

The Atheism, Agnosticism and Criticism of Religion of Robert Ingersoll in the Context of the Czech Freethinking Movement

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ABSTRACT

In the American society in the 19th century, still prevalingly Christian, proclamations of faithlessness and calls for a purely scientific worldview occasionally appeared. Religion was perceived as an obstacle to efforts toward scientific materialism. A leading representative and popularizer of such an attitude was the American humanist, thinker, orator and lawyer Robert Green Ingersoll, whose works have been translated into many languages, including Czech. Ingersoll became a very popular figure, inspiring freethought circles both in the United States and in Europe. As a keen critic of religion, he ranked among the key American advocates for free thought, humanism, and the propagation of scientific knowledge. The paper discusses his specific form of faithlessness (agnosticism rather than atheism) and introduces a typology categorizing strategies of his criticism of the religious worldview in the context of Czech intellectual and freethinking movement of the first third of the 20th century.

KEYWORDS

Robert Green Ingersoll, Freethinking, Atheism, Agnosticism, Czech Freethought Society, *Volna myslenska*

Robert Green Ingersoll (1833–1899) ranks among the most important advocates of faithlessness¹ in the 19th century United States. According to Tim Page, Robert Ingersoll is “one of the great lost totemic figures in American history, and it is time that he was brought back into our collective memory. After Ralph Waldo Emerson, he may have been the busiest and most controversial lecturer of the nineteenth century, attracting many thousands of listeners across the country [...]”²

Susan Jacoby considers Ingersoll an agnostic and freethinker.³ Nevertheless, she suspects that “Ingersoll’s nineteenth-century designation as the Great Agnostic – not Great Atheist – is the real reason why so many prominent twenty first century atheists have placed scant emphasis on his role in American history. A neutral descriptive term in Europe today, *atheist* remains a pejorative to many religious Americans.”⁴ In this study, his influence on the European cultural environment, namely in the Czech lands, will be traced.

In the 19th century United States, Ingersoll was well known. He influenced public opinion in particular as an excellent and sought-after orator. His public lectures focusing on criticism of religion were so popular that he supposedly earned more money than the American President. Ingersoll propagated free society, science, and progress. His accessible style of religious criticism inspired not only Americans, but new immigrants as well, including those arriving from the

1 Ingersoll’s intellectual role models included especially Voltaire, Jeremy Bentham, and Ernst Haeckel, but also Darwin, Lamarck, and Humboldt.

2 Tim Page, *What’s God Got to Do with It?: Robert Ingersoll on Free Thought, Honest Talk and the Separation of Church and State* (Hannover: New Hampshire, 2005), 1–2.

3 See monograph on Ingersoll: Susan Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 11.

4 Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic*, 193.

Czech lands of the then Austro-Hungarian Empire. As a result, at the time Ingersoll's work was translated into Czech for several decades. Therefore, we can assume that Ingersoll's legacy took root in the Czech freethought movement and his instruments of the criticism of religion were employed by Czech freethinking intellectuals within their cultural environment. Thus this paper analyzes the phenomenon of freethinking and points out similarities between Ingersoll's work and Czech Freethought.

Based on evidence in the census as well as the period's popular and scholarly literature, both in the United States and the Czech lands (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy) faithlessness was rather exceptional in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. In the Czech cultural milieu, faithlessness or even atheism, if discussed at all, was addressed as part of theological critique, i.e. by theologians attempting to analyze the phenomenon which was for them a completely unacceptable. They attempted to critically assess faithlessness and to look for its possible hidden causes. Faithlessness and atheism were often a lifestyle or the attitude of individuals setting themselves against traditional values and cultural patterns of thought. Thus to reflect on the phenomenon theoretically was far more pressing for theologians and philosophers than for the atheists themselves. Paradoxically then, it was theologians and philosophers who created the specific discursive language and arguments employed for apologetic purposes, rather than atheist thinkers. However, many of the theologians failed to differentiate between atheism, agnosticism, anticlericalism, and faithlessness. Even individuals who merely refused to comply with the Church hierarchy, criticized the situation within the Church, opposed political Catholicism or simply voiced their doubts concerning faith in God, were labeled atheists.

Within the discourse of the anti-atheist struggle, faithlessness was viewed as a consequence of moral decline, intellectual skepticism and the spiritual weakness of an individual. Within Czech 19th century theology, harsh assaults against Voltaire,⁵ Ernest Renan⁶ and Ludwig Feuerbach were common. In the Czech and German environment, Robert Ingersoll was a well-known critic of religion (his writings thundering especially against Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism, less against rather uncommon religions in the United States of his time);⁷ nevertheless, he is rarely mentioned in the period's Christian theology and philosophy. This is quite surprising, especially considering the fact that Ingersoll's criticism of faith and religion is clear, straightforward, simple, understandable and somewhat vehement, similar to the style of Voltaire, Ingersoll's exemplary model. All this should have made the spread of Ingersoll's ideas more alarming for theologians than for example far the more intricate philosophy of Feuerbach.

The Idea and Ideals of the Freethinking Movement

The first freethought society in Europe was founded in 1854 in Brussels, and in the 1860s and 1870s more followed, especially in Germany and France. In 1880, the international society *Fédération*

5 See for example Eugen Kadeřávek.

6 Arnošt Hello, *Německo a ateismus devatenáctého století*, trans. J. Florian (Stará říše na Moravě: Vlastním nákladem, 1908).

7 Page, *What's God Got to Do with It?*, 10.

*internationale de la libre pensée*⁸ was established, an umbrella organization encompassing many national free and atheist societies associating wide variety of tendencies and attitudes of its constituting members.

Czech freethinkers publicly claimed associations with international Free Thought, but they felt an independent part of the movement. Ideologically, they followed in the footsteps of the French enlightenment as well as English deism. Freethought as an organized movement began to systematically operate in the Czech lands and at the beginning of the 20th century resulted in the 1904 founding in Prague of the society *Spolek Augustin Smetana* (later renamed as Freethought, *Volná myšlenka*). The organization was conceived particularly in opposition to the majority political Catholicism and was rooted in the liberalism of the revolutionary year 1848 and in the thought of Karel Havlíček Borovský. One statute of the Czech Freethought Society in the 1921 states that “as an international movement, the society defends the idea of human freedom in religious, political, economic, social, cultural, and any other contexts. Simply, it defends the freedom of human conscience.”⁹ Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the freethought society was apolitical, standing apart from (or above) political parties, ideologically varied, or, in the words of Karel Havlíček Borovský, a kind of apolitical politics.

The movement considered substituting its own ideas for the social role of what they saw as outdated religions as one of its main tasks in modern society, however it did not proclaim any dogmatic teaching. The effort was more toward a way of more independent thinking.¹⁰ It criticized prejudices and superstitions and openly adhered to the scientific form of knowledge and understanding of truth. Apart from the theoretical and rationalistic objectives, the movement also aimed at having a practical impact of their ideas on individuals. It thus refuted the concept of double truth commonly held in modern science and philosophy, through which the personal lives of many scientists are ruled by Christian teaching and morals, while their professional lives are guided by scientific principles. Freethinkers wanted to overcome this duality and create harmony in life, thus it also developed the concept of laic or natural morality, applicable not only to ethics but to social justice and even to the arts as well. The aim to harmonize the life of the individual and society is closely connected with efforts to overcome the ontological dualism of “body and soul” and to stress physical health and hygiene.

Freethought rejected any form of domination over the individual, be it clericalism, absolutism, monarchism or capitalism; it supported in particular minimalizing the overall supremacy of the Church at all levels of social life. Religion was to be considered a personal affair and should not be privileged by the state in any way, including legally or economically. Church holidays were then to be abolished as state holidays, and Church property should be nationalized, as it was seen as a kind of public property anyway. Thus every freethinker and Czech patriot should take an appropriate stand against Rome (the symbol of the Catholic Church power) as well as towards the Czech reformer Jan Hus and the ideas of the Hussite and the Czech Brethren movements, as these philosophies were leading the Czech nation in its struggle for freedom of conscience. Jan Hus was

8 The founders included for example Bennett, H. Spencer, Moleschott, Renouvier, V. Liebknecht and C. Depaepe.

9 *Volná myšlenka československá – historie, zásady a cíle – stanovy spolku* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1921), 3.

10 *Volná myšlenka*, 7.

seen not only as a national symbol of resistance to Church despotism, but as an example of an independently thinking person. The way to preserve Hus's legacy in modern society was to privilege democracy, republicanism, and the principles of social justice.¹¹ The members of the Freethought movement saw themselves as representing this legacy, with the President of Czechoslovakia Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk as their leader.¹²

For the Czech avant-garde, a movement at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries advocating free thinking and severing the traditional connection to the German intellectual milieu, the influence of French, English, and American freethinking became influential, with its impact growing since the second half of the 19th century. Among the thinkers influencing Czech Freethought were Jean Maria Guyau, Georges Matisse, Jean Finot, Émile Durkheim, Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, and Robert Ingersoll. Before proceeding to a detailed analysis of Ingersoll's influence, we shall briefly outline the forms and the range of impact of German and French thinkers to provide a context regarding the international dimension of the freethinking movement.

Among the German thinkers published by the Czech Freethought Society, Friedrich Nietzsche must be emphasized. His treatise¹³ translated into Czech as *Náboženský život* [Religious Life] was published in 1912. In this work, Nietzsche analyses philosophically and psychologically the concepts of religious truth, the rise of religious cults as well as various aspects of Christianity.

The work of the French philosopher Jean-Maria Guyau was known to Czech intellectuals, as his *Irréligion de l'avenir* (1886) was translated¹⁴ in 1926. Deeply aware of what he saw as a decay in worldview and of values, Guyau described the social situation of the 19th century as critical.¹⁵ He assumed that the society was headed towards a non-religious period in which the only light for the modern man would be reason, even if according to Guyau man's capacity for rationality was overestimated. Presupposing the forthcoming extinction of religion, he at the same time stresses that this does not mean the automatic disappearance of the metaphysical needs of humans. Thus the 19th century can be seen as a period when traditional historical forms of spirituality begin to be publicly refuted, while new ones, more progressive and seemingly attuned to the needs of modern man, were being sought.

Similar ideas were expressed by Georges Matisse, whose work was made available to Czech intellectuals in a compilation titled *Shroucení představy boha* [The Fall of the Idea of God], published by the Freethought in 1922. Matisse points out not only the growing religious indifference, resistance to religious authority and spread of atheism even among renowned religious scholars, but highlights that fact that religious feelings were being transformed into the socialist concept of the state and to patriotism. We can note that these ideas were developed in the Czech context in connection to the French school of sociology of *Émile Durkheim* by the former Catholic priest and later freethinker Ladislav Kunte, who saw the solution to the period's religious crisis in nationalism

11 *Volná myšlenka*, 11–18.

12 Lubomír Milde, *Hus v naší době* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1926), 31.

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Náboženský život*, trans. Zdenka Hostinská (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1912), title of the original unacknowledged.

14 Jean-Maria Guyau, *Zánik náboženství* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1926).

15 Jean-Marie Guyau rejected the projection of subjective images out of this world, i.e. his view was that heaven must be sought in the human soul, providence in science, and goodness at the core base of life itself. Guyau, *Zánik náboženství*, 74.

and the socialist concept of the state. However, Matisse did not speak of immediately substituting religion, but assumed that social progress would develop in opposition to religion and that “atheism, or faithlessness is an undeniable sign of the genius of modern Europe.”¹⁶

The ideas of Jean Finot were also inspiring for Czech freethinkers. His work *La Science du bonheur* (1909), which had been awarded by the French Academy, was translated in 1925.¹⁷ Probably influenced by Nietzsche, Finot criticizes man’s unhappiness and helplessness, a condition which he sees as a result of racial, religious and economic prejudices. Finot highlights the human desire for life and for a secularly understood happiness, one which, however, he does not see in hedonistic terms. His primary aim is to diagnose the causes of the state of helplessness, despair and pessimism, states he regarded as unfortunate legacy of not only Christianity but other religious systems as well.¹⁸ Finot advocated anthropological optimism, based on the principles of solidarity, altruism, and moral self-improvement, stressing the importance of social progress, science and work.

Besides the German and French inspiration, influences from the English-speaking world were equally significant. Among these was the brief but complex essay by philosopher Bertrand Russell *Why I Am Not a Christian* (London: Watts, 1927), translated into Czech in 1928,¹⁹ where Russell provides insights to two issues: his personal non-belief in God and the immortality of soul, and to why he does not consider Jesus to be the wisest and the best of all people.²⁰ For Czech freethought, the essay was important mainly because it declared freedom of thought and the belief in the capabilities of reason, as well as the need to free oneself from the slavish succumbing to fear derived from the Oriental despotic image of god, a projection that was preventing such efforts toward freedom.²¹ The aim of publishing the essay in Czech was to counter a new wave of the uncritical overestimation of Christianity within Czech society in the second half of the 1920s. Similarly to Russell’s ideas as expressed in his book, Robert Ingersoll believed that Christianity is not unique and original but is a derivation of older religions and pagan legacies. He considers of the figure of Jesus in this light.²²

Several years later in 1935, the Czech Freethought Society published another book by Bertrand Russell *Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?* (published in English by Watts&Co. in 1930 together with the earlier essay as a continuation of the arguments therein). Compared to former essay, it differs in the scope of its criticism, as it does not focus merely on Christianity but aims at religion in general.²³ Russell considers religion as a social phenomenon born out of fear and according to Russell its benefit for civilization is minimal.

Many of the works translated and/or mediated by the Czech Freethought Society were of a promotional, critical and vehement character, as they were aimed at addressing the masses

16 Georges Matisse, *Shroucení představy boha* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1922), 5–8, 70–71.

17 Jean Finot, *Štěstí v nás*, trans. Otakar Kunstovný (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1925).

18 Finot, *Štěstí v nás*, 51.

19 Bertrand Russell, *Proč nejsem křesťanem* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1928).

20 Russell, *Proč nejsem křesťanem*, 6–7.

21 It is interesting to note that Russell’s book was surprisingly reprinted once more during the period of vigorous Communist indoctrination in 1956 regardless of the fact that (for Communists) Russell was a bourgeois philosopher and a pacifist.

22 Robert Ingersoll, *O pověrách a zázracích*, 2nd ed. (Považská Bystrica: Juraj Masár-AMA, 2003), 24–28.

23 Bertrand Russell, *Prospělo náboženství civilizaci* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1935), 5.

and were to serve as instruments of struggle against superstitions and religion. Such was also the overall character of the work of American Robert Green Ingersoll, a sharp critic of religion. He was educated and well informed, but his work could at the same time be seen as somewhat plebeian, accessible to the common man. Between the years 1883 and 1933, seven of his books were published in Czech, probably initiated by Czech freethinkers living in the U.S.A. The poet and journalist Václav Šnajdr, a respected freethinker and a radical critic of religion living since 1869 in US translated Ingersoll's selected papers²⁴ into Czech. Obviously, the Czech Freethought Society cooperated closely with freethinkers in France and Germany as well as with Czech-American ones.

Drawing on Jeremy Bentham, Ingersoll believed that the only thing worthy of striving for is happiness, the sole aim of human existence and the purpose of human action.²⁵ However, he does not perceive a happy life in a hedonistic sense as based on satisfying physical needs, but as a "good and just way of life in the highest and the noblest sense."²⁶ Happiness according to Ingersoll stems from knowledge and at the same time it is a wise attitude as well as a reward for a truly good and healthy life. Ingersoll contrasts his natural concept of happiness with the Christian supernatural view, which had been considered superior to secular contentment.

Ingersoll was among the few American intellectuals of the 19th century to openly and sharply criticize religion, superstitions and the belief in miracles. His lectures concerning these topics attracted wide attention despite the fact that during the 19th century many new religious movements had come into existence in the U.S.A.

It must be noted, however, that Ingersoll's aim was not to find a religious core or even a rational religion. He believed in the efficacy of his criticism of religion and anti-religious propaganda.

Ingersoll critiqued religion for many reasons, especially because according to him religion did not make a man better, it enslaved him and divided society rather than united it. Ingersoll adheres personally to the great propagators of science and believed in its almost redeeming role. He considered the struggle for the freedom of thought as crucial, together with secular schooling and a secular form of civilization. In the social sphere, he stressed the need to help the socially disadvantaged and believed that labor in particular is proper, with reasonable work being even the noblest form of prayer.

Although he preferred to be called agnostic rather than atheist²⁷ (he claimed that no one could know whether God exists or not), philosophically he formulated four cornerstones of his faithlessness. Ingersoll's initial thesis is formed by the propositions that the universe is natural, that nature has no ultimate telos and is guided by necessity. The first cornerstone of his faithlessness rests on the claim that matter is indestructible, the second that power is imperishable, the third that matter and power cannot exist separately, and the fourth on the claim that something which cannot be destroyed cannot be created at the same time.

For Czech freethinkers, however, formulating their own atheist position in such a systematic manner was not essential. Ingersoll himself was in this respect rather cautious, too, and offered

24 Václav Šnajdr, *Jak smýšlel Robert G. Ingersoll* (Cleveland: Dennice Novověku, 1904).

25 Ingersoll, *O pověrách a zázracích*, 14.

26 Robert Ingersoll, *Mythus a zázrak* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1928), 3.

27 Page, *What's God Got to Do with It?*, 3.

only a basic philosophical outline of his position. Generally, Ingersoll and the Czech Freethought society defended science, and from a scientific point of view refuted theism, modern deist thinking, pantheism, and even atheism. Their rationalistic and scientific critique therefore aimed at all interpretations of reality which were not scientifically verifiable. The sharp criticism of religion and various forms of religiosity by freethinkers gradually diminished and gave way to the accentuation of the notions of a free society. Although a rationalistic critique of religion always had a firm place in freethought, the tendency toward the study of religious or spiritual manifestations from a scientific point of view increased. The opinion that irrational behavior can be explained rationally (i.e. scientifically) was, then, for them not exceptional.

Clericalism as the Greatest Enemy of Free Thinking

In his brief introduction to the Czech translation of Ingersoll's treatise on myth and miracles, Lubomír Milde stresses that freedom of conscience and freedom of thought were Ingersoll's highest ideals, a position which ranks Ingersoll among the most important figures of free thinking. In fact, Milde calls Ingersoll "the classic of free thought," even mentioning that after Ingersoll's death American clericals attempted to spread what Milde calls purposeful misinformation about Ingersoll's deathbed conversion to Christianity and ultimate confession to a Roman Catholic priest, and his regret for actions against the religion. Nevertheless, three women known to have been present at Ingersoll's deathbed denied the information and confirmed the contrary, i.e. that Ingersoll remained faithful to his ideas until the end.²⁸ There are probably several reasons why Milde included this into his introduction of Ingersoll's book. Most importantly, Milde wanted to refute any doubts on this matter and in a way cleanse Ingersoll's legacy of this false accusation, but he also intended to point out the deception of Catholicism, the institutions of which continued to attempt to have total control and dominance over every phase of an individual's life. The ubiquitous presence of the Church therefore fundamentally undermines freedom of thought and independent choice-making of an individual, both on the level of common issues and fundamental ones.

The core belief of the Freethought movement was the idea that free thinking could not be achieved without the significant diminishment of the overall social influence of the Catholicism. Thus the movement's anticlerical position (targeted especially against the Roman Church) was typical for freethinkers, and consistent with that of Ingersoll. Both parties also shared focus on the Enlightenment's concept of natural religion, an emphasis later replaced by a focus on the extinction or abolition of religion. Ingersoll even speaks of the clergy as enemies of human freedom, research, and science, thus they have filled the world with hatred, fear and bigotry. Some of his statements are rather harsh. Rudolf Kopecký, a freethinker, clearly proclaimed in the mid-1920s that Freethought was against any religion and every form of church institution. Freethought opposed especially the Catholic Church, which was seen as the gravest danger for cultural development of humankind, for political freedom, democratic state and social justice.²⁹ Thus anticlericalism³⁰ ranked among

28 Lubomír Milde, "Robert G. Ingersoll," in *Mythus a zážrak* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1928), 2.

29 Rudolf Kopecký, *Ideový základ Volné myšlenky* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1926), 34–35.

30 Robert Ingersoll, *Antiklerikální epištoły* (Brno: Opletal, 1902), 27–30.

the central concepts of freethought which predetermined free thinkers toward public engagement and reform. They in fact believed that an “anticlerical stand is a necessary higher stage of thought development.”³¹ Similarly to Ingersoll, who supported the complete separation of church and state,³² freethinkers advocated non-confession, separation of state and church, as well as the secularization of private and public lives as necessary and logical steps toward progress.³³ For these reasons, the Freethought Society encountered difficulties in attempting to be established officially. The Austro-Hungarian state authorities created many obstacles to this process, e.g. members were under constant police surveillance and often dragged into court. During World War I, the Czech Freethought Society’s activity was forbidden and its key representatives imprisoned or otherwise interned. The society resumed its operation after WWI thanks to the democratic system of the newly founded Czechoslovakia, when the Freethought Society began its publication activities.³⁴

Nevertheless, we must stress that this anticlerical stand did not automatically indicate the complete avocation of faithlessness, atheism or even religious indifference. For example Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, a key figure of the intellectual life in Czechoslovakia, was convinced that despite the period’s religious skepticism and crisis, atheism proper was a very rare phenomenon.³⁵

The Freethought Society was originally named after former priest and Hegelian philosopher Augustin Smetana (1814–1851). Joining the revolution of 1848, Smetana became a symbol of opposition to the Catholic Church and its dominant position in society when he demonstrated his resistance by leaving the Order of the Cross and the Church in 1850. He was excommunicated soon afterwards. Smetana was an important figure despite the opinion of František Krejčí, an advocate of Czech positivism and a member of the Freethought Society, that Smetana was “an eager pantheist”³⁶ and his work was merely “a fanciful evolutionary metaphysics.”³⁷ This, however, well illustrates the fact that atheism was not fundamental for Czech freethought; rather atheists made up just one part of the alliance of resistance to the Catholic Church and to clericalism, an opposition often expressed in sharp, derisive criticism. Although not part of the statute originally, after a while only people who did not partake in the confession of sins in the Church could become members of the Freethought society.³⁸ This was probably the reason why some Catholic theologians later claimed that after WWI anti-Catholic propaganda connected the Freethought society with Czech Protestants.³⁹ Based on their historical experience, Czech Protestants were very pleased with the political changes after WWI with the fall of the Habsburg Catholic Austro-Hungarian Empire. In early Czechoslovakia, Catholicism was seen as reactionary, while Protestantism as progressive, succeeding Catholicism as the dominant moral and cultural type.

31 Theodor Bartošek, *Moderní společnost a církev* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1907), 7.

32 Ingersoll, *Mythus a zázrak*, 12.

33 Bartošek, *Moderní společnost a církev*, 61.

34 *Volná myšlenka československá – historie, zásady a cíle – stanovy spolku* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1921), 5–6.

35 Tomáš G. Masaryk, *V boji o náboženství* (1904, Prague: Čin, 1947), 32.

36 František Krejčí, *O filosofii přítomnosti* (Prague: Jan Laichter, 1904), 448.

37 Josef Král, *Československá filosofie* (Prague: Melantrich, 1937), 32–33.

38 This rule was applied in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, although not in Slovakia.

39 Josef Kubalík, *Křesťanské církve v naší vlasti* (Prague: Česká katolická charita, 1983), 87.

According to Antonín Kudláč, anti-Catholicism connected the Freethought society with monists as well as with social democrats and anarchists regardless of all their ideological differences.⁴⁰ Among the main aims of the society of freethinkers was creating conditions for freedom of thought, the support and protection of free research, freedom of conscience in personal as well as in social life, as well as the cultivation of a sense of solidarity among its members. The practical means to achieve these goals included publishing books, magazines and leaflets, founding public libraries and reading rooms, individually subscribing to books, magazines and journals, organizing meetings, public lectures, educational courses, as well as convening demonstrations, petitioning, submitting proposals to legal bodies and other authorities, along with offering legal advice and protection as well as financial support to members in need.⁴¹ To these ends, a social care division was established. On the whole, though, the society was a heterogeneous, diverse platform which did not strive toward a single worldview or position. Thus, as Gollova concludes, “since its very beginning, the Freethought’s ideological ambiguity, diversity of its membership and its single-minded orientation on the struggle against the Roman Catholic Church carried the seeds of split.”⁴²

The Free School as a Prerequisite for a Free Democratic Society

Freethinkers saw themselves as a movement consisting of two main trends – the first focused on child rearing and education, the other on the freedom of speech and the criticism of all forms of authoritative knowledge. These two trends were perceived as inseparable, or closely intertwined. Similarly, Ingersoll insisted on eliminating “all theology from youth education.” He is generally hostile to theology, considering it arrogant, ignorant, and incapable of progress. Ingersoll was convinced that only that which is known for sure, i.e. verifiable knowledge, should be taught as schools. Ingersoll asserted that no church or religious organization should be allowed to control an elementary school.⁴³

Several years after the establishment of the Czech Freethought Society in 1911, a biography of the important Spanish anticlerical freethinker Francisco Ferrer was published in Czech. Ferrer was an active advocate of modern free secular schooling, founding the school Escuela Moderna in Barcelona in 1901. The institution’s objective was to provide non-compulsory, independent knowledge to all regardless of class and gender differences. Ferrer was falsely accused of high treason and executed in 1909. Interestingly enough, Czech freethinkers led by Theodor Bartošek⁴⁴ took active part in the protests against Ferrer’s arrest and later in the attempts to rehabilitate him.

The Freethought Society rejected the majority rule, supported the rights of political and even religious minorities, and rejected any form of forced knowledge apart from basic parenting prerogatives, free schools, and public education in general. With respect to achieving these goals, democracy was seen to be the best political system, represented by a state perceived as an

40 Antonín Kudláč, *Příběh(y) Volné myšlenky* (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2005), 36–37.

41 Richard Aron, *Právní rádce pro osoby bezkonfesní* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1921), 47–48.

42 Miroslava Gollová, “Počátky české volnomyšlenkářské a bezvěrecké organizace,” *Český časopis historický* 2 (1984): 218.

43 Ingersoll, *Mythus a zázrak*, 12.

44 Bartošek was authorized by the organization World Freethought to defend Ferrer at the court in Madrid in the matter of his postmortem rehabilitation.

inclusive community maintained by non-authoritative republicanism, while monarchy was seen as unacceptable.⁴⁵

The Free School, which not only educates but also facilitates the independent advancement of skills and abilities of children, is a key institution of the democratic state, as the cultural and even economic level of development of any society is dependent on the level of general education. According to the Freethought Society, such schools should be separated from the church. A voting system was introduced into school system, and teachers could choose their own curriculum.⁴⁶ Therefore, school must be secularized, organized democratically and possibly nationally, while the curriculum must be based on scientific knowledge. By secularization of schooling, the freethinkers meant freeing pupils from compulsory religious services, the removal of religious symbols and support for legislative changes which promised to declare any religious affiliation (or a lack of) as being no obstacle for the position of school manager. At the same time, any religious education (even optional) should be banned from school premises. Some freethinkers even demanded that school staff should consist only of teachers who had left the church and were adherents of democracy.⁴⁷

The role of the state in the process of education was to remain neutral, “away from the thought ferment.” The state was to exercise no influence on political or religious views of pupils, although the school was to cultivate the spirit of secular morality.⁴⁸ The cultivation of the religious morality of freethinkers and nonbelievers, seemingly the most valuable part of religion, had no place. In cases in which some aspect of religious teachings intersected with secular morality, the merits of the teachings in questions had to be justified. Here it must be stressed that the efforts by the advocates of secular morals to justify their validity were strongly influenced by the period’s historicism, particularly the argument that secular ethics is older than religious morality, thus existing “before religion”⁴⁹ and as such, stands in contrast to religious ethics.⁵⁰

However, sometimes the term secular morality simply denotes morality without god. The principles on which this new morality should be based were widely discussed, for example as summarized thusly at the World Freethought Congress in Paris in 1905: morality is a natural phenomenon and a social phenomenon; it develops together with society, is not ultimate, does not have absolute validity, and is validated by rational acceptance, not by imperative.⁵¹

Freethinkers thus stressed freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, implementation of humanistic ideals, secularization of society, free secular schooling, separation of state and church, state reform of church property, as well as the emancipation of women,⁵² the right to divorce, and

45 Rudolf Kopecký, *Ideový základ Volné myšlenky* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1926), 17.

46 *Co je to volná škola?* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1907).

47 František Čálek, “Laicisace a demokratizace národní školy v republice československé,” in *Laicisace a demokratizace vyučování* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1920), 5–13.

48 Kopecký, *Ideový základ Volné myšlenky*, 19–21.

49 Inocenc A. Bláha, a founder of Czech sociology, discussed this issue in “Mravní výchova náboženská nebo laická,” in *Poměr pokrokového člověka ke katolicismu* (Brno: Ústřední spolek jednot učitelských na Moravě, 1927), 24–32. He defended the merits of secular morality.

50 Kopecký, *Ideový základ Volné myšlenky*, 33.

51 Ferdinand Buisson, “Jednotné vyjádření zásad morálky bez boha,” in *Morálka bez boha* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1906), 46–48.

52 *Žena a Volná myšlenka* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1920).

even the right to choose cremation upon a person's death. Many of these ideas came into existence after WWI with the founding of democratic Czechoslovakia, with some of the principles embodied in law.

A remarkable manual written by lawyer Richard Aron was issued offering legal advice to citizens without religious affiliation or non-believers on how to function in the Czechoslovakian democratic system, for example how to leave the Church, what is the relationship of school and church, how to arrange a civil wedding or funeral, and to register a newborn without church affiliation, etc. Cremation was a hotly and widely discussed topic at that time. Freethought highlighted the medical, aesthetic and even economic merits, while it considered the traditional church funeral as a culturally older and thus a more primitive form, linking adherence to it to political clericalism and non-progress.

Criticism of Myths, Miracles, Superstition, and Religion and the Defense of Free Science

Freethinkers studied and devoted critical attention both from a scholarly and popular points of view to various phenomena such as Spiritism, occultisms, mysticism, miracles, states of ecstasy and of possession. Works on these subjects were translated rather than avoided because such phenomena were popular with the public. Therefore, freethinkers felt obliged to take a rational stand on these issues and to explain supernatural phenomena in a natural way. Ingersoll believed that humans live in a natural world which he places into opposition to a supernatural one. All that happens in the world, religion notwithstanding, is caused by natural laws.⁵³ Therefore all phenomena were seen to be explainable and one had to search for their natural causes. Ingersoll for example claimed that superstition is a result of false thinking and of a denial of causality. Freethinkers and practitioners of free science thus were not to avoid studying so-called supernatural phenomena such as superstition, belief in spirits, sorcery,⁵⁴ hell, devils, magic, spells, magic objects (amulets) or different kinds of miracles.⁵⁵ However, some members of the Freethought movement disagreed with devoting scientific attention to such issues.

For educational reasons, the publishing house Freethought issued works by Maurice Maeterlinck, physician George Henri Roger, and psychiatrist Arthur Kronfeld. Kronfeld for example refuted the use of hypnosis and suggestion in child rearing and education, but conceded to their use for medical purposes, particularly in treating psychiatric patients. In the hands of psychiatrists, hypnosis and suggestion were seen as methods equal to other medical means. Henri Roger proposed a kind of liberal scientism, admitting on one hand the limitations of scientific knowledge, on the other hand stating that supernatural phenomena were not to be ignored but be even subjected to scientific study. He was aware that although modern man might have rid himself of traditional faith, which Roger considers empty, he still has spiritual needs without which his sensitivity is not fully satisfied, i.e. he has a tendency to turn to practices such as fortune telling and superstitions. It is

53 Ingersoll, *Mythus a zázrak*, 15.

54 Robert Ingersoll, *Duchové* (Prague: J. Jelínek, 1906), 17.

55 Ingersoll, *O pověrách a zázracích*, 1–12.

therefore the duty of science to explain such phenomena and gradually include them as explained by facts into the scientific picture of the world.⁵⁶

Obviously by translating this variety of foreign sources, the Czech freethought was striving for a more complex and scientific criticism of modern forms of religiosity than the rather philosophical criticism practiced by Ingersoll. Ingersoll for example refuted the content of myths as unambiguously unprovable from a scientific point of view, but admitted they maintained a role in cultivating human sensitivity and thinking. He differentiated between myth and miracle, stating that while myth is an idealization of reality, beliefs in miracles forego it. Ingersoll therefore strictly refuses or denies the existence of miracles. As to the origin of religion, Ingersoll considered it natural and linked it, e.g. with sun cults.⁵⁷

Freethinkers thus gradually shifted their attention from a mere criticism of Catholicism, Christianity, belief in miracles and superstitions to a more scientific study of them. Similarly to Roger, Czech freethinker and religious studies scholar Otakar Pertold claimed that in religious development, there exists a so-called regressive phase, completely different from the previous theistic phase. In the regressive phase, new forms of religion come into existence. The religious regress, according to Pertold, is based on superstition and returns back to fetishism and animism (e.g. in the form of Spiritism or occultism). Thus development in this respect is not linear but oscillates as in a sinusoid. In this way, Pertold's assumption about the regressive stage is original and contrary to his contemporaries. His concept was well documented throughout the development of Czech religious scene, during which folk forms of religiosity and quack medicine began to flourish.

The interests of freethinkers expanded to the natural sciences, the study of which they wanted to popularize. Several books were translated, including an interesting work by German natural scientist Hans Reichenbach titled in Czech *Od Koperníka k Einsteinovi* [From Copernicus to Einstein] (1928) which addressed the changing ideas about the world and its development as well as concepts regarding space and time, and motion. Reichenbach predicted that despite the period's fury against Einstein's theory of relativity (the explanation of which Reichenbach devotes great attention to), the theory would be considered self-evident in the future.⁵⁸

Rudolf Lämmel's work *Přírodovědci a přírodní zákony* (1930), which popularized findings in the natural sciences, was also among the many books translated into Czech by the adherents of Freethought. This work claims that modern man has come to substitute chance and beliefs in spiritual beings by natural laws. Stressing the importance of scientific thinking, Lämmel, however, refuses attempts to divinize natural laws on the grounds that they are after all a human creation, i.e. nature knows no law and thus the validity of propositions based on so-called natural law are not absolute. He calls for a so-called humble science and admits that even in his times, the sciences are still under the influence of religious rudiments which must be gradually eliminated.⁵⁹

Although Ingersoll, too, wants a modest science, the task of which resides only in the search for truth, he was, more than Lämmel, a man of the 19th century, i.e. enthusiastic and hopeful as to scientific progress, fully embracing his contemporaries' scientific optimism. Ingersoll's understanding

⁵⁶ Ingersoll, *O pověrách a zázracích*, 15.

⁵⁷ Ingersoll, *O pověrách a zázracích*, 42.

⁵⁸ Hans Reichenbach, *Od Koperníka k Einsteinovi* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1928), 134.

⁵⁹ Rudolf Lämmel, *Přírodovědci a přírodní zákony* (Prague: Volná myšlenka, 1930), 7–14.

of science was secular, faithless and materialistic, denying any role for the supernatural, as matter was seen to be eternal and one with the absolute unity of nature.⁶⁰ Ingersoll sees science as the opposite of superstition, a true healer, the only “messiah”⁶¹ and the “savior freeing the world.”⁶²

Conclusion

The nature of the faithlessness of Robert Ingersoll encompassed several basic characteristics. It grew mainly from a negative attitude towards religious concept of the world and of man, not from indifference to religion. His non-belief was active and engaged as well as polemical against various aspects of belief in the supernatural. Ingersoll's works contrast a religious concept of human life against a secular one, emphasizing happiness as the main goal of life; Ingersoll's preference emerges for a natural concept of morality, a scientific understanding of the world, secular education and schools, and politically he is a democrat. In this he resembled Czech freethinkers. His concept of atheism, which he indicated only in outline form, was based on philosophical materialism in opposition to Christian idealism, and on evolutionism against creationism. However, it is important to stress that Ingersoll's atheism lacks the depth of Feuerbach and the stylistic refinement of Voltaire. Ingersoll's style is rather popular, although well-informed and thus more similar to the Enlightenment thinker Paul d'Holbach than to Voltaire, whom Ingersoll himself considered as one of his models of thinking. Ingersoll's criticism of religion is more in the spirit of the Enlightenment than modernist, but with considerable potential to reach ordinary people, such as workers, or the large-scale movements such as the Freethought, rather than scholars and intellectuals.

The frequency of translations of Ingersoll's works into Czech and the long-standing interest in his works in the Czech lands is obvious, although it is not easy to estimate the range and degree of Ingersoll's impact on the Czech Freethought movement. Several reasons can be outlined regarding this difficulty, with a primary one being simply technical: in this period it was not a common practice to cite meticulously one's sources, therefore it is almost impossible to trace the scope of Ingersoll's ideas in the Freethought publications. Thus the researcher must focus especially on similarities in thinking and argumentation. In addition, although the leaders of Czech freethought movement were united on many issues, they also differed on a number of questions. In general, they would apparently agree with Ingersoll in his strong anticlerical stance, in the emphasis on the secular concept of school and on his emphasis on scientific knowledge, but they would differ in the general attitude towards religion. Czech freethinkers were also far more ambiguous in their attitude to the philosophical concept of materialism. Some adherents were critics of religion, others seekers of a truer religious form. One of the leading representatives Lubomír Milde wrote that religion is a corpse that must be exhumed, with science used to confirm its death. On the other hand, Otakar Kunstovný even suggested creating a modern society with its own religious rites, symbols and service to humankind, especially in social and political fora.⁶³ Other freethinkers

60 Ingersoll, *O pověrách a zázracích*, 26.

61 Ingersoll, *Mythus a zázrak*, 9.

62 Ingersoll, *O pověrách a zázracích*, 44.

63 Otakar Kunstovný, *Náboženství dnešního člověka* (Prague: Obroda, 1924), 98.

considered nature as the temple of this new religion, with its new clergy represented by composers such as Antonín Dvořák and Bedřich Smetana. Despite research challenges, however, the overall influence of Robert Ingersoll on the Czech Freethinking movement is undeniable.

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