

Freethought in America After the Civil War

In the period between the Civil War and the end of the century, Freethought enjoyed a period of growth and change. The rapid acceptance of Darwinism rendered Deism obsolete and put the defenders of the Bible on the defensive. “Agnostic”, a term invented by Thomas Huxley, replaced “Infidel” as the label of choice in Freethought circles. Silver-tongued Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899) entertained crowds on the lecture circuit. German immigrants brought in radical politics and new philosophies.

The principal Freethought organization was the National Liberal League, later called the American Secular Union. The NLL was an outgrowth of the Free Religious Association. Francis Abbot, who was editing *The Index* for the FRA, felt the need for an organization to achieve the separation of church and state. His call in *The Index* in 1873, for the formation of Liberal Leagues, attracted many Agnostics including Ingersoll, Unitarians like Minot Savage, Jewish rabbis and journalists, Spiritualists led by Robert Dale Owen, radical Germans, and old abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott, and even Wendell Phillips, still an orthodox Christian.

At the centennial, on July 4, 1876, in Philadelphia, delegates launched the NLL, elected Abbot president, and adopted his “Nine Demands of Liberalism”, which included such items as abolishing judicial oaths, taxing church property, repeal of Sabbath laws, and dropping military chaplains from the government payroll. The vice-presidents and other officers were also mainly from the FRA, which represented what may be called the “moderate” wing of freethought. But it was not long before more militant Freethinkers, led by D. M. Bennett, took over.

DeRobigne Mortimer Bennett (1818-1882) had founded *The Truth Seeker* in 1873. As a young man, Bennett had lived for a time with the Shakers in New York. He then moved about the country, selling seeds and patent medicines, before settling down in 1870 in a drug store in Paris, Illinois. Having become an atheist in the 1840s with some help from Gilbert Vale’s bookstore, Bennett in 1873 engaged in a debate on prayer with local clergy through letters to the town newspaper. When the paper stopped printing his side, Bennett printed 12,000 copies of the first issue of *The Truth Seeker*, and sent them all over the country. Bennett soon moved to New York, and *The Truth Seeker* became a weekly.

It was the persecution of Bennett by Anthony Comstock, under the recently passed “Comstock Laws” prohibiting mailing of “obscene” material, that led to the split in the NLL. At the 1878 annual convention, Bennett demanded that the NLL

work for full repeal of the Comstock Laws, but moderates led by Abbot wished only to modify the laws to protect legitimate personal liberty, not sexually explicit material. Bennett won the vote. Abbott was ousted as president, and he and his followers withdrew from the NLL. The next year, upon a suggestion by Robert Ingersoll, the policy was changed to both opposition to the Comstock Laws, and disapproval of obscene literature.

Ingersoll was by then already the celebrity agnostic of the country. The son of an abolitionist Presbyterian minister, Robert had become skeptical as a child, and his marriage to Eva Parker, an intelligent woman from a family of infidels, solidified his agnosticism. Ingersoll had a successful law practice in Peoria, Illinois, and during the Civil War, distinguished himself as a colonel, but was captured, paroled, and went home. After the war, he served a term as attorney general of Illinois, but he refused to keep his infidelity to himself, and mindful of this handicap, he pursued no further political office.

Ingersoll's elevation to fame was his speech nominating James G. Blaine for president as the "Plumed Knight" of the Republican Party in the 1876 convention. Even though Blaine failed to get the nomination, Ingersoll's rousing speech earned him tumultuous acclaim. He then began touring the country, and in between campaigning for the Republican party, he established himself as one of the most popular platform speakers with his lectures on agnosticism.

Ingersoll was known both for his captivating delivery and his pithy turn of phrase. "Whenever a man lives by prayer," he said, "you will find that he eats considerable besides." His statement of humanist ethics is among the most popular- "My creed is this: Happiness is the only good. The place to be happy is here. The time to be happy is now. The way to be happy is to make others so."

The Ingersolls and their two daughters enjoyed a happy and virtuous family life that refuted the claim that unbelievers are wicked. Although Ingersoll himself was politically conservative on economic questions, his friends and admirers ran the spectrum from Andrew Carnegie and Thomas Edison to Eugene Debs and Margaret Sanger.

Samuel Clemens (1835-1910) was known to his friends, including Ingersoll, as a skeptic in religion. Although he satirized saint worship and assailed the new Christian Science religion of Mary Baker Eddy, his family kept private his strongest attacks on Christianity. *Letters to the Earth* was not published until 1964.

Many NLL members were social activists and there were attempts to organize as a political party. But lack of funds, and more importantly lack of consensus on the proposed platforms, stymied these efforts. The 1884 convention voted to

stick to the Nine Demands, and changed the name to the American Secular Union.

Before long, the ASU began to drift back into “unitarian” control under President R. B. Westbrook, who was a minister, much to the annoyance of the infidel “Old Guard”. In 1891 Samuel Putnam founded the Freethought Federation of America to pressure politicians into passing secularist legislation including a proposed amendment requiring church-state separation. The FFA had little success. It merged with the ASU in 1894 with Putnam as president, and the name reverted to ASU in 1901.