FREETHINKERS: A History of American Secularism
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Excerpts from Chapter 6: The Great Agnostic and the Golden Age of Freethought

The period from, roughly, 1875 to 1914 presents the high-water mark of free thought as an influential movement in American society. … (pg151)

To describe the last quarter of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th centuries as a golden age of freethought is to suggest not that a majority of Americans were persuaded by rationalist or anti-religious arguments but that those arguments reached a much broader public than they ever had in the past. Unlike 18th-century Deists, nearly all of whom identified with Jeffersonian democracy, American freethinkers of the late 19th century were anything but unified in their political views, which ran the gamut from anarchism to Spencerian conservatism. Freethinkers might be Democrats, rock-ribbed Republicans, or, on occasion, socialist with either a capital or a small *s*. (pp152-53)

In the postwar decades, close connections -- especially in large cities -- began to develop between gentile freethinkers and German Jews like Felix Adler, who founded the Ethical Culture Society in 1876. The *Truth Seeker*, for instance, had the highest regard for Adler and always covered his lectures. There were fewer connections between native American freethinkers and the poor Jewish immigrants who began arriving after 1880 – (Ernestine) Rose and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had shared a platform, but Emma Goldman and Stanton never did. All of Ingersoll's works, however, were published in Yiddish translation: his passionate agnosticism struck a chord with secular Jews who had rejected traditional observance and who shared Ingersoll's faith in science and self-education. "Some Mistakes of Moses", a satirical deconstruction of Genesis and Exodus, was, as might be expected, the Ingersoll lecture most frequently translated into Yiddish. (pg 152) …

The one political concern that did unite all freethinkers was their support for absolute separation of church and state, which translated into opposition to any tax support of religious institutions -- especially parochial schools. (pg 153)

Because Americans of different faiths were accustomed to religious liberty in practice as well as in theory, separation of church and state -- however compelling as a constitutional principle -- was not an issue that touched the daily lives of most citizens. Arguments over the mention of God on coins or tax exemption of church property could not provide freethinkers with a basis for appeal to the larger public. The absence of a political focus -- a problem unknown to anticlerical Europeans, who formed a political opposition to governments based on monarchy, narrow economic privilege, and church authority -- is generally considered a weakness of the American freethought movement. *But this lack of identification with a particular political point of view or party was also a strength, in that it enabled freethinkers to exert a strong influence on all the reform movements that were nonpartisan in character. (Emphasis added – JR)* For if freethinkers did not have a political platform, they nevertheless agreed on a wide range of social, cultural, and artistic concerns, which generated such fierce debate in the decades after the Civil War that they would form a template for the nations "culture wars" a century later. These included free political speech; freedom of artistic expression; expanded legal and economic rights for women that went well beyond the narrow political goal of suffrage; the necessity of ending domestic violence against women and children; dissemination of birth control information (a major target of the putative postal laws, defining birth control information as obscene, that bore the name of Anthony Comstock); opposition to capital punishment and to inhumane conditions in prisons and insane asylums; and, above all, the expansion of public education. (pg 154)

It is difficult, in an era in which most Americans acquire their information from packaged sound bites that require almost no effort from audiences, to convey the excitement of a time when people were willing to expend a good deal of energy looking at evidence, and listening to opinions, that challenged the received wisdom of previous ages. Autodidacts considered it fun to sit or stand for hours and hear lecturers discuss Shakespeare's sonnets, the poetry of Byron, the philosophy of Voltaire, the new biblical criticism based on the premise that the Scriptures were written by humans, evolution, electrification, the germ theory of disease, or woman suffrage. Their faith-inspired counterparts were equally eager to listen to evangelists deliver lengthy sermons on salvation and damnation. Freethought lecturers, unable to hold out the prospect of salvation or threaten damnation in the next world, could appeal to their audiences only by holding out a different vision of how to think and live on this earth.

The most masterful articulator of the secularist vision was Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-99). Without him, the golden age of American freethought is as difficult to imagine as abolitionism without Garrison are the first wave of feminism without Stanton. Ingersoll's position as the preeminent orator of his generation enabled him to reach millions of Americans who might otherwise have refused to give a personal hearing, unmediated by a hostile press, to the case against conventional religion. One of the two most important figures in the history of American secularist dissent (the other of course being Paine), Ingersoll bridged the gap between the theoretical deism of the Enlightenment and the practical freethought, focusing on specific social problems, that defined the late-19th century movement. While he was hardly the first person to make the connection between authoritarian religion and authoritarian social values, Ingersoll was the first American to lay out a coherent secular humanist alternative, touching on everyday matters like marriage and parenthood, to life as defined by traditional religious faith -- and to present the case for freethought to a broad public. Like Paine's written polemics, Ingersoll's speeches were delivered in vivid, down-to-earth language, intended for the many rather than the few, and understandable to all. (pp 157-58)

Only a small proportion of Americans were moved to reject religion altogether in response to the proselytizing freethinkers of the 19th century, but many more turned away from the more rigid and unquestioning forms of faith. But even more important, freethinkers made a powerful case for a secularist approach to public affairs rooted in an Enlightenment heritage unfamiliar to many in late-19th century America. Ingersoll did more than anyone to restore Americans' memory of their country's secular and rationalist tradition. In one of his most frequently delivered lectures, he declared of the founders:

> "They knew that to put God in the Constitution was to put man out. They knew that the recognition of a Deity would be seized upon by fanatics and zealots as a pretext for destroying the liberty of thought. They knew the terrible history of the church too well to place in her keeping, or in the keeping of her God, thus sacred rights of man. They intended that all should have the right to worship, or not to worship; that our laws should make no distinction on account of creed. They intended to found and frame a government for man, and for man alone. They wished to preserve the individuality of all; to prevent the few from governing the many, and the many from persecuting and destroying the few."

This vision of America as a republic "for man, and for man alone" -- as opposed to a society singularly blessed by and answerable to God -- was as controversial a century ago as it remains today. It lies at the heart of the culture wars that began not in the late 20th century but in the impassioned debate during the golden age of free thought. (pp 184-85)

Note also this, from the conclusion of Chapter 5: Evolution and its Discontents

One of the glories of 19th-century freethought was that its most passionate adherents never laid claims to the absolute knowledge professed by congregants of orthodox faiths. If freethinkers did not hesitate to describe atheism and agnosticism as faiths like any other, often using the term *religion* in a secular sense to define an ethical and metaphysical system grounded in the search for truth rather than in the conviction of having found the truth. The scientific method, combining inductive and deductive reasoning, was very much a part of the secularist religion, but true freethinkers did not make a religion out of science itself. At a widely publicized though much-mocked national freethinkers' convention held in upstate New York in 1878, a Cornell University professor memorably summarized the secularist freethought creed. "We have or may have a religion of unselfish devotion to others and to our own highest ideals," he prophesied, "a religion of character, of abiding enthusiasm for humanity, and of complete intellectual honesty. Into our little human lives it will bring something of the grandeur of these infinite surroundings, a higher purpose amid which and for which we live."