

A funny thing happened on the way to the 20th Century.

Before there was the presidential confidant Billy Graham there was the presidential confidant and advisor, the agnostic (atheist?) Robert Ingersoll.

Presented at a Sunday Circle at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation (Blacksburg, Virginia), April 1, 2007, by Morton Nadler, a member of the UUC, as well as a retired Minister of the Humanist Society of Friends. Given here is an outline of his presentation.

1. Ingersoll outline
 - a. Outline: **before there was TV, before there was radio, there was the lecture circuit—Mark Twain, Ingersoll**
 - b. Criminal lawyer; later corporate lawyer
 - c. Army leader
 - d. Abolitionist and suffragist
 - e. Heretic
 - f. Defender of free speech: Anti-Comstockian but straight-laced!
 - g. Political leader
 1. Political orator who could swing elections
 - a. Obama's keynote address at 2004 convention
 - b. Ingersoll's nominating speech of Blaine at 1876 convention
 2. Intimate visitor at the White House, especially
 - a. Hayes
 - b. Garfield
 - c. Arthur
 - h. Friend of leading lights Mark Twain and Walt Whitman
 - i. Home is center of culture, art, political life in later years
2. Background
 - a. **Grandfather, Ebenezer "had sense enough to be a Universalist....If any were spared all would be." (Robert)**
 - b. **Father, John, was a Calvinist Congregational minister, an ardent abolitionist. Never long at any one church! Had Universalist tendencies**
 - c. Robert born 1833, brother Clark two years older
3. Ideological evolution
 - a. **He began study of law when he was 18 years old, and three years later was admitted to the bar. His gift of oratory soon made him a distinguished man, both in the courts and in Democratic politics.** In 1853 he studied law with Willis Allen, busily engaged in a campaign for reelection as a representative to Congress on the Democratic ticket. Young "Josh" Allen in the absence of his father did the bulk of the legal work for the firm and with him Robert gained most of his early legal experience. "Josh" had another influence upon Robert: he had decidedly liberal leanings in religion, he was spoken of as an atheist. Josh and Robert talked for many hours about religious questions.

- b. Had Ingersoll married a devout woman, he might not have wandered again. But **Eva Parker was a rationalist**. Never caught in the coils of sin-and-hell, her approach to religious questions was emotionally uncomplicated. If she thought of God at all, it was, as a Deist might, of a remote, impersonal force. She could not take seriously the idea of a God made in the image of man, which was the only God her husband could take seriously, either in acceptance or in attack. Agnosticism came easy for her, it came hard for him.
- c. He was an exceedingly successful criminal lawyer. **He claimed he never defended somebody in whose innocence he was no convinced**. Here's an example of his style. In opening arguments in one case he said:

I want you to try this case according to the evidence and nothing else. I want you to say whether you believe the testimony of these conspirators and scoundrels If you bring in a verdict of guilty I want you to be able to defend yourselves when you go to the defendant!

- 4. Abolitionist like his father.
 - a. His father was an ardent abolitionist
 - b. In 1862 he volunteered for the Union army, He organized the 11th Illinois Regiment and went to the front as its Colonel. He spent most of military career in raiding and scouting. On November 28, 1862, while endeavoring to intercept a Confederate raiding party with 600 men, he was attacked by a force of 10,000 and captured. ... "the enemy ran over us—actually took the ramrods out of the men's hands. I was the last to leave the guns. Away I went over a field—and away they went after me. They shot at me it seemed hundreds of times." He came to a high fence. His horse "jumped the fence clear and fine"—but when he came down on the other side his knees gave way and he fell flat—"off I went—and Mr. 'Sesesh' bagged the aforesaid."

Ingersoll was taken for safekeeping to a nearby store, where he stayed four days. Then he was paroled. Several fellow prisoners had various versions of an incident that occurred while he was in custody. One evening he, prisoners, and guards were exchanging yarns and cracking jokes in the store. The laughter drew other Confederates to the store, which became quite crowded, and some stood outside. One prisoner cried to Ingersoll, "Speech! Speech!" "But half my audience can't get in here," said Ingersoll. "Well, let's go outside then," someone said. So outside they went, Rebs and Feds together as if there were no war at all. Ingersoll mounted a box and bantered his audience for a while. Then he became serious, about how reluctantly the North had taken up arms against the South and about the plight of the slaves. He was going along nicely on these matters when up came none other than General Forrest, who listened for a few moments and then shouted, "Here, Ingersoll, stop that speech and I'll exchange you for a government mule."

After his parole Ingersoll went back to Jackson, where General Sullivan told him that he had saved the town. He had delayed Forrest long enough so that reinforcements could come up....

- c. **By 1867 he was a radical Republican. He delivered an address to the colored people at Galesburg, Illinois, 1867. Here is the conclusion:**

I wonder that you ask a white man to address you on this occasion, when the history of your connection with the white race is written in your blood and tears -- is still upon your flesh, put there by the branding-iron and the lash.

I feel like asking your forgiveness for the wrongs that my race has inflicted upon yours. If, in the future, the wheel of fortune should take a turn, and you should in any country have white men in your power, I pray you not to execute the villainy we have taught you.

One word in conclusion. You have your liberty -- use it to benefit your race. Educate yourselves, educate your children, send teachers to the South. Let your brethren there be educated. Let them know something of art and science. Improve yourselves, stand by each other, and above all be in favor of liberty the world over.

The time is coming when you will be allowed to be good and useful citizens of the Great Republic. This is your country as much as it is mine. You have the same rights here that I have -- the same interest that I have. The avenues of distinction will be open to you and your children. Great advances have been made. The rebels are now opposed to slavery -- the Democratic party is opposed to slavery, as they say. There is going to be no war of races. Both parties want your votes in the South, and there will be just enough negroes without principle to join the rebels to make them think they will get more, and so the rebels will treat the negroes well. And the Republicans will be sure to treat them well in order to prevent any more joining the rebels.

The great problem is solved. Liberty has solved it -- and there will be no more slavery. On the old flag, on every fold and on every star will be liberty for all, equality before the law. The grand people are marching forward, and they will not pause until the earth is without a chain, and without a throne.

5. He became known as a freethinker aka agnostic and was attacked by most pulpits
 - a. Bible critic; exposed the contradictions
 - b. A loving god could not have made the world as it is
 - c. Most popular lecture: Some Mistakes of Moses. Of all his lectures the one most frequently translated into Yiddish!

There was a time when a falsehood, fulminated from the pulpit, smote like a sword; but, the supply having greatly exceeded the demand, clerical misrepresentation has at last become almost an innocent amusement. Remembering that only a few years ago men, women, and even children, were imprisoned, tortured and burned, for having expressed in an exceedingly mild and gentle way, the ideas entertained by me, I congratulate myself that calumny is now the pulpit's last resort. The old instruments of torture are kept only to gratify curiosity; the chains are rusting away, and the demolition of time has allowed even the dungeons of the Inquisition to be visited by light. The church, impotent and malicious, regrets, not the abuse, but the loss of her power, and seeks to hold by falsehood what she gained by cruelty and force, by fire and fear. Christianity cannot live in peace with any other form of faith. If that religion be true, there is but one savior, one inspired book, and but one little narrow grass-grown path that leads to heaven. Such a religion is necessarily uncompromising, unreasoning, aggressive and insolent. Christianity has held all other creeds and forms in infinite contempt, divided the world into enemies and friends, and verified the awful declaration of its founder -- a declaration that wet with blood the sword he came to bring, and made the horizon of a thousand years lurid with the fagots' flames....

d. Accused by the left of beating a dead horse.

When Ingersoll delivered "Some Mistakes of Moses" in Chicago, the clergy swarmed to the attack, hardly indicative that he was striking at a dead theology. Of the few who thought he was, Robert Collyer was a Unitarian whom the Chicago Presbytery pronounced a heretic. And David Swing was tried by that Presbytery for heresy. Swing charged Ingersoll with "concentrations upon minor points" yet such points were major in his own heresy. That Collyer would misread the pertinence of Ingersoll's attacks might be expected from his statement, "I look upon the Old Testament as a rotting tree." Few clergymen could say that. The Reverend Dr. Ryder even as he attacked Ingersoll for a narrow interpretation of the Bible admitted that that kind of interpretation abounded in the church. Dr. Thomas, a Methodist minister, said, "It may be that we have claimed too much for the Bible, and thereby given not a little occasion for such men as Mr. Ingersoll to appear at the other extreme, denying too much."

- e. Dr. Thomas' statement aptly puts the case for and against Ingersoll. He did go to extremes. He did go over the Bible with a fine-toothed comb and treat his findings as he did the miracle of the manna in the wilderness: "This manna was a very popular thing. It would melt in the sun, and yet they could cook it by seething and baking. One would as soon think of frying snow or of boiling icicles. But this manna had another remarkable quality. No matter how much or little any person gathered, he would have an exact omer; if he gathered more, it would shrink to that amount, and if he gathered less, it would swell to that amount. What a magnificent substance manna would be with which to make a currency-shrinking and swelling according to the great laws of supply and demand." But **if Ingersoll searched the Bible for inaccuracies and oddities and railed at the letter of it, the point remains that he was not attacking straw men. Literacy in theology was the rule, not the exception.** [

6. Corporate lawyer

- a. . In 1885, Western Union having forced out of business the American Rapid Telegraph Company proceeded with dispatch on the basis of an unconfirmed contract with the receivers of American Rapid to take over the property of the company. But in so doing Western Union, not for want of guile, made no distinction between the property of American Rapid and that of the Bankers' and Merchants' Telegraph Company. Western Union agents throughout the country had emerged from their stations at an identical hour to cut several thousand miles of wire and dismantle four hundred offices of American Rapid *and* Bankers' and Merchants'

- b. [On the train to Syracuse to argue a case, Conkling, a famous lawyer confessed to not being prepared. Ingersoll asked for the papers.] Conkling produced them. The Colonel examined them. Before reaching Syracuse he handed them back, saying: "Conkling, I will argue this case, although, as you know, my throat is bad to-day and I'll have to whisper my argument in the court's ear." "I'm extremely sorry, Colonel, to put this burden on you, but I see no other way. Do you think you understand the case with this brief inspection?" "Perfectly; as well as if I had studied it for weeks," and for the next few miles he laid it all out before his astonished auditor. "Is that the way you prepare your briefs, Colonel?" "Why not? If I can't catch on to a case by reading it, as soon as the Court does by hearing it, I'd make a nice judge or lawyer, wouldn't I?" "You're a strange man, Colonel, I can't fathom you." [211]
7. **Lecturer:** In 1882, Ingersoll was at the crest of his fame, or notoriety. And people in the highest places seemed to lend him sanction. At the memorial services at the Academy of Music, New York City, the evening of Decoration Day, May 30, Ingersoll was the speaker. As if such a man on so solemn an occasion were not enough to shock the orthodox, who should be seen sitting on the platform with him but men of the greatest national prominence: Ulysses S. Grant; Charles Scribner; August Belmont; George W. Curtis; Roscoe Conkling; Carl Schurz; Charles J. Folger, Secretary of the Treasury of the United States; Benjamin H. Brewster, Attorney General of the United States; and, to top it all, Chester A. Arthur, the President of the United States.
8. **Stump speaker:**
Margaret Sanger (nee Higgins), was born. Watching her mother die at age 48 of tuberculosis after bearing 11 children changed not only the course of Margaret's life, but world history. As a young child, Margaret was introduced to the power of the Catholic Church when the local priest locked the doors of the town hall to prevent agnostic **Robert Ingersoll** from speaking in Corning, N.Y. Margaret wrote in her autobiography of the spellbinding experience of hearing Ingersoll speak in the woods instead.
9. **Presidential intimate**
 - a) **Access to White House:** He was now in the intimate counsels of both Garfield and Blaine, and the White House was always open to him. Often in the evenings he would take the short walk from his home on Lafayette Square to the White House, there to chat with the President about all sorts of matters.
 - b) **The Ingersoll "at home"**
Their Sunday evening receptions soon became an institution for cultural, artistic, and business luminaries representing many professions and shades of opinion. The guest list read like a Who's Who of fin de siècle New York: Andrew Carnegie; Henry Ward Beecher; the actors Maurice Barrymore, Edwin Booth (brother of John Wilkes Booth), and Julia Marlowe; Samuel J. Tilden, the losing Democratic presidential candidate in 1876; the famous Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi; Elizabeth Cady Stanton; and even the young Harry Houdini who, like most professional magicians, disdained belief in the supernatural

10. Ingersoll & Whitman, Twain. He delivered the funeral eulogy for Whitman.

11. On Unitarianism and Universalism

UNITARIAN CLUB DINNER.

New York, January 15, 1892.

MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: In the first place, I wish to tender my thanks to this club for having generosity and sense enough to

invite me to speak this evening. It is probably the best thing the club has ever done. You have shown that you are not afraid of a man simply because he does not happen to agree entirely with you, although in a very general way it may be said that I come within one of you.

So I think, not only that you have honored me -- that, I most cheerfully and gratefully admit -- but, upon my word, I think that you have honored yourselves. And imagine the distance the religious world has traveled in the last few years to make a thing of this kind possible! You know -- I presume every one of you knows -- that I have no religion -- not enough to last a minute -- none whatever -- that is, in the ordinary sense of that word. And yet you have become so nearly civilized that you are willing to hear what I have to say; and I have become so nearly civilized that I am willing to say what I think.

And, in the second place, let me say that I have great respect for the Unitarian Church. I have great respect for the memory of Theodore Parker. I have great respect for every man who has assisted in relieving the heavens of an infinite monster. I have great respect for every man who has helped to put out the fires of hell. In other words, I have great respect for every man who has tried to civilize my race.

The Unitarian Church has done more than any other church -- and maybe more than all other churches -- to substitute character for creed, and to say that a man should be judged by his spirit; by the climate of his heart; by the autumn of his generosity; by the spring of his hope; that he should be judged by what he does; by the influence that he exerts, rather than by the mythology he may believe. And whether there be one God or a million, I am perfectly satisfied that every duty that devolves upon me is within my reach, it is something that I can do myself, without the help of anybody else, either in this world or any other.

Now, in order to make myself plain on this subject -- I think I was to speak about the Ideal -- I want to thank the Unitarian Church for what it has done; and I want to thank the Universalist Church, too. They at least believe in a God who is a gentleman; and that is much more than was ever done by an orthodox church. They believe, at least, in a heavenly father who will leave the latch string out until the last child gets home; and as that lets me in -- especially in reference to the "last" -- I have great respect for that church.

12. He and his wife are buried side by side in Arlington National Cemetery.

In the discussion I was asked about his view of Lincoln. I replied that he didn't think much of him. He supported Douglass in the election of 1860 because he opposed the extremism of the abolitionists. John Brown *should* hang. He was upset at the suspension of the writ of *Habeas Corpus*. He was ready to let the South go. Yet when war came, he rallied.

In 1894 he gave a talk on Lincoln that was full of praise for the author of the Emancipation Proclamation and the savior of the union. And he opened the talk by mentioning that Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin were born on the same day!

On the 12th of February, 1809, two babes were born -- one in the woods of Kentucky, amid the hardships and poverty of pioneers; one in England, surrounded by wealth and culture. One was educated in the University of Nature, the other at Cambridge.

One associated his name with the enfranchisement of labor, with the emancipation of millions, with the salvation of the Republic. He is known to us as Abraham Lincoln.

The other broke the chains of superstition and filled the world with intellectual light, and he is known as Charles Darwin.

Nothing is grander than to break chains from the bodies of men -- nothing nobler than to destroy the phantoms of the soul.

I was also asked about taxation of church property. Here is the text of an interview on the subject.

Bank of Wisdom Box 926, Louisville, KY 40201 SOME LIVE TOPICS.

Question. Have you seen the memorial to the New York Legislature, to be presented this winter, asking for the repeal of such laws as practically unite church and state?

Answer. I have seen a memorial asking that church property be taxed like other property; that no more money should be appropriated from the public treasury for the support of institutions managed by and in the interest of sectarian denominations; for the repeal of all laws compelling the observance of Sunday as a religious day.

Such memorials ought to be addressed to the Legislature of all the States. The money of the public should only be used for the benefit of the public. Public money should not be used for what a few gentlemen think is for the benefit of the public. Personally, I think it would be for the benefit of the public to have Infidel or scientific -- which is the same thing -- lectures delivered in every town, in every State, on every Sunday; but knowing that a great many men disagree with me on this point, I do not claim that such lectures ought to be paid for with public money. The Methodist Church ought not to be sustained by taxation, nor the Catholic, nor any other church. To relieve their property from taxation is to appropriate money, to the extent of that tax, for the support of that church.

Whenever a burden is lifted from one piece of property, it is distributed over the rest of the property of the State, and to release one kind of property is to increase the tax on all other kinds. There was a time when people really supposed that churches were saving souls from the eternal wrath of a God of infinite love. Being engaged in such a philanthropic work, and at that time nobody having the courage to deny it the church being all-powerful -- all other property was taxed to support the church; but now the more civilized part of the community, being satisfied that a God of infinite love will not be eternally unjust, feel as though the church should support herself.

To exempt the church from taxation is to pay a part of the priest's salary. The Catholic now objects to being taxed to support a school in which his religion is not taught.

He is not satisfied with the school that says nothing on the subject of religion. He insists that it is an outrage to tax him to support a school where the teacher simply teaches what he knows. And yet this same Catholic wants his church exempted from taxation, and the tax of an Atheist or of a Jew increased, when he teaches in his untaxed church that the Atheist and Jew will both be eternally damned! Is it possible for impudence to go

further? I insist that no religion should be taught in any school supported by public money; and by religion I mean superstition. Only that should be taught in a school that somebody can learn and that somebody can know. In my judgment, every church should be taxed precisely the same as other property. The church may claim that it is one of the instruments of civilization and therefore should be exempt. If you exempt that which is useful, you exempt every trade and every profession. In my judgment, theaters have done more to civilize mankind than churches; that is to say, theaters have done something to civilize mankind -- churches nothing. The effect of all superstition has been to render man barbarous. I do not believe in the civilizing effects of falsehood.

There was a time when ministers were supposed to be in the employ of God, and it was thought that God selected them with great care -- that their profession had something sacred about it.

These ideas are no longer entertained by sensible people. Ministers should be paid like other professional men, and those who like their preaching should pay for the preach.

They should depend, as actors do, upon their popularity, upon the amount of sense, or nonsense, that they have for sale. They should depend upon the market like other people, and if people do not want to hear sermons badly enough to build churches and pay for them, and pay the taxes on them, and hire the preacher, let the money be diverted to some other use. The pulpit should no longer be a pauper. I do not believe in carrying on any business with the contribution box.

All the sectarian institutions ought to support themselves.

There should be no Methodist or Catholic or Presbyterian hospitals or orphan asylums. All these should be supported by the State. There is no such thing as Catholic charity, or Methodist charity.

Charity belongs to humanity, not to any particular form of faith or religion. You will find as charitable people who never heard of religion, as you can find in any church. The State should provide for those who ought to be provided for.

A few Methodists beg of everybody they meet -- send women with subscription papers, asking money from all classes of people, and nearly everybody gives something from politeness, or to keep from being annoyed; and when the institution is finished, it is pointed at as the result of Methodism. Probably a majority of the people in this country suppose that there was no charity in the world until the Christian religion was founded. Great men have repeated this falsehood, until ignorance and thoughtlessness believe it. There were orphan asylums in China, in India, and in Egypt thousands of years before Christ was born; and there certainly never was a time in the history of the whole world when there was less charity in Europe than during the centuries when the Church of Christ had absolute power. There were hundreds of Mohammedan asylums before Christianity had built ten in the entire world. All institutions for the care of unfortunate people should be secular -- should be supported by the State.

The money for the purpose should be raised by taxation, to the end that the burden may be borne by those able to bear it. As it is now, most of the money is paid, not by the rich, but by the generous, and those most able to help their needy fellow citizens are the very ones who do nothing. If the money is raised by taxation, then the burden will fall where it ought to fall, and these institutions will no longer be supported by the generous and emotional, and the rich and stingy will no longer be able to evade the duties of citizenship and humanity. Now, as to the Sunday laws, we know that they are only spasmodically enforced. Now and then a few people are arrested for selling papers or cigars. Some unfortunate barber is grabbed by a policeman because he has been caught shaving a Christian, Sunday morning.

Now and then some poor fellow with a hack, trying to make a dollar or two to feed his horses, or to take care of his wife and children, is arrested as though he were a murderer.

But in a few days the public are inconvenienced to that degree that the arrests stop and business goes on in its accustomed channels. Now and then society becomes so pious, so virtuous, that people are compelled to enter saloons by the back door; others are compelled to drink beer with the front shutters up; but otherwise the

stream that goes down the thirsty throats is unbroken.

The ministers have done their best to prevent all recreation on the Sabbath.

They would like to stop all the boats on the Hudson, and the sea -- stop all the excursion trains.

They would like to compel every human being that lives in the city of New York to remain within its limits twenty-four hours each Sunday. They hate the parks; they hate music; they hate anything that keeps a man away from church. Most of the churches are empty during the summer, and now most of the ministers leave themselves, and give over the entire city to the Devil and his emissaries. And yet if the ministers had their way, there would be no form of human enjoyment except prayer, signing subscription papers, putting money in contribution boxes, listening to sermons, reading the cheerful histories of the Old Testament, imagining the joys of heaven and the torments of hell.

The church is opposed to the theater, is the enemy of the opera, looks upon dancing as a crime, hates billiards, despises cards, opposes roller-skating, and even entertains a certain kind of prejudice against croquet.