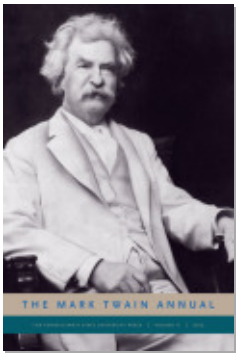
The Mark Twain and Robert Ingersoll Connection: Freethought, Borrowed Thought, Stolen Thought



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The Mark Twain Annual, Volume 11, 2013, pp. 42-61 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

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Early in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, the narrator mentions that Judge Driscoll:

> was president of the Freethinkers' Society, and Pudd'nhead Wilson was the other member. The society's weekly discussions were now the old lawyer's main interest in life. Pudd'nhead was still toiling in obscurity at the bottom of the ladder, under the blight of that unlucky remark which he had let fall twenty-three years before about the dog. . . . Judge Driscoll could be a freethinker and still hold his place in society because he was the person of most consequence to the community, and therefore could venture to go his own way and follow out his own notions. The other member of his pet organization was allowed the like liberty because he was a cipher in the estimation of the public, and nobody attached any importance to what he thought or did. He was liked, he was welcome enough all around, but he simply didn't count for anything (942–43).

Judge Driscoll and Pudd'nhead Wilson were very lonely freethinkers in Dawson's Landing, but freethinking, a reliance on empirical proof as evidence for belief, as opposed to faith or supernatural evidence, was an important intellectual movement in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. In her recent book *Freethinkers*, Susan Jacoby asserts, "The period from, roughly, 1875 to 1914 represents the high-water mark of freethought as an influential movement in American society" (151). Given those dates, we might think of this time as the age of Mark Twain, but in terms of the freethought movement, it was the age of Robert Ingersoll. Widely known in his time, celebrated as a skilled orator, wildly popular as a lecture speaker and writer, vilified by the

THE MARK TWAIN ANNUAL, Vol. 11, 2013

religiously orthodox as "The Great Agnostic," Ingersoll has now been nearly forgotten. But from 1876, when he burst on the national political scene with his "Plumed Knight" speech nominating James G. Blaine for president, to his death in 1899, Robert Ingersoll was undoubtedly the most influential American public figure in the battle between religious thought and rational, scientific doubt.[1] He was also one of the most influential writers on Mark Twain's thought, especially on Twain's late writings about religion. That influence has been recognized, but not as fully as it deserves. Especially in his late works, after he had read Ingersoll's complete works, Mark Twain was influenced greatly by "The Great Agnostic." In fact, a fuller examination shows that Twain was not only influenced by Ingersoll, but that he borrowed ideas, phrasing, and even exact words so heavily that he is most certainly guilty of extensive plagiarism. Much has been written about Twain's turn to pessimism and darkness in his last decade, often decried as bitterness and despair, but increasingly recognized as evidence of philosophical honesty and depth. His extensive borrowing reveals that what many have seen as philosophical honesty is actually intellectual dishonesty of a high order. That evidence calls for a new reading of many of Twain's late, mostly unpublished works, most notably "Letters from the Earth."

My title gives recognition to Thomas Schwartz's 1976 article in *American Literature*, "Mark Twain and Robert Ingersoll: The Freethought Connection." Schwartz very ably and fully recounts Mark Twain's knowledge of and admiration for Robert Ingersoll, beginning with the November night in 1879 when both were speaking at the Grand Banquet of the Re-Union of the Army of the Tennessee, at Chicago's Palmer House, with Grant and other notables in attendance. Mark Twain's speech, the last of a long night of speeches, was "The Babies," which brought the house down. But as Schwartz details, it was Robert Ingersoll's speech that captured Twain's admiration (184). He wrote to his wife, Livy, soon after the event, expressing his admiration for Ingersoll and calling Ingersoll's speech "just the supreme combination of English words that was ever put together since the world began" (Paine 1:371). A few days later, he wrote to William Dean Howells, saying "Bob Ingersoll's speech . . . will sing through my memory always as the divinest that ever enchanted my ears" (Smith and Gibson 1:279). In early December, he wrote a letter to Ingersoll, praising his speech and asking for a clean copy of it to read to the young ladies at the Saturday Morning Club (Paine 1:373). Ingersoll wrote back, praising "The Babies," and including not only the speech but also a copy of his 1878 collection, *Ghosts, and Other Lectures* (Larson 236). Twain responded immediately with thanks and appreciation: "I am devouring them—they have found a hungry place, and they content it & satisfy it

to a miracle. I wish I could hear you *speak* these splendid chapters before a great audience" (Paine 1:373). When Ingersoll died in 1899, Twain wrote to Ingersoll's niece this touching—and quite heartfelt—message: "Except for my daughter's, I have not grieved for any death as I have grieved for his. His was a great and beautiful spirit, he was a man—all man from his crown to his foot soles. My reverence for him was deep and genuine; I prized his affection for me and returned it with usury" (Paine 2:682).

Schwartz goes on to show the influence that Ingersoll had on several of Twain's works, including *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *A Connecticut Yankee*, and *What Is Man?* But Schwartz relies only on what he knew for a certainty Twain had read of Ingersoll's works: *Ghosts* and the other lectures in that volume, and the debate between Ingersoll and Judge Jeremiah S. Black, published in the *North American Review*, which Twain followed avidly, even sending Ingersoll a letter congratulating him on his "victory" over Black (185). However, good evidence exists that Twain knew Ingersoll's work much more fully. As Schwartz acknowledges, soon after Twain's death in 1910, an article titled "What Was Mark Twain's Religion?" in *The Truth-Seeker*, the leading freethought publication of the time, closely associated with Ingersoll, who was a constant contributor, stated that Twain had been a longtime subscriber, and that he had renewed his subscription just months before his death (191). Even more important, Mark Twain almost certainly owned the twelve-volume 1900 Dresden edition of Ingersoll's *Works*, as evidenced by Twain's letter of December 20, 1900, replying to a Connecticut man named Griswold who had apparently offered Twain a full set of the books: "I shall be very glad indeed to have the Dresden edition of my old friend's books, in my library at this house. I knew him twenty years, and was fond of him, and held [him] in as high honor as I have held any man living or dead" (Gribben 1:344). Although Alan Gribben lists only *Ghosts* as among books Twain owned in *Mark Twain's Library: A Reconstruction*, he notes the Griswold letter, saying that Twain's copies of the complete works have disappeared (1:344). In *The Mark Twain Encyclopedia* article on Ingersoll, Mary Minor Austin states that there is evidence Clara Clemens concealed the fact of her father's ownership of the complete works (396); although I cannot corroborate the late Professor Austin's evidence, the charge is certainly plausible, given Clara's efforts to protect Twain's reputation after his death, and given the controversial standing of Ingersoll in the early twentieth century.

Thomas Schwartz laid the foundation for the freethought connection between Twain and Ingersoll, but I want to build on that foundation by operating on the assumption that by 1900, Mark Twain had Ingersoll's complete

works, and that in his last decade, when he wrote his most vitriolic attacks on religion, he relied heavily on Ingersoll. Several critics have acknowledged Twain's debt to Ingersoll;[2] Gregg Camfield, in *The Oxford Companion to Mark Twain*, asserts that Twain had the Ingersoll Dresden edition and "gleaned many of Ingersoll's ideas for his late works" (294). But I am going further. An examination of Twain's and Ingersoll's writings on orthodox religion will show how deeply indebted Mark Twain was, not only to Robert Ingersoll's ideas, but often to his actual words. Plagiarism is a serious charge, but I believe that the evidence will show that the charge is valid. I present this evidence and leave it readers to decide for themselves. In any case, as critical attention to Mark Twain's late work continues and as examination of his religious views enjoys a much-needed renaissance, the Twain–Ingersoll freethought connection deserves closer scrutiny.

Twain's "Bible Teaching and Religious Practice" was written in 1890 but not published until 1923 in *Europe and Elsewhere*. He attacks Christianity for its support of slavery and for its belief in witches. "In all the ages the Roman Church has owned slaves, bought and sold slaves, authorized and encouraged her children to trade in them," he writes (420). He goes on to excoriate the history of slave trading in England and America, noting that in both countries, the pulpit was a stalwart supporter of the right to hold slaves, joining the procession toward freedom only "at the tail end" (421).

The same with witches, saying that the church, authorized by scripture, "worked hard at it night and day during nine centuries and imprisoned, tortured, hanged, and burned whole hordes and armies of witches, and washed the Christian world clean with their foul blood" (421). But, he continues, "then it was discovered that there was no such thing as witches, and never had been. One does not know whether to laugh or to cry. Who discovered that there was no such thing as a witch—the priest, the parson? No, these never discover anything." As with slavery, "the witch text remains; only the practice has changed" (421–22).

Attacks on the church's role in slavery and witch persecution are a staple of Ingersoll's lectures, with developed arguments on the subjects in "Ghosts" (1877), which we know for a certainty that Twain read—and marked; in *the North American Review* debate with Black, which we know Twain followed with interest; and in several other lectures. From the Ingersoll–Black debate: "But the believer in the inspiration of the Bible is compelled to declare that there was a time when slavery was right—when men could buy, and women could sell, their babies" (6:6).[3] As Twain had done, Ingersoll comments on

the change that has come with the passage of time: "He must maintain that Jehovah is just as bad now as he was four thousand years ago, or that he was just as good then as he is now, but the human conditions have so changed that slavery, polygamy, religious persecutions, and wars of conquest are now perfectly devilish" (6:6). In "Ghosts," Ingersoll makes several points about witchcraft and its biblical sanction: "All the believers in witchcraft confidently appealed to the Bible. Their mouths were filled with passages demonstrating the existence of witches and their power over human beings. By the Bible they proved that innumerable evil spirits were ranging over the world endeavoring to ruin mankind" (1:282–83). He continues a few pages later: "From the malice of those leering and vindictive vampires of the air, the church pretended to defend mankind. Pursued by these phantoms, the frightened multitudes fell upon their faces and implored the aid of robed hypocrisy and sceptered theft" (1:284–85). These passages come from a book that Twain, by his own admission, "devoured."

The blazing words of the aged stranger in Mark Twain's "The War Prayer" (1905) are no doubt familiar to most of his readers:

> God's servant and yours has prayed his prayer. Has he paused, and taken thought? Is it one prayer? No, it is two—one uttered, the other not. Both have reached the ear of Him who heareth all supplications, the spoken and the unspoken. Ponder this—keep it in mind. If you would beseech a blessing upon yourself, beware! lest without intent you invoke a curse upon a neighbor at the same time. If you pray for the blessing of rain upon your crop which needs it, by that act you are possibly praying for a curse upon some neighbor's crop which may not need rain and can be injured by it (654).

He concludes in the next paragraph: "When you have prayed for victory you have prayed for many unmentioned results which follow victory—*must* follow it" (654). Compare Ingersoll's ideas—but also his words, his diction, and his sentence construction, especially the repeated "if" clauses—in a lecture from 1898, "Superstition":

> If we thank him for sunshine and harvest we should also thank him for plague and famine. If we thank him for liberty, the slave should raise his chained hands in worship and thank God that he toils unpaid with the lash upon his naked back. If we thank him for victory we should thank him for defeat.

> Only a few days ago our President, by proclamation, thanked God for giving us the victory at Santiago. He did not thank him for sending the yellow fever. To be consistent the President should have thanked him equally for both (4:324).

Ingersoll's conclusion seems to sum up Twain's overall argument in "The War Prayer": "Man should think; he should use all his senses; he should examine; he should reason" (4:324).

Over the course of his career, Ingersoll constantly attacked the idea of free moral agency and independent opinion, stances that look very similar to Twain's railing against "the moral sense." In "A Lay Sermon" (1886), Ingersoll proposes this idea:

> I want you to remember that everybody is as he *must* be. I want you to get out of your minds the old nonsense of "free moral agency;" and then you will have charity for the whole human race. When you know that they are not responsible for their disposition, any more that for their height; not responsible for their acts, any more than for their dreams; when you finally understand the philosophy that everything exists as the result of an efficient cause, and that the slightest fancy that ever fluttered its painted wings in the horizon of hope was as necessarily produced as the planet that in its orbit wheels about the sun—when you understand this, I believe you will have charity for all mankind—including even yourself (4:212–13).

In "The Gods" (1872), Ingersoll writes, "Man has no ideas, and can have none except those suggested by our surroundings" (1:26). In his famous 1896 lecture "Why I Am an Agnostic," he goes even further: "For the most part we inherit our opinions. We are the heirs of habits and mental customs. Our beliefs, like the fashion of our garments, depend on where we were born. We are moulded by our surroundings. Environment is a sculptor—a painter" (4:5). Twain's condemnations of the "moral sense" and the "damned human race" are so numerous that a listing of them would fill a small book, but several passages from "What Is Man?" (1906) show just how similar his ideas are to Ingersoll's. In his philosophical dialogue between a Young Man and an Old Man, the Old Man talks about human nature in a way that closely resembles Ingersoll's pronouncements: "Whatsoever a man is, is due to his *make*, and to the *influences* brought to bear upon it by his heredities, his habitat, his associations. He is moved, directed, COMMANDED, by *exterior* influences—*solely*. He *originates*

nothing, himself—not even an opinion, not even a thought" (734). When the Young Man asks, "Where did I get my opinion that this which you are talking is all foolishness?" the Old Man replies

> It is a quite natural opinion—but *you* did not create the materials out of which it is formed. They are odds and ends of thoughts, impressions, feelings, gathered unconsciously from a thousand books, a thousand conversations, and from streams of thought and feeling which have flowed down into your heart and brain out of the hearts and brains of ten centuries of ancestors. *Personally* you did not create even the smallest microscopic fragment of the materials out of which your opinion is made (734).

Later, the Old Man comments on the overriding force of training: "All training is one form or another of *outside influence*, and *association* is the largest part of it. A man is never anything but what his outside influences have made him. They train him downwards or they train him upwards—but they *train* him; they are at work upon him all the time" (761). Since Twain's late philosophical writings were published nearly a half century ago, much critical attention has been paid to his growing pessimism and despair, attitudes usually attributed to his financial losses and to the deaths of those close to him; at least some of those attitudes—and his ideas and his phrasing of them—should properly be attributed to his earnest reading of Robert Ingersoll.

In June 1906, Twain devoted four days to explosive autobiographical dictations about God and the Bible, ideas so controversial that, as he wrote to Howells at the time, they "will get my heirs and assigns burnt alive if they venture print this side of 2006 A.D.—which I judge they won't. . .. The edition of A.D. 2006 will make a stir, when it comes out. I shall be hovering around taking notice, along with other dead pals. You are invited" (Smith and Gibson 2:811). On June 19, he begins by noting God's true nature:

> In the Old Testament His acts expose His vindictive, unjust, ungenerous, pitiless and vengeful nature constantly. He is always punishing—punishing trifling misdeeds with thousandfold severity; punishing innocent children for the misdeeds of their rulers; even descending to wreak bloody vengeance upon harmless calves and lambs and sheeps and bullocks, as punishment for inconsequential trespasses committed by their proprietors. It is perhaps the most damnatory biography that exists in print anywhere. It makes Nero an angel of light and leading, by contrast (Baetzhold and McCullough 319).

Again, Ingersoll makes this point repeatedly: in "Some Reasons Why" (1881); in "About the Holy Bible" (1894); in "The Foundations of Faith" (1895); and in "Why I Am an Agnostic" (1896), where he writes:

> He was so saving of mercy, so extravagant in murder, so anxious to kill, so ready to assassinate, that I hated him with all my heart. At his command, babes were butchered, women violated, and the white hair of trembling age stained with blood. This God visited the people with pestilence—filled the houses and covered the streets with the dying and the dead—saw babes starving on the empty breasts of pallid mothers, heard the sobs, saw the tears, the sunken cheeks, the sightless eyes, the new made graves, and remained as pitiless as the pestilence (4:18–19).

The ideas are similar, but so are the tone and even the delivery.

On June 20, Twain comments on all bibles' lack of originality:

> Each borrows from the others, and gives no credit, which is a distinctly immoral act. Each, in turn, confiscates decayed old stage-properties from the others, and with a naive confidence puts them forth as fresh inspirations from on high. We borrow the Golden Rule from Confucius, after it has seen service for centuries, and copyright it without a blush. When we want a Deluge we go away back to hoary Babylon and borrow it, and are as proud of it and as satisfied with it as if it had been worth the trouble. We still revere it and admire it, today, and claim that it came to us direct from the mouth of the Deity; whereas we know that Noah's flood never happened, and couldn't have happened. The flood is a favorite with Bible makers. If there is a Bible—or even a tribe of savages—that lacks a General Deluge it is only because the religious scheme that lacks it hadn't any handy source to borrow it from (Baetzhold and McCullough 322).

In "Some Mistakes of Moses" (1879), as he does elsewhere, Ingersoll notes the commonality of flood stories in various cultures, including Egypt, India, Greece, and American Indians. "At one time," Ingersoll writes, "the Christian pointed to the fact that many nations told of a flood, as evidence of the truth of the Mosaic account; but now, it having been shown that other accounts are much older, and equally reasonable, that argument has ceased to be of any great value" (2:167).

On June 23, Twain again questions the biblical notion of God, specifically the idea that God is moral:

> Do we also know that He is a moral being, according to our standard of morals? No. If we know anything at all about it, we know that He is destitute of morals—at least of the human pattern. Do we know that He is just, charitable, kindly, gentle, merciful, compassionate? No. There is no evidence that He is any of these things—whereas each and every day, as it passes, furnishes us a thousand volumes of evidence, and indeed proof, that he possesses none of these qualities (Baetzhold and McCullough 323).

Ingersoll asks a similar set of questions in one of his last lectures, 1899's "What Is Religion?":

> If this God exists, how do we know that he is good? How can we prove that he is merciful, that he cares for the children of men? If this God exists, he has on many occasions seen millions of his poor children plowing the fields, sowing and planting the grain, and when he saw them he knew that they depended on the expected crop for life, and yet this good God, this merciful being, withheld the rain. He caused the sun to rise, to steal all moisture from the land, but gave no rain. He saw the seeds that man had planted wither and perish, but he sent no rain. He saw them slowly devour the little that they had, and saw them when the days of hunger came—saw them slowly waste away, saw their hungry, sunken eyes, heard their prayers, saw them devour the miserable animals that they had, saw fathers and mothers, insane with hunger, kill and eat their shriveled babies, and yet the heaven above them was as brass and the earth beneath was as iron, and he sent no rain. Can we say in the heart of this God there blossomed the flower of pity? Can we say that he cared for the children of men? Can we say that his mercy endureth forever? (4:484–85).

Considering the likelihood, the near certainty, that Twain had read Ingersoll's complete works by this time, the correspondence is striking, especially the repetition of rhetorical questions.

Twain's most focused and developed ideas about God, the Bible, and religion are found in "Letters from the Earth," written in 1909 but not published until 1962. "Letters from the Earth" also shows the most borrowing from Ingersoll.[4] A comparison of some passages will show just how extensively Twain relied

on Ingersoll, not only for ideas, but in several cases for much more, including passages that are clearly lifted almost directly.

Twain makes this point in the second letter about the composition of heaven:

> The inventor of their heaven empties into it all the nations of the earth, in one common jumble. All are on an equality absolute, no one of them ranking another; they have to be "brothers;" they have to mix together, pray together, harp together, hosannah together—whites, niggers, Jews, everybody—there's no distinction. Here in the earth all nations hate each other, every one of them hates the Jew. Yet every pious person adores that heaven and wants to get into it. He really does. And when he is in a holy rapture he thinks that if he were only there he would take all the populace to his heart, and hug, and hug, and hug! (889).

Ingersoll had made a similar point in 1884's "Orthodoxy," commenting on a revivalist in St. Louis who would not allow blacks and whites to sit together:

> The question was whether in these revivals, when they were trying to rescue souls from eternal torture, they would allow colored people to occupy seats with white people; and that revivalist, preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ, said he would not allow the colored people to sit with white people; they must go to the back of the church. These same Christians tell us that in heaven there will be no distinction. That Christ cares nothing for the color of the skin. That in Paradise white and black will sit together, swap harps, and cry hallelujah in chorus; yet this minister, believing as he says he does, that all men who fail to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ will eternally perish, as not willing that a colored man should sit by a white man and hear the gospel of everlasting peace (2:409).

When Twain wrote "Letters from the Earth" in 1909, he had almost certainly been in possession of Ingersoll's complete works for nine years, and the echoes of Ingersoll's thoughts and even his phrasing seem too close to be coincidental. Twain, not writing for publication, is more graphic than Ingersoll—"whites, niggers, Jews, everybody"—but the harping and praise singing are the same.

In Letter V, in his comments about the contradictions of the biblical creation story, Twain compares astronomical facts about the distance of stars from earth with the Genesis story of them all being created the same day, concluding that, "for three hundred years, now, the Christian astronomer has known that his

Deity *didn't* make the stars in those tremendous six days; but the Christian astronomer does not enlarge upon that detail. Neither does the priest" (892). In "About the Holy Bible" (1894), Ingersoll had made the same point about the conflict between science and religion:

> For centuries the church insisted that the Bible was absolutely true; that it contained no mistakes; that the story of creation was true; that its astronomy and geology were in accord with the facts; that the scientists who differed with the Old Testament were infidels and atheists.
>
> Now this has changed. The educated Christians admit that the writers of the Bible were not inspired as to any science. They now say that God, or Jehovah, did not inspire the writers of his book for the purpose of instructing the world about astronomy, geology, or any science. They now admit that the inspired men who wrote the Old Testament knew nothing about any science, and that they wrote about the earth and stars, the sun and moon, in accordance with the general ignorance of the time.
>
> It required many centuries to force the theologians to this admission. Reluctantly, full of malice and hatred, the priests retired from the field, leaving the victory with science (3:462).

Twain continues his skeptical run through the Old Testament with the story of Adam and Eve, again pointing out the absurdity and contradictions of the story:

> He made a man and a woman and placed them in a pleasant garden, along with the other creatures. They all lived together in harmony and contentment and blooming youth for some time; then trouble came. God had warned the man and the woman that they must not eat of the fruit of a certain tree. And he added a most strange remark: he said that if they ate of it they should surely *die*. Strange, for the reason that inasmuch as they had never seen a sample of death they could not possibly know what he meant ("Letters from the Earth" 893).

Ingersoll had questioned the story in "Orthodoxy":

> Is there an intelligent man or woman now in the world who believes in the Garden of Eden story? If you find any man who believes it, strike his forehead and you will hear an echo. Something is for rent. Does any

> intelligent man now believe that God made man of dust, and woman of a rib, and put them in a garden, and put a tree in the midst of it? Was there not room outside of the garden to put his tree, if he did not want people to eat his apples?
>
> If I did not want a man to eat my fruit, I would not put him in my orchard (2:366).

Both Twain and Ingersoll question the justice of God punishing *all* of Adam and Eve's descendants for *their* sin. Twain comments extensively on God's main punishment:

> Disease! that is the main force, the diligent force, the devastating force! It attacks the infant the moment it is born; it furnishes it one malady after another: croup, measles, mumps, bowel-troubles, teething-pains, scarlet fever, and other childhood specialties. It chases the child into youth and furnishes it some specialties for that time of life. It chases the youth into maturity; maturity into age, and age into the grave (904).

Ingersoll had written on this topic in 1884, again in "Orthodoxy":

> According to this, just as soon as Adam and Eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit, God began to contrive ways by which he could destroy the lives of his children. He invented all the diseases—all the fevers and coughs and colds—all the pains and plagues and pestilences—all the aches and agonies, the malaria and the spores; so that when we take a breath of air we admit into our lungs unseen assassins; and, fearing that some might live too long, even under such circumstances, God invented the earthquake and volcano, the cyclone and lightning, animalcules to infest the heart and brain, so small that no eye can detect—no instrument reach. This was all owing to the disobedience of Adam and Eve (2:368).

Ingersoll continues his list of diseases and agonies for two more pages.

The story of Noah contains even closer correspondence between the two writers. Both comment on the absurdity of God destroying what he had created, an all-knowing creator who created beings that he knew would go bad. Ingersoll especially objects to the destruction of innocent animals. When Twain comments on the absurdity and impossibility of collecting all the pairs of animals, calculating that "of birds and beasts and fresh-water creatures he

had to collect 146,000 kinds; and of insects upwards of 2,000,000,000 species" (899), he was echoing a passage from Ingersoll's "Some Mistakes of Moses":

> Of the birds, Noah took fourteen of each species, according to the 3rd verse of the 7th chapter, "Of fouls also of the air by sevens, the male and the female," making a total of 175,000 birds. . . . There are at least sixteen hundred and fifty-eight kinds of beasts. Let us suppose that twenty-five or them are clean. Of the clean, fourteen of each kind—seven of each sex—were taken. These amount to 350. Of the unclean—two of each kind, amounting to 3,266. There are some six hundred and fifty kinds of reptiles. Two of each kind amount to 1,300. And lastly, there are of insects including the creeping things, at least one million species, so that Noah and his folks had to get of these into the ark about 2,000,000,000 (2:148).

That repetition of "2,000,000,000" strikes me as a bit more than coincidence, although I suppose they could have independently taken the number from the same book. I propose a more likely book that Twain took his number from: Ingersoll's.

They compare the Old and New Testaments, and both come down harder on the supposedly more benevolent New Testament for its introduction of hell and eternal punishment. Both call the Bible a bad influence on the young, Twain specifically pointing out that all young Christian children learn masturbation from the Bible (924), Ingersoll demurring to be specific about the filth of the Good Book, saying, "I do not even wish to call the attention of my readers to these things, except in a general way" ("Some Mistakes of Moses" 2:176).

Twain seems to have drawn from Ingersoll in several other passages, but one long passage from the end of "Letters from the Earth" provides the best evidence of his borrowing and the clearest case of outright plagiarism. Twain quotes at length from the thirty-first chapter of the Book of Numbers, the story of the children of Israel's vengeance on the Midianites, when God commanded them to kill all the males, capture all the women and children, kill all the male children and "every woman that hath known man by lying with him. . . . But all the women–children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves" (921). Twain comments on the unfairness of God's decrees, but focuses on this last group:

> The heaviest punishment of all was meted out to persons who could not by any possibility have deserved so horrible a fate—the 32,000 virgins.

> Their naked privacies were probed, to make sure that they still possessed the hymen unruptured; after this humiliation they were sent away from the land that had been their home, to be sold into slavery; the worst of slaveries and the shamefulest, the slavery of prostitution; bed-slavery, to excite lust, and satisfy it with their bodies; slavery to any buyer, be he gentleman or be he coarse and filthy ruffian (925–26).

Turning to Ingersoll, in "Some Mistakes of Moses," published in 1879, we find this passage:

> If the Bible be true, God commanded his chosen people to destroy men simply for the crime of defending their native land. They were not allowed to spare trembling and white-haired age, nor dimpled babes clasped in the mother's arms. They were ordered to kill women, and to pierce, with the sword of war, the unborn child. "Our Heavenly Father" commanded the Hebrews to kill the men and women, the fathers, sons and brothers, but to preserve the girls alive. Why were not the maidens also killed? Why were they spared? Read the thirty-first chapter of Numbers, and you will find that the maidens were given to the soldiers and the priests. Is there, in all the history of war, a more infamous thing than this. Is it possible that God permitted the violets of modesty, that grow and shed their perfume in the maiden's heart, to be trampled beneath the brutal feet of lust? If this was the order of God, what, under the same circumstances, would have been the command of the devil? When, in this age of the world, a woman, a wife, a mother, reads this record, she should, with scorn and loathing, throw the book away. A general, who now should make such an order, giving over to massacre and rapine a conquered people, would be held in execration by the whole civilized world. Yet, if the Bible be true, the supreme and infinite God was once a savage (2:253–54).

There—Twain quoting from the same Bible chapter as Ingersoll, drawing the same conclusion, focusing on the same horrible detail. That parallel is a clear-cut case of plagiarism, but if the reader wants to think it was mere coincidence that they both chose the same chapter of the Bible independently, consider the modern parallels that follow in both men's writing. Twain concludes by looking for a parallel in human history and finds it in a recent event: an 1862 massacre by Indians in Minnesota. Twain asks us to "consider this incident":

> Twelve Indians broke into a farm house at daybreak and captured the family. It consisted of the farmer and his wife and four daughters, the youngest aged fourteen and the eldest eighteen. They crucified the parents; that is to say, they stood them stark naked against the wall of the living room and nailed their hands to the wall. Then they stripped the daughters bare, stretched them upon the floor in front of their parents, and repeatedly ravished them. Finally they crucified the girls against the wall opposite their parents, and cut off their noses and their breasts. They also—but I will not go into that. There is a limit. There are indignities so atrocious that the pen cannot write them. One member of that poor crucified family—the father—was still alive when help came two days later.
>
> Now you have *one* incident of the Minnesota massacre. I could give you fifty. They would cover all the different kinds of cruelty the brutal human talent has ever invented (926–27).

Here is the parallel Ingersoll drew between the biblical massacre and a recent one:

> A little while ago, out upon the western plains, in a little path leading to a cabin, were found the bodies of two children and their mother. Her breast was filled with wounds received in the defence of her darlings. They had been murdered by the savages. Suppose when looking at their lifeless forms, some one had said, "This was done by the command of God!" In Canaan there were countless scenes like this. There was no pity in inspired war. God raised the black flag, and commanded his soldiers to kill even the smiling infant in its mother's arms. Who is the blasphemer; the man who denies the existence of God, or he who covers the robes of the Infinite with innocent blood? ("Some Mistakes of Moses" 2:254).

Perhaps Mark Twain could have singled out the story of the Midianites without heaving read Ingersoll on the same Bible story, but drawing a subsequent parallel to Indian savagery surely lies beyond the realm of coincidence. It is, as Twain would say, a sockdolager.

In Mark Twain's defense, several arguments should be made. Ingersoll himself was influenced by other writers, and both he and Twain were greatly influenced by their reading of Thomas Paine.[5] Also, before Twain had ever heard of Ingersoll, he had already begun to develop his skeptical ideas about the Bible and orthodox Christianity. He wrote a long letter to his fiancée,

Olivia Langdon, just before their marriage in 1870, outlining his doubts about the biblical account of creation in light of new discoveries in astronomy and geology (*Mark Twain's Letters, Volume 4* 11–13), and later that year, two years before Ingersoll wrote "The Gods," Twain wrote an unpublished piece, "God of the Bible vs. God of the Present Day," in which he presents in miniature many of his arguments in "Letters from the Earth" and the autobiographical dictations: the biblical god's pettiness, cruelty, unfairness, and vindictiveness, and his ignorance of astronomy, geology, and of science in general. He also cites the absurdities of the Adam and Eve and Noah stories (Baetzhold and McCullough 313–17). In a sense, his late ideas were already present, and it might be argued that he and Ingersoll were merely developing the same lines of thought. Such an argument, though, would have to overlook much evidence that suggests not only influence of ideas but also heavy borrowing of those ideas, including phrasing.

Another argument about the late writings is often made in Twain's defense: that he was protecting his "brand," his name, and that many of the late skeptical writings remained intentionally unpublished for that purpose. His brand was his livelihood, and his heretical writings would damage him financially as well as personally. And at this late stage of his life, he was also thinking about his heirs, especially his youngest daughter, Jean, hoping that royalties from his works would continue to provide an income for her after his death.[6] For a number of reasons, he chose to conceal the depth of his skepticism.

Yet before him lay the example of Robert Ingersoll, who revealed his skepticism in public for over a quarter of a century, on the lecture platform, in books, in magazines, and in newspapers. Ingersoll was vilified, yes, but he was also recognized as the greatest orator of his age, drawing huge crowds all over the country to his lectures (managed by James Redpath, Twain's manager for a time), earning up to $7,000 per appearance (Larson 129). Twain recognized his own hypocrisy and admitted (privately) of man's lack of culpability for his actions in an autobiographical dictation of June 25, 1906: "We all know perfectly well—though we all conceal it, just as I am doing, until I shall be dead, and out of reach of public opinion—we all know, I say, that God, and God alone, is responsible for every act and word of a human being's life between cradle and grave" (Baetzhold and McCullough 330–31). Compare that to Ingersoll's words from 1877 in "The Liberty of Man, Woman, and Child":

> I have made up my mind to say my say. I shall do it kindly, distinctly; but I am going to do it. I know there are thousands of men who substantially

> agree with me, but who are not in a condition to express their thoughts. They are poor; they are in business; and they know that should they tell their honest thought, persons will refuse to patronize them—to trade with them; they wish to get bread for their little children; they wish to take care of their wives; they wish to have homes and the comforts of life. Every such person is a certificate of the meanness of the community in which he resides. And yet I do not blame these people for not expressing their thought. I say to them: "Keep your ideas to yourselves; feed and clothe the ones you love; I will do your talking for you. The church can not touch, can not crush, can not starve, cannot stop or stay me; I will express your thoughts" (1:354–55).

I think it highly likely that Mark Twain had read those words, and that he had the evidence of Robert Ingersoll's resolve before him as a silent rebuke to his own lack of intellectual courage—a harsh claim, to be sure, but I think a just one, given the extent of Twain's borrowing from Ingersoll and his unwillingness to emulate Ingersoll's public pronouncements.

Twain often acknowledged that he "borrowed," that all writers do, but it seems clear to me that his use of Ingersoll goes way beyond mere borrowing. If we did it, if our students did it, we would call it what it is: plagiarism. I recall vividly the wicked thrill I got when I first read "Letters from the Earth" as an undergraduate; had I known then that Mark Twain was stealing these ideas, indeed many of these very words, from a contemporary writer and thinker, my opinion of him would surely have been lessened. If my accusations are accurate, we need to engage in a revision of critical opinion of "Letters from the Earth," as well as many other late writings.

In effect, Mark Twain intended to hide his late works for one hundred years, or longer, purportedly to protect his name, his image. But perhaps he also delayed publication to obscure his deep debt to Robert Ingersoll. Had he published, for example, "Letters from the Earth" in the first decade of the twentieth century, *many* people would have immediately recognized the extent of his borrowing from Ingersoll.[7] I am not suggesting he made a bet that, one hundred years later, he would be remembered and celebrated and that Robert Ingersoll would be largely forgotten. But that is the way it has worked out. Perhaps someone will find Twain's copies of Ingersoll's complete works, which would prove the case I am arguing. But I believe the proof is already evident.

Over forty years ago, in *Mark Twain and the Bible*, Allison Ensor wrote these prescient words: "Obviously something drastic happened in Twain's thinking about Christ between 1878 and the attacks of 1906 and 1909

which we have reviewed" (89). That "something drastic" certainly includes Twain's reading of Ingersoll, beginning in 1879, and lasting until Twain's death. Ensor's 1969 book paved the way for an overdue reexamination of Twain's religion and spirituality in a number of recent books.[8] The argument continues, but regardless of how we label Mark Twain's religious attitudes, he was clearly a freethinker, although the freedom of his thought comes with a price: a large and unacknowledged debt to Robert Ingersoll, the most noted freethinker of his—and Mark Twain's—time. Robert Ingersoll deserves overdue payment through fuller scholarly recognition of his great influence on Mark Twain's late writings. Much has been written about the influence on Twain's ideas by William Lecky, Hippolyte Taine, and Thomas Paine. To that list must be added another name: Robert Green Ingersoll. "My reverence for him was deep and genuine; I prized his affection for me and returned it with usury," Twain wrote to Ingersoll's niece after the death of "The Great Agnostic" (Paine 2:682). Perhaps in that use of the word "usury" we get a sense of just how much Mark Twain recognized that he owed—and never fully paid—his departed friend.

Notes

1. For overviews of Ingersoll's life and work, see Anderson, *Robert Ingersoll*; C. H. Cramer, *Royal Bob: The Life of Robert G. Ingersoll*; and Larson, *American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll*.

2. Budd, *Mark Twain: Social Philosopher* 100–101, 173; Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible* 99; Cummings, *Mark Twain and Science: Adventures of a Mind* 32; Austin, "Ingersoll, Robert Green" 395–96; and Bush, *Mark Twain and the Spiritual Crisis of His Age* 172.

3. Ingersoll's lectures are available online by title at http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/robert_ingersoll.

4. Mary Minor Austin notes several specific parallels between "Letters from the Earth" and Ingersoll's works. See Austin, "Ingersoll, Robert Green" 396.

5. For a discussion of Paine's influence on Twain's religious skepticism, see Britton, "Paine, Thomas" 562–63. For an overview of Paine's influence on Ingersoll, see Larson, *American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll* 106–7.

6. For a discussion of Twain's relationship with and hopes for his daughter Jean, see the final chapters of Lystra, *Dangerous Intimacy: The Untold Story of Mark Twain's Final Years*.

7. For example, H. L. Mencken notes that "much of 'What Is Man?' you will find in the forgotten harangues of Ingersoll." See Mencken, "Mark Twain" 149. Mencken knew of the existence of "Letters from the Earth" and other unpublished writings but was not able to read them.

8. See Cummings, *Mark Twain and Science: Adventures of a Mind*; Phipps, *Mark Twain's Religion*; Fulton, *The Reverend Mark Twain: Theological Burlesque, Form, and Content*; Bush, *Mark Twain and the Spiritual Crisis of His Age*; and Berkove and Csicila, *Heretical Fictions: Religion in the Literature of Mark Twain*.

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