

## Meet Colonel Ingersoll

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**E**ach nation has created at least one god, and that god, not surprisingly, has always resembled his creators. He 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. All these gods demanded praise, flattery, and, of course, worship. Most of them demanded sacrifice, and the smell of innocent blood has ever been considered a divine perfume. All these gods have insisted upon having a vast number of priests and the principal business of these priests has been to boast about their god, and to insist that he could easily vanquish all the other gods put together.

These gods not only attended to the skies, but were supposed to interfere in all the affairs of humanity. They presided over everybody and everything. Nothing was too small—nothing too large; the falling of sparrows and the motions of the planets were alike attended to by these industrious and observing deities. From their starry thrones they frequently came to the earth for the purpose of imparting information to us. Some left their shining abodes to tell women that they should, or should not, have children, or to inform a priest how to cut and wear his shawl.

When the people failed to worship one of these gods, he generally visited them with pestilence and famine. Sometimes he allowed some other nation to drag them into slavery—or sell their children into slavery; but generally he glutted his vengeance by murdering their first-born children. The priests always did their whole duty, not only in predicting these calamities, but in proving, when they sometimes actually happened, that they were brought down upon the people because they had not given quite enough.

Each of these gods promised happiness here and hereafter, and threatened to eternally

punish all who either disbelieved in his existence or suspected that some other god might be his superior; but to deny the existence of *all* gods was, and is, the crime of crimes. Redden your hands with human blood; blast by slander the fair fame of the innocent; strangle the smiling child upon its mother's knees and your case is not hopeless. For all this, and for all these you may be forgiven. For all this, and for all these, that bankruptcy court established by the gospel, will give you a discharge; but deny the existence of these divine ghosts, and the sweet and tearful face of Mercy becomes livid with eternal hate. Heaven's golden gates are slammed shut, and you, with an infinite curse ringing in your ears, with the brand of infamy upon your brow, commence your endless wanderings in the lurid gloom of hell—an immortal vagrant—an eternal outcast—a deathless convict.

It is in the Bible and the Bible, so they tell us, is the word of God. But you know, my friends, the instant we admit that a book is too sacred to be doubted, or even reasoned about, we become mental serfs. The doctrine that future happiness depends upon belief is monstrous. It is the infamy of infamies. The notion that blind faith is to be rewarded by an eternity of bliss, while a dependence upon reason, observation, experiment and experience merits everlasting pain, is too absurd for refutation. Whether the Bible is true or false, is of no consequence in comparison with mental freedom. Salvation through slavery is worthless. Salvation from slavery is beyond value.

As long as we believe the Bible to be infallible, that book is our master and we it's slaves. The civilization of this century and all the marvels wrought by the human hand is not the child of faith, but of skepticism, experiment and reasoned conclusion, in other words—of free thought.

Our ancestors not only had their god-factories, but they made devils as well. But strangely, in nearly all the theologies, mythologies and religions, the devils have been much more humane and merciful than the gods. No devil ever gave one of his generals an order to

kill children and to rip open the bodies of pregnant women. Such barbarities were always ordered by the good gods. The pestilences were sent by the most merciful gods. The frightful famine, during which the dying child with pallid lips sucked the withered bosom of a dead mother, was sent by the loving gods. No devil was ever charged with such fiendish brutality.

One of these gods, according to the account, (point to bible) drowned an entire world, with the exception of eight persons. The old, the young, the beautiful and the helpless were remorselessly devoured by the shoreless sea. This, the most fearful tragedy that the imagination of ignorant priests ever conceived, was not, they tell us, the act of a devil, but of a god, so-called, who has his worshippers unto this day. What a stain such an act would leave upon the character of a devil!

In that purely scientific book called Genesis, we find the following:

“Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made, and he said unto the woman, “Yea, hath God said. Ye shall not eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden?”

And the woman said unto the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.”

And the serpent said unto the woman. “Ye shall not surely die. For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat.

And the Lord God said, “Behold the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live

forever, he must be banished.” Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So he drove out the man, and he placed at the east of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword, which turned every way to keep him away from the tree of life.”

If the account given in Genesis is really true, do we not, after all, owe this serpent a debt of thanks? He was the first schoolmaster, the first advocate of learning, the first enemy of ignorance, the first to whisper in human ears the sacred word, “liberty”, the creator of ambition, the author of modesty, of inquiry, of doubt, of investigation, of progress and of civilization.

Give me the storm and tempest of thought and action, rather than the dead calm of ignorance and faith! Banish me from Eden when you will; but first let me eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge!

We are told by priests and assorted holy men that to believe is the safe way; but to my way of thinking, the safe way is to be honest. Nothing can be safer than that. No one in the hour of death ever regretted having been honest. No one, in the presence of eternity, ever wished that they had been a hypocrite. No one ever then regretted having not thrown away their reason. It certainly cannot be necessary to throw away our reason to save our souls, because, after that, our souls are not worth saving.

The soul has a right to defend itself. My brain is my castle, and when I waive the right to defend it, I become an intellectual serf. I say, let us think. Let each one of us express his or her thoughts. Let us become investigators, not followers, not cringers and crawlers. If there is in heaven an infinite Being. It never will be satisfied with the worship of cowards and hypocrites.

Let me say once and for all, that when I speak of God, I mean the Being described by Moses; the Jehovah of the Bible and all other assorted gods conceived in the womb of the human imagination. There may be, for all I know, somewhere in the unknown shoreless vast, some Being whose

dreams are constellations and within whose thought the infinite exists. About this Being, if such a one exists, I know nothing and so I have nothing to say.

After all, of what use is it to search for a creator? The difficulty is not thus solved. You leave your creator as much in need of a creator as anything your creator is supposed to have created. The bottom of your stairs rests on nothing, and the top of your stairs leans upon nothing. You have reached no solution.

While utterly discarding all creeds, and denying the infallibility of all religions, there is neither in my heart nor upon my lips a sneer for the hopeful, loving and tender souls who believe that from all this discord will result a perfect harmony; that every evil will in some mysterious way become a good, and that above and over all there is a being who, in some way, will reclaim and glorify every one of the children of men and women. Whoever increases the sum of human joy is a worshiper. Whoever adds to the sum of human misery is a blasphemer. I shall never attack anything that I believe to be good. I shall never fear to attack anything I honestly believe to be wrong! The man who sits by the bed of his invalid wife, and holds her hand in his, who nurtures and watches over her through the night and attends to her and nurses and feeds her and gives her words of cheer and hope, that man is a worshiper and that is real religion.

What is right and what is wrong? Everything is right that tends to the happiness of humankind, and everything is wrong that increases the sum of human misery. If we all honored free thought, then we could collect the wealth of the intellectual world. In the physical world springs make the creeks and brooks, and they the rivers, and the rivers empty into the great sea. So each of us should add to the sum of human knowledge. If we deny freedom of thought, the springs cease to gurgle, the rivers to run, and the great ocean of knowledge becomes a desert of barren ignorant sand.

The Sciences are not sectarian. The great scientist, Galileo, who was the first to point

the telescope at the sky, found out more about heaven than the closed eyes of prayer had ever discovered. Someday superstition will go and Science will remain. Science always has been, is, and always will be modest, thoughtful, truthful. It has but one object—the ascertainment of truth. Science is for *this* world. It is perfectly candid. It does not try to conceal, but to reveal. It is the enemy of mystery, of pretense and cant. It does not ask people to be solemn, but sensible. It calls for and insists on the uses of all the senses, of all the faculties of the mind. It does not pretend to be “holy” or “inspired.” It courts investigation, criticism and even denial. It asks for the application of every test, for trial by every standard. It knows nothing of blasphemy and does not ask for the imprisonment of those who ignorantly or knowingly deny the truth. The good that springs from a knowledge of the truth is the only reward it offers, and the evil resulting from ignorance is the only punishment it threatens.

Nature is but an endless series of causes and effects. She eternally transforms. A deity outside of Nature exists in nothing, and is nothing. Nature embraces with infinite arms all matter and all force. That which is imagined to be beyond her grasp is destitute of both. Nature, so far as we can discern, is without passion and without intention. She neither weeps nor rejoices. She produces us without purpose, and obliterates us without regret. She knows no distinction between the beneficial and the hurtful. Poison and nutrition, pain and joy, life and death, smiles and tears, are all alike to her. She is neither merciful nor cruel. She cannot be flattered by worship nor melted by tears. She does not know even the attitude of prayer. She appreciates no difference between poison in the fangs of snakes and mercy in the hearts of people. Only through us does nature take cognizance of the good, the true, and the beautiful. Without us, the universe is blind and cold. Nature is the maker of the universe, but we are the makers of love.

Love is the Morning and the Evening Star. It shines upon the cradle of the baby, and sheds its radiance on the quiet tomb. It is the mother of Art, inspirer of poet, patriot and

philosopher. It is the air and light of every heart, builder of every home, kindler of every fire on every hearth. The meanest hut with love in it is a palace fit for the gods, and a palace without love is merely a hovel of darkness. Love gave us our first dreams of immortality. It fills the world with melody, for Music is the voice of Love. Love is the magician, the enchanter, that changes worthless things to joy. Without it, we are low as insects, - but with it, earth is heaven and we are gods.

Honor, place, fame, glory, riches—they are ashes, smoke, dust, disappointment, unless there is somebody in the world you love, somebody who loves you; unless there is some place made absolutely sacred by the love of others.

Love is our universal creation and our universal possession. Love is not of any country and through all the ages, great have souls have blossomed in love and pity. It is a splendid thing to think that the person you really love will never grow old to you. Through the wrinkles of time, through the mask of years, you will always see the face you have loved and won. You will not see that they grow old. I like to think of it in that way—I like to think that love is eternal. And if you love in that way, you can then go down the hill of life together, and as you go down, hear, perhaps, the laughter of children and a birdsong in the tree of the ages.

I consider myself a son of Illinois even though I was born in the state of New York. I grew to manhood in the state of Lincoln and there I made common cause with the abolitionists. When the war came, I formed a militia of cavalry and became their colonel. After that great tragedy had finally ended, after the dead were buried, I would, at least a few times a year, journey to Springfield and visit the tomb of Lincoln.

The first time I stood before the tomb, the words of my friend, Walt Whitman, came to mind:

“When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom’d,

And the great star early drooped in the western sky at night,  
I mourn'd – and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.  
O ever-returning spring! trinity to me you bring;  
Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping star in the west,  
And thought of him I loved.”

The him that Walt Whitman loved and mourned was Abraham Lincoln and I loved him too.

Lincoln was an immense personality – firm but not obstinate. He was severe with himself, and for that reason lenient with others. He did merciful things as stealthily as others committed crimes.

By his candor, by his kindness, by his perfect freedom from restraint, by saying what he thought, and saying it absolutely in his own way, he made it not only possible, but popular, to be natural. He was the enemy of mock solemnity, of the stupidly respectable, of the cold and formal.

He wore no official robes either on his body or his soul. He never pretended to be more or less, or other, or different, from what he really was.

He cared nothing for place, but everything for principle; little for money, but everything for independence. He was as patient as Destiny, whose undecipherable hieroglyphs were so deeply graven on his sad and tragic face.

Nothing discloses real character like the use of power. It is easy for the weak to be gentle. Most people can bear adversity. But if you wish to know what a person is really like, give them power. This is the supreme test. It is the glory of Lincoln that, having almost absolute power, he never abused it, except on the side of mercy. He loved to see the pearls of joy on the cheeks of a wife whose husband he had rescued from death.

Lincoln was the grandest figure of the fiercest civil war. He is the gentlest memory of our world.

A tomb is a contemplative place. And on the continent last year, with the grave of Lincoln still fresh in my brain, I visited another tomb. Remember what I said about Lincoln? Nothing discloses real character like the use of power. If you wish to know what a person is really like, give them power. In Paris, I stood by the grave of Napoleon. Oh, it is a magnificent tomb of gilt and gold. There, I gazed upon the sarcophagus of rare and nameless marble, where rest at last the ashes of that restless man. I leaned over the balustrade and thought about the career of the greatest soldier of the modern world. I thought of the orphans and widows he had made – of the tears that had been shed for his glory, and of the only woman who ever loved him, pushed from his heart by greed and ambition. I thought, had I lived in France during Napoleon's time, I would rather have been a peasant and worn wooden shoes. I would rather have lived in a hut with a vine growing over the door, and the grapes growing purple in the Autumn sun. I would rather have been a poor peasant, with my wife by my side, as the day died out of the sky – with my children upon my knees and their arms about me – I would rather have been an unknown toiler, and gone down to the tongueless silence of the dreamless dust, than to have been that imperial impersonation of force and murder, known as Napoleon \_\_ the Great.

Let me close now by saying, If I had the power to produce exactly what I want for next Christmas, I would have all the kings and emperors resign and allow the people to govern themselves.

I would like to see a fair division of profits between capital and labor, so that the toiler could save enough to mingle a little June with the December of his life.

I would like to see an international court established in which to settle disputes between nations, so that armies could be disbanded and the great navies allowed to rust and rot in perfect peace.

I would like to see the whole world free— free from injustice, free from superstition.

I would have all the nobility drop their titles and give the land back to the people. I would have all the cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests and ministers admit that they know nothing about theology, nothing about hell or heaven, nothing about the destiny of the human race, nothing about devils or ghosts, gods or angels. I would have them tell all their "flock" to think for themselves, to be manly men and womanly women, and to do all in their power to increase the sum of human happiness.

The rights of all are equal. Justice, poised and balanced in eternal calm, will shake from the golden scales, in which are weighed our every act, the very dust of prejudice and caste. No race, no color, no previous condition, can change the rights of humanity. Prejudice is born of ignorance and malice. One of the greatest men of this country called prejudice "the spider of the mind." It weaves its web over every window and over every crevice where light can enter, and then disputes the existence of the light that it has excluded. That is prejudice. Prejudice will give the lie to all the other senses. It will swear the northern star out of the sky of truth. You must avoid it. It is the womb of injustice, and those who cannot rise above it are not civilized. They are barbarians.

If this is not now a free Government, if citizens cannot now be protected, regardless of race or color, if the three sacred amendments have been undermined by the Supreme Court, we must have another; and if that fails, then another; and we must neither stop, nor pause, until the Constitution shall become a perfect shield for every right, of every human being, beneath our flag.

There is but one blasphemy, and that is injustice. There is but one worship, and that is justice! When all people on earth have the right to speak their minds, then and only then will this world at last be civilized.

Where the sword of justice becomes a staff to support the weak, it bursts into blossom; and the perfume of that flower is the only incense, the only offering, the only sacrifice that

mercy and justice will accept.