green Ingersoll."

Elizabeth Cady Stanton appealed to Ingersoll for his support in the suffrage movement. He not only responded affirmatively to her request but suggested she come to one of his lectures and "I will let you do the speaking!" When he died in 1899, Elizabeth Cady Stanton sent his widow a telegram which began with these words: "No man of the 19th century do I more reverently worship than Robert Green Ingersoll."

We may well ask today whether any such comment could be made by any woman for a public figure enjoying a comparable public standing to that experienced by Ingersoll a century ago.

Robert and Eva Ingersoll had but two children, two daughters upon whom he lavished his love and attention. Big families were the rule. As one who loved children, why did he have but two? Ingersoll recognized the burden of child-bearing to the woman. It was difficult to leave his wife and wee ones while he lectured all over the country. As soon as they were old enough they either accompanied him or were left in the care of a loving, caring relative. Ingersoll also saw the deprivation, poverty and suffering in unplanned, unwanted human reproduction. As to be expected, the mainstream churches opposed any and all forms of artificial birth control. (A position maintained to the present day by the Roman hierarchy and a handful of fundamentalist cults). He was asked by an earnest reporter:

"What is the solution to unwanted births? The church says that continence and abstinence is the only proper course of action to be pursued. What is your opinion?"

"Science must make woman the owner, the mistress of herself. Science, the only possible savior of mankind must put it in the power of woman to determine for herself whether she will or will not become a mother. This is the solution to the whole question. This FREES woman. The babes that are born will be welcome. They will be clasped with glad hands to happy breasts. They will fill homes with light and joy."

A ringing endorsement of science, of science applied to the uplift, the ennoblement of humanity, an essence of contemporary Humanism. Yet, these thoughts are coming from one who never saw day one of the 20th century!

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Often, I have been asked whether Ingersoll would have been a supporter of a woman's right to an abortion. It would appear from the quote just cited that you can make a case for Ingersoll as a supporter of abortion as a woman's right. He would prefer, as most would, that the universal practice of conception control would preclude the necessity for an abortion. Considering the present trends in population, Ingersoll might well have been one of those who today insist that abortion is not just a woman's right but a human necessity if our species is to avoid race suicide by uncontrolled reproduction!

Ingersoll saw women as the equal of men. Again and again he emphasized this point in his lectures. Voting, of course was the issue that focused most clearly on the discrepancy in rights enjoyed by men but denied women. He said:

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"I am perfectly willing that any woman who desires the privilege and honor shall vote. If any woman wants to vote I am too much of a gentleman to say she shall not. She gets her right, if she has it, from precisely that same source that I get mine, and there are many questions which I deem it important that women should vote, especially upon the questions of peace and war. Woman is not the intellectual inferior of man, period."

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A rather remarkable view considering the near universal hate and hostility visited upon the suffragist movement one-hundred and more years ago.

Ingersoll chided the clergy for employing scripture to justify their anti-feminist attitudes. Ingersoll, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, wanted to free women from biblical superstition and cruelty along with winning their freedom from a male dominated and male oriented society. Repeatedly he insisted:

"As long as woman regards the Bible as the charter of her rights she will be the slave of man. The bible was not written by a woman. Within its lids there is nothing but humiliation and shame. If we wish to find what the bible thinks of woman, all that is necessary to do is to read it. We will find everywhere that woman is spoken of simply as property, that she belongs absolutely to the man. We will find that whenever a man got tired of his wife all that he had to do was give his wife a writing

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of divorcement and that then the mother of his children became a houseless, homeless wanderer. We will find that men were allowed as many wives as they could get whither by purchase, courtship or conquest. That is what the bible thinks of woman, she is the property of man."

Small wonder Elizabeth Cady Stanton worshipped him. She had long worked on her rewriting of the Bible's, The Pentateuch, Judges, Kings, Prophets and Apostles. The finished volume was called "The Woman's Bible." Stanton and her committee had worked hard to "neuter the scriptures" and to give woman a fair shake in the Bible. (One might ask how Romans can put up with a Pope who is presently marching the church backward to the 12th century where the rights and opportunities of women are concerned. *Why not divorce America's Roman Catholics from Rome and go it alone and in this century's thought?*)

Divorce was another position in which Ingersoll and the clergy clashed. Orthodoxy maintaining its eternal positions of rigid stupidity, could see divorce only for adultery, and usually only for a woman's adultery! Again, Ingersoll was outraged by an argument consuming the attention of the clergy. A housewife had been blinded by her husband while in drunken rage. The question of the day was, "Should this be grounds for divorce? "With biting words and powerful sarcasm, Ingersoll made his views known. "Yes, I read the account in the paper. I do not recall of ever having read anything more perfectly horrible or cruel. It is impossible for me to imagine such a monster or to account for such an inhuman human being. How a man can deprive another of sight — except where some religious question is involved — is beyond my comprehension. When we take into consideration the crime committed by the man who blinded his wife it is impossible NOT to think of the right of divorce. Does not the married woman have the right of self-defense? Must a woman, in order to retain her womanhood, become a serf, a slave with a wild beast for a master? . . . In some states the husband can obtain a divorce on the ground that his wife has committed adultery, but the wife cannot secure a divorce simply for the reason that he has been guilty of the same offense. The idea that marriage is something more than a con-

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tract is at the bottom of the legal and judicial absurdities that surround this subject. Whom nature hath put asunder, let not man bind and manacle together . . . Most of the laws

about divorce are absurd or cruel and ought to be repealed . . . *Is it in the interest of society that those who despise each other should live together?* Can anything be more infamous than for a government to compel a woman to remain the wife of a man she hates — or of one whom she justly holds in abhorrence? Must this woman, full of kindness, affection, healthy, be tied and chained to this living corpse?"

The reader will please note that throughout the quotation it is always the figure of the abused woman which occupies Ingersoll's attention. He was not much concerned about men who encountered a "bad" woman for he expected that men could take care of themselves. He clearly recognized, however that the cards were stacked against women in all respects. If he appeared to be prejudiced for/toward women, it was with good reason that he was such an enthusiastic advocate. His travels, his observations convinced him that women far more often than men were the victims of spouses and society than were men.

Ingersoll's support for women was also extended to the children they bore. One of his reasons for supporting parenting that was desired and planned, lay in his belief that some form of eugenics ought to be practiced. The science of his day convinced many that with proper breeding criminal types could be eliminated. The old heredity/environment argument for some was being won by heredity and hence the enthusiasm for controlled reproduction. He tells us:

" . . . Why should men and women have children that they cannot take care of, children that are burdens and curses? . . . There is but one hope. Ignorance, poverty and vice must stop populating the world . . ."

"Failure seems to be the trademark of nature. Why? Nature has no design, no intelligence. Nature produces without purpose, sustains without intention and destroys without thought. Man has a little intelligence and he should use it. Intelligence is the only lever capable of raising mankind. The real question is can we prevent the ignorant, the poor, the vicious from filling the world with their children? . . . Why should men and women have children that they cannot take care of, children that are burdens and curses? . . . There is but one hope. Ignorance, poverty and vice must stop populating the world . . . I look forward to the time when men and women by reason of their knowledge of consequences, of the morality born of intelligence will refuse to perpetuate disease and pain, will refuse to fill the world with failures." This a rather strong position to take regarding some kind of eugenics. There is little reason to doubt that Ingersoll, were he alive today, would be more inclined to support prenatal research that would result in removing from the birth process those unfortunates for whom the cup is passed and Special Olympics created. Once born, this may be our only humane course but if we have it within our power to preclude their birth, would this not be even more humane?

The long-standing view of woman as a biological machine for the production of babies is nowhere applauded or supported by Ingersoll. I have been asked, numberless times; "Ingersoll talked well on behalf of women but in his own life, how did he follow through?"

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One of Ingersoll's requirements was that when he spoke anyplace on the lecture circuit, that he be paid in cash. The following morning he would go to the local post office. Having counted the "take," he would set aside what he required for his own expenses while on the road, and would make out a money order for the balance. It was made out to his wife Eva. The understanding was that she was to cash the money order, put the money in a box on the mantle in their living room and that she and the two daughters were to take from the box whatever they needed for running the house and their own expenses. That was the arrangement, no further accounting was expected. Indeed, this is a procedure that many a man could not, would not observe today! It is not surprising that when he died that Ingersoll's estate was less than \$10,000 in cash. He was generous beyond belief and not just with his own family and intimates. His charitable contributions have been estimated to be somewhere between thirty and forty-five percent of his annual income. For many years, Ingersoll equalled in today's money, a million dollars a year. This came mostly from the lectures and also from his extensive and successful law practice. He was a great supporter of the arts and always a soft-touch for the lowly, the deprived, the suffering.

Ingersoll firmly believed that our forefathers had successfully retired God from politics.

Religion to Ingersoll was one's conduct in life. He had no patience with theological legerdemain or philosophical obfuscation. His concerns were the rights, opportunities, conditions and the progress of humanity. It is true to suggest that his only faults were the excesses of his virtues. He had far too much optimism and confidence in the diffusion of knowledge through public education and the ultimate triumph of reason. He earnestly believed that organized, orthodox religion, the church and the clergy were on their last legs.

Ingersoll firmly believed that our forefathers had successfully retired God from politics. He was convinced that the 20th century would bring the millennium, that peace, justice and prosperity were inevitable. Late in his career a group of Unitarians invited him to speak to them. He had little quarrel with many of the Unitarians and was an outspoken admirer of the great Theodore Parker. Toward the conclusion of his long "toast" (an after-dinner speech) he summarized his thoughts and feelings about religion. As always it focused on the "here and now" and our conduct of life. He said:

Religion to Ingersoll was one's conduct in life.

"Now then what is religion. I say it is all right here and that all our duties are to our fellowman. That the man who builds a house, marries the girl that he loves, takes good care of her, stays home nights as a general thing, pays his debts, tries to find out all that he can, fills his mind with beautiful thoughts and ideas it can hold, turns a part of his brain into a gallery of fine arts with a host of paintings and pictures there, has

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another niche devoted to music where rise the winged notes to glory, tries to find out all he can from the great ones dead, swaps thoughts with the ones that are alive, true to the ideal he has here in his brain — he is what I call a religious man. He tries to make the world happier, better. He puts dimples of joy on the cheeks of the ones he loves and lets the Gods run Heaven to suit themselves. That is all the religion I have, to make somebody else happier if I can. Let us have that religion until it can no longer be said that they who do the most work have the least to eat. Let us have that religion **here** until hundreds of thousands of women are not compelled to make a living with the needle that has been called "the asp on the breast for the poor," and to live in tenements, in filth, where modesty is impossible. I say let us preach that religion **here**, until men are ashamed to have forty or fifty millions or more than they need while their brethren lack bread and their sisters die from want . . . Let us preach that religion **here** among ourselves until there are no more abused and beaten wives. Let us preach that religion until children are no longer afraid of their parents and until there is no back of a child bearing the scars of a father's lash."

"Let us preach that religion here among ourselves until there are no more abused and beaten wives. Let us preach that religion until children are no longer afraid of their parents and until there is no back of a child bearing the scars of a father's lash."

Yes, here again, Ingersoll's concern for women and children, their rights as human beings and not as chattels or second-class citizens is uppermost in his mind as he defines what is important in life.

His deep concern for the well-being of women and children characterized both his oratory and his behavior. His love for his family was overflowing and his discipline came from his example and reason. When asked by a friend what he would like his epitaph to be, without hesitation he replied: "That I have not caused my children one hour of pain."

This is indeed a remarkable choice from a life that was known for great flights of oratory, the plaudits of millions, the respect of many notables, friendships with the mighty and unparalleled success in his career as an orator and as a lawyer.

Ingersoll's Epitaph "That I have not caused my children one hour of pain."

Today, Ingersoll is dismissed by some because of his "sentimentality!" Is it mere sentimentalism, a predisposition to share in the suffering of women, to make this kind of an observation?

"... no girl is safe in the streets of any city after the sun goes down. After all, the sun is the only God who has ever protected woman. In the darkness, she has been the prey of the wild beast in man."

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Based on what you see on TV in the day's news, read in the paper, present an Academy Award for the portrayal of several rapes of a woman in a bar, was it just "sentiment" that prompted Ingersoll's concern?

Besides, what is wrong with honest sentiment? Consider his highly poetic and sentimental description of the laugh of a child. "The laugh of a child will make the holiest day more sacred still. Strike with hand of fire, O weird musician, thy harp strung with Apollo's golden hair: fill the vast cathedrals aisles with symphonies sweet and dim, deft toucher of the organ keys; blow bugler blow, until thy silver notes do touch and kiss moonlight waves, and charm the lovers wandering 'mid the vine-clad hills. But know your sweetest strains are discords all, compared with childhood's happy laugh that fills the eyes with light and every heart with joy..."

Gross sentimentalism? Consider that this salute to a child's laugh is followed immediately by: "And yet the minds of children have been polluted by this infamous doctrine of eternal punishment. I denounce it today as a doctrine, the infamy of which no language is sufficient to express."

Ingersoll's concern for fairness, justice and the opportunity to learn, to grow in freedom was always present in his commentaries on women and children. His "sentimentality" in no way erased the logic or validity of his observations — it simply gave another dimension of the man's character.

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Toward the end of his classic lecture, the Liberty of Man, Woman and Child, he becomes very specific in suggesting to adults how they should relate to their children. He says: "Let your children have freedom and they will fall into your ways; they will do substantially as you do; but if you try to make them, there is some magnificent, splendid thing in the human heart that refuses to be driven. . . I believe in allowing the children to think for themselves. I believe in democracy of the family. If in this world there is anything splendid it is a home where all are equals . . . Life should not be treated as a solemn matter. I like to see the children at the table and hear each one telling of wonderful things he has seen and heard . . . Let the children have liberty. Be honest and fair with them; be just; be tender, and they will make you rich in love and joy . . ."

"Let your children have freedom and they will fall into your ways; . . . Let the children have liberty. Be honest and fair with them; be just; be tender, and they will make you rich in love and joy . . ."

It is when Ingersoll returns to his larger vision for humanity, within which the rights of women and children are defined that he leaves us his most enduring legacy. He must, of necessity, return to his condemnation of the Bible to set the stage for his own philosophy of living, his religion of secularism.

"The free mother surrounded by free and loving children, adored by a free man, her husband, was unknown to the inspired writers of the Bible."

"The free mother surrounded by free and loving children, adored by a free man, her husband, was unknown to the inspired writers of the Bible. They did not believe in the democracy of home — in the republicanism of the fireside. These inspired gentlemen knew nothing of the rights of children. They were advocates of brute force — the disciples of the lash. They knew nothing of human rights. Their doctrines have brutalized the homes of millions . . . There has never been upon the earth a generation of free men and women. It is not yet time to write a creed. . ."

There has never been upon the earth a generation of free men and women.

Ingersoll always had a problem with creeds, all creeds connected with orthodoxy of any shade. He rejected them all outright. The clergy insisted that no one could lead a good life without some kind of a creed, that a creed was essential to guiding one's life along the straight and narrow. Ingersoll accepted the straight but he did not care for the "narrow." Finally, he responded:

"While I am opposed to all orthodox creeds, I have a creed of my own and my creed is this: Reason is the only torch; Justice the only worship, Humanity the only religion, Love the only priest, Happiness the only God. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to help make others so."

Uttered more than one hundred years ago, the essential validity of Ingersoll's "creed" stands. Yet, let us consider his creed in the light of the liberty of man, woman and child. Let us acknowledge that the creed cannot be exercised without observing also Ingersoll's law of reciprocity. That is, every right we claim for ourselves we must be willing to extend to every man, woman and child.

"While I am opposed to all orthodox creeds, I have a creed of my own and my creed is this: Reason is the only torch; Justice the only worship, Humanity the only religion, Love the only priest, Happiness the only good. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to help make others so."

Author's Note: Most of the quotes in this article can be found in Ingersoll's excellent lecture: "The Liberty of Man, Woman, and Child." In no instance have they been taken out of context in order to change his meaning. The lecture was first given by Ingersoll in 1876. The reader can find the lecture in Vol. I of *The Complete Works of Robert Ingersoll*, Vol. I, pages 329-398, Dresden Edition.

The Dresden Editions have been published more than half-a-dozen times. Currently, it is out of print but often in a public library's "overflow storage section," you will find a set. If not, a collection of many of his best quotes is available in paperback from Prometheus Books: *The Best of Robert Ingersoll* edited by Roger E. Greeley.