

***'I Bow to No Priest Either of Faith or Unfaith':  
Frederick Douglass's Afro-Agnosticism***

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By the time twenty-year old Frederick Douglass (né Bailey) escaped bondage in Talbot County, Maryland, landing at last in New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1838, this fugitive's faith in the providence of God was already severely damaged. His first violent encounter with "the merciless negro breaker," Edward Covey, not only brutalized his body—Covey assaulting the sixteen-year-old with a barrage of heavy booted kicks to his side and bloodletting blows to his head—but tormented his still-young mind as well with anguished feelings of doom and divine judgment. Cutting and running to the woods surrounding Covey's farm, still smarting from Covey's cold-hearted battering and anxious about returning to him (having as yet hatched no plans for a full-out escape from enslavement), young Douglass, withdrawn to the trees, bore his own Gethsemane there: "After lying there about three quarters of an hour, brooding over the singular and mournful lot to which I was doomed, my mind passing over the whole scale or circle of belief and unbelief, from faith in the overruling providence of God, to the blackest atheism."<sup>1</sup> The echo of the Garden of Gethsemane aside, the leafy grove shrouding Douglass from detection on his getaway to St. Michael's could scarcely have been a more felicitous setting for Douglass's Christ-like travail. For it was the dark night of the soul Douglass was to suffer there. Proximate to the main road but deep enough into woods to evade Covey's enraged pursuit, "through bogs and briers" (*MBMF*, 274), Douglass wandered clumsily toward St. Michael's to make a complaint about Covey to Captain Thomas Auld, his owner. Unbalanced by a bloodied head wound, his strength failing him, Douglass recalled:

suffer[ing] more than I can describe. There I was, in the deep woods, sick and emaciated, pursued by a wretch whose character for revolting cruelty beggars all opprobrious speech—bleeding, and almost bloodless. I was not without the fear of bleeding to death. The thought of dying in the woods, all alone, and of being torn to pieces by the buzzards, had not yet been rendered tolerable by my many troubles and hardships. (*MBMF*, 274)

As his next words make clear in their expression of surrender "to the whole scale or circle of belief and unbelief, from faith...to the blackest atheism," Douglass experienced his ordeal in the woods as a crisis of religious belief equally as much as it was a physical trial or emotional torment. Though most often looked over in favor of the triumphant second battle with Covey days later which Douglass called "the turning point in my 'life as a slave'" (*MBMF*, 286. Emphasis Douglass's), it is in (or, more precisely, immediately after) his *first* row with Covey that Douglass arrived at a turning point in his life as a Christian toward some dimly irreligious awareness of the divine in the woods, "buried in its somber gloom, and hushed in its solemn silence; hid from all human eyes, shut in with nature and nature's God" (*MBMF*, 278), that he would spend much of adult life,

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 274. All subsequent reference to *My Bondage and My Freedom* (*MBMF*) are to this edition and are indicated in parentheses in the body of the text.

especially its latter years, trying to square theologically with Christian orthodoxy. In this, Douglass was not an apostate, to be clear; he was, rather, a kind of theologian for whose faith, far from forsaken as the freethinker critics suggest, came to be intelligent and intelligible rather more than a soulful feeling or mythos.

While the majority of Douglass biographers since James Monroe Gregory, Charles Chesnutt, and Booker T. Washington in 1893, 1899, and 1906,<sup>2</sup> respectively, have consistently portrayed Douglass as “a man of lasting faith,”<sup>3</sup> to echo a more recent critic, and as a Christian believer who “sustained a faith in a Christianity” in spite of duplicitous men like Covey, incredibly a leader in the Methodist church, Douglass’s fealty to orthodoxy over his long career was not unswerving. To imagine that Douglass’s Gethsemane experience in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (to be repeated in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*) was an aberration from an otherwise constant piety is to read too much—or, better, *too little*—into John Ernest’s broadly hagiographical remarks about Douglass’s religious life. To take his estimation of Douglass as “a man of lasting faith” for a declaration of unqualified, undiminished adherence to Christianity’s organizing precepts is to fail hearing Ernest qualify the excellence of Douglass’s religiosity. In “Crisis and Faith in Douglass’s Work,” Ernest commends Douglass’s “complex” faith. He describes Douglass’s determined comportment toward Christianity’s Protestant representation as preserved “only by way of resistance to the violated religion that surrounded him.”<sup>4</sup> This complexity of conflict, crisis, and resolve, Ernest argues, typified Douglass’s religious experience. “Ultimately, Douglass can be identified as a man of lasting faith and a religious leader not in spite of the ongoing crisis [of faith] he experienced but because of it.”<sup>5</sup> To repeat, Douglass was no apostate; but he was scarcely a votary either.

If *My Bondage and My Freedom* portrays Douglass’s suffering in the woods near Covey’s rented farm as the elemental scene of religious experience in Douglass, and we are to understand that experience as constituted by a *dialectic* of feelings—belief and unbelief, “faith...and the blackest atheism”—then, inasmuch as Douglass’s devotion to the Christian faith may have unfolded from the positive impressions felt in this biblically evocative scene, might not that radical doubt that also issues from it—that “blackest atheism” Douglass grieved over—have simultaneously cultivated faith’s opposite condition, unbelief, or what we may call Douglass’s “irreligion” as well? In his race to see Auld about Covey, passing through the woods along the main road to St. Michael’s but “far enough...to avoid detection and pursuit” (*MBMF* 273), Douglass offers a dramatic visual for the analogous relation of irreligion to religious faith over his career. That is, the deep woods are related to the twelve-mile stretch of road to St. Michael’s as the knotty heterodoxy of irreligion is to the authorized path to God that is Christianity. The woods enfigure a darkly apposite (though by no means wholly opposite) agnostic orientation of the self

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<sup>2</sup> While Benjamin Quarles is regularly credited with composing the first biography of Douglass, Gregory, Chesnutt, and Washington each produced earlier books on Douglass. It may be that Quarles’s 1948 *Frederick Douglass* was the first *academic* biography of Douglass (that is, written by a trained historian), however. Even so, I dare not say that Gregory, Chesnutt, or Washington *weren’t* scholarly, despite what must have been the popular appeal of their works. (It may be worth noting as well that Washington may have relied on an amanuensis, Samuel Laing Williams, for his *Frederick Douglass* [1906]). Williams was the first African American graduate of George Washington University Law School.)

<sup>3</sup> John Ernest, “Crisis and Faith in Douglass’s Work,” in Maurice S. Lee, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 62.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest, “Crisis and Faith,” 62.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest, “Crisis and Faith,” 62.

or soul that is at once orthodoxy's critique and limit. In them lies that internal, if disavowed, difference in orthodoxy's conceptual content without which orthodoxy cannot apprehend itself as such, even if it cannot own the incoherencies internal to it either. Against his "lasting faith," I mean, Douglass's irreligious instincts, though experienced as something like "the blackest atheism," are not so wholly atheistic as it seems. They are not so counterposing as this. Unfolding according to a more dynamic logic, they are, one might say, *paratheistic*, set in proximate, tensive relation to the dogmatic devotions of the self-justifying church-going class. If Douglass did not testify to his irreligion as a young man, it is perhaps because he would have no language or leadership to express or understand it in a systematic way for many more years. Eventually, he'd entertain both.

Between 1859 when Otilie Assing introduced Douglass to Ludwig Feuerbach's religious critique in *The Essence of Christianity* (first published in English in 1854 by George Eliot) and 1892 when Douglass gave his last word on religion in the expanded De Wolfe, Fiske, and Company edition of *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (this opinion being repeated often over the remaining three years of his life), the nineteenth century's most distinguished race man developed his own critique and theory of religion beyond that which is expected of the prophet given to moral outrage and portent over a nation's sins. Over three decades, Douglass dared approach pen and platform more and more as a religious reformer, if not as a speculative theologian in his own right, keen on decolonizing American religious thought of its dominative notions of God and God's earthbound elect. For nothing struck at his sense of what it meant, or should have meant, to be a religious American then so awfully as "the pregnant and striking fact that American slavery never was afraid of American religion."<sup>6</sup> Try as he might to overcome it in his early-career speech-making and writing (including, powerfully, his "Appendix" to the *Narrative* of 1845), Douglass could not abide the sacralization of the slave order in American religious training and institutional practice, especially in the United States South. It was an aporia he could not abide and still keep to faith. Over against the prophet-critic sent to exhort the wayward to repentance for their spectacular hypocrisies, that is, Douglass would at last lay his axe at the very root of the tree. He would forgo orthodoxy for reformation by way of a post-confessional (in the anti-dogmatic sense) hermeneutics of suspicion.

To put this another way, in appropriating the logging trope above which I have marshalled from Scripture (Matthew 3:10, Luke 3:9), I mean to offer up to readers a figural type and shadow for the anti-foundationalism nineteenth-century religious liberalism exercised on systematic Christian theology and for Douglass's connection to that movement. In calling up this image, however, I do not propose to portray Douglass as a rebellious—or worse, some say, godless—iconoclast, I want it to be clear (although his sternest critiques of religious faith ring with a cynicism not unlike that of an erstwhile believer disabused of his unseen enchantments<sup>7</sup>). Douglass was not anti-religious, I maintain. Rather his turn away from evangelical Methodism toward strains of Unitarian, agnostic, even atheistic thought around 1859 (with his introduction to Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and the state execution of the zealot John Brown in December) accords with biographer David Blight's reminder that Douglass's "condemnation of religious

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<sup>6</sup> Douglass quoted in Frederic May Holland, *Frederick Douglass: The Colored Orator* (New York: Haskin House, 1891), 333.

<sup>7</sup> Douglass's pronouncement that man "is to be his own savior . . . [having] neither angels to help him, nor devils to hinder him," for example, in addition to such characterizations of prayer and divine favor as "absurd" are reflective of just such defiance and disillusion.

contradiction” by American moralists in the slave era “is not itself an antireligious prescription.”<sup>8</sup> To be sure, denunciation is not a blanket disavowal always. After 1859, Douglass would come to publicly *denounce* some of the most orthodox rites and ideas inhering to established Christian opinion, including creationism and the efficaciousness of prayer<sup>9</sup>, but *disavowing* religion outright was not the end Douglass’s denunciations sought or came to. To reason against Blight this way and mistake “condemnation of religious contradiction” for “antireligious prescription” is particularly consequential to any attempt by Douglass scholars to set down in critical biographical writing the shape of his religious life and leanings rightly. For it is to neglect, among other key subtleties, the Unitarian distinctives that Douglass embraced from the New England abolitionists he joined with as partners in reform thought and activism. Theodore Parker, the notable transcendentalist and abolitionist; Frederic May Holland, a Massachusetts admirer and early biographer of Douglass; William Channing Gannet, minister at Rochester’s First Unitarian Church, a temperance crusader, and Douglass’s eulogist at the latter’s 1895 obsequies in Rochester; Thomas Wentworth Higginson, commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> South Carolina Volunteers (USCT) and Civil War hero; and Ralph Emerson, the most influential religious reformer of Douglass’s day, were not only Unitarian in religious thought and inclination, but each received formal ordination to Unitarian parish leadership. Among other omissions the race to anti-religion in the reform age produces, we might pause further to examine an agnostic tilt in American culture away from traditional leanings in belief. Standing by nothing so much as an aporetic (non)belief in God’s ontotheological indeterminacy as a transcendent power or personality, agnosticism neither confesses nor denies belief in God, therefore. Its adherents thus go on willfully unreconciled in matters of divine debate, like Douglass “bow[ing] to no priest either of faith or unfaith” as I set out to stress in the title of this little study of Douglass’s religious evolution after Feuerbach and the execution of John Brown.

Although greater space and subtler attention to Feuerbach and Brown (not to mention the special bond Douglass shared with Assing, an avowed anti-religionist) are important subjects for ongoing research and writing about what I prefer to call Douglass’s religious *lives*, to borrow an approach to Douglass proffered by Robert Levine<sup>10</sup>, in this article I want to explore the formally

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<sup>8</sup> David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 515.

<sup>9</sup> As to the former, Douglass would be attacked by the pastor of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church for Douglass’s seeming sympathies with evolutionism in the speech “It Moves” and his claim there that “the Genesis of Moses is less trustworthy as to the time of creating the heavens and the earth than are the rocks and the stars.” Frederick Douglass, “‘It Moves’; or the Philosophy of Reform: An Address Delivered in Washington D.C. on 20 November 1883” in eds. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, vol. 5 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 131. On prayer, see, for example, “It Moves,” p. 137 and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* in ed. Gates, *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*, p. 913.

<sup>10</sup> Levine, closely reading Douglass’s gesture toward having lived “several lives” near the end of *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, asks: “[W]hat if we were to take seriously Douglass’s notion of having lived several (or much more than several) lives as one?” Robert S. Levine, *The Lives of Frederick Douglass* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 2. Here, I note as well my ongoing curiosity about the so-called Douglass-Truth debate and the extent to which said debate, so far from being reducible to a challenge by Truth—“Frederick, *is God dead?*”—to a call by Douglass’s to Black revolutionary violence, was, at root, a theological disagreement. While Douglass’s position that Black slaves “had no possible hope except their own right arms,” expressed at the 1860 (not likely 1852 as widely held) antislavery meeting in Salem, Ohio (not Boston, after all), sounded like just such a call, at a deeper level his reference to the slaves’ “own right arms” reflected Douglass’s growing convictions that belief in God’s active, interventionist role in human history was superstitious and that rescue from famine depended, therefore, not on prayer but on plowing, for instance. Whereas Truth held to a God-centered religious philosophy, Douglass was steering toward a humanistic one, in other words. On the question of the historical Douglass-Truth

agnostic influence on Douglass's ontotheological critique of God (hinted at by the deep woods as a reminiscently scriptural metaphor for wayward [non]belief) and God's deeply personalist representation in early American religious life and theology. From 1865 to the turn of the century, few Americans were untouched by the public force of agnosticism's critique of creedal Christianity in the United States if only because it was in those years that Robert G. Ingersoll, "The Great Agnostic," was one of the best-known Americans of the post-bellum period. An American lawyer, Republican politico, and acclaimed orator (Walt Whitman declared him the greatest of the nineteenth century), Ingersoll spoke fluently on matters as diverse as prohibition, republicanism, literature, music, capital punishment, and anti-slavery. Yet no interview or article by any partisan or newspaper that followed him ever got far before its interests turned expressly to Ingersoll's deep, considered animus toward Christian orthodoxy and the abiding hold of its premodern mythic-ness on modern minds. Always, the country's most popular apostate answered his interlocutors philosophically with an almost unmatched argumentational facility. By his death in 1899, Ingersoll was thus a known quantity the country over. Very nearly a household name then, he was perhaps the most famous American of the nineteenth century whom the twentieth century all but forgot. If, then and now, religious studies and studies in the philosophy of religion had approached the negative dialectics of disbelief as commensurately available to investigation as their historical and abiding concerns for systems of positive belief and belief-thought, then the twentieth and twenty-first centuries might never have lost sight of one of the nineteenth century's most important irreligionists and, thus, of confessional agnosticism as a meaningful field of critical religious inquiry.

If Ingersoll's popularity as a thinker/lecturer and reputation for oratorical virtuosity were not enough to warrant his consideration alongside Douglass, Ingersoll's closest Black counterpart in religious thought and nearest rival (of any stripe) in podium oratory, biographical and archival evidence suggests that Douglass closely interacted with Ingersoll on at least three occasions. Twice, in 1869 (possibly 1870) and in 1880, Douglass and Ingersoll met socially—first, in Peoria where, famously, Ingersoll welcomed Douglass into his home after the city had been perfectly *inhospitable* to Douglass on a previous visit; then later, in Washington where, by chance, both had resettled their families. Records show that Assing, whose influence on Douglass's personal and business affairs alike was not slight, joined the reunion of men in Ingersoll's parlor as Douglass's plus-one. Though Assing's earnest desire to disabuse Douglass of all religious sympathy is very clearly noted by Blight and William McFeely, Maria Dietrich and Leigh Fought,<sup>11</sup> all acknowledge the extent to which Douglass had already "shifted emphasis from a determination of human life to the human will long before he read Feuerbach,"<sup>12</sup> Assing's effusive self-congratulation for introducing Douglass to Feuerbach, notwithstanding. Similarly, though Booker T. Washington claimed that it was Theodore Parker, the Transcendentalist and outspoken abolitionist, to whom Douglass looked to for inspiration as a religious reformer, I want to pursue how Douglass, already inclined to paratheistic ideas owing to that "complex" dialectic of religious feeling he'd nursed since childhood, reexamined the divine idea alongside Ingersoll's agnostic contrarianism.

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debate specifically, see Tim Bruno, "Rewriting Rebellion: The Douglass-Truth Debate," *ESQ* 65. no. 1 (2019): 33–72, and Alex Schwartz, "'Is God Dead?': Frederick Douglass's Recollection of a Contentious Moment in Abolitionist History," *New North Star* 3 (2021): 64–66.

<sup>11</sup> Blight as cited above. William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991); Maria Dietrich, *Love Across Color Lines: Otilie Assing and Frederick Douglass* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1999); Leigh Fought, *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Dietrich, *Love Across Color Lines*, 229.

Despite so little having been said in the twentieth or twenty-first century about Ingersoll, it is a wonder still that he has passed so long unmentioned in Douglass studies. The two were, after all, twin peas in a cultural pod, sharing very nearly identical distinction within White and Black publics respectively as singular orators, wide-ranging intellectuals, sage statesmen, biting satirists, and, more and more, (ir)religious thinkers. Proximate as they were to one another in Washington, how could either one ever escape the high standing, and thus the public speech or published ideas, of the other? Douglass's three documented encounters with Ingersoll (which, in light of their equal celebrity and political consonance as progressives, may not have been their only meetings) could only have informed and sharpened their thought separately on the religion question specifically in nineteenth-century reform discourse. Now, while there's much to explore regarding the potential for Douglass's association with Ingersoll to have utility for Ingersoll's liberal credibility, it may be more urgent (and less cynical) to consider Douglass as essential, from a certain point of view I want to call "Afro-agnostic," to the very possibility of agnostic thought in itself. By this I mean that if, in metaphysical terms, "the [B]lack or blackness" names the disavowed internal difference of a thing, or the "absence (of difference) that defines and is internal to" what is called White, in other words,<sup>13</sup> then Douglass's particular agnosticism, fashioned in (and metaphorized by) the deep woods where slave religion was born and ritualized apposite to establishment religion, represents the very "failure" of agnostic thought always already embedded, if denied its being there, in agnosticism's nineteenth-century voicings by White anti-clerics like Ingersoll. Despite so many diverse claims on him by religious and non-religious humanistic traditions, claims of philosophical and faith-based belonging by African Methodists, New England Unitarians, and disestablishment Freethinkers, focusing on Douglass's late career specifically, there is no more prominent or prolific nineteenth-century Afro-agnostic for the Whiteness of agnostic thought and sentiment to strive with.

When Douglass met Ingersoll in Washington late in 1880, he had already encountered and begun grappling with Feuerbach's arresting demythologizing of the Christian God-story. So compelling was it, in fact, that it was likely *The Essence of Christianity* that Douglass was crediting when he allowed to a Glasgow audience not long after opening Feuerbach, "I have been very much modified both in feeling and opinion.... [Formerly,] I was young, had read but little, and naturally took some things on trust. Subsequent experience and reading have led me to examine for myself. This has brought me to other conclusions. When I was a child, I thought and spoke as a child."<sup>14</sup> But whether or not Douglass was counting *The Essence of Christianity* in the "[s]ubsequent experience and reading" that revised his opinion of orthodoxy and called its clerics into derision, one thing at least is unquestionable: pace William Van Deburg, Ingersoll's generosity toward Douglass in Peoria years earlier was key among the varied "reasons for his drift toward a liberal concept of God,"<sup>15</sup> at least as much as Feuerbach's masterwork was. For by 1870, Douglass had come to understand that the acts of "those faithful men and women, who have devoted their great energies of their souls to the welfare of mankind"—those only through whom he could "get any

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<sup>13</sup> I am borrowing language here from Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 191.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Douglass, "The Constitution and Slavery" in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Volume 2, Pre-Civil War Decade, 1850–1860* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 479–80.

<sup>15</sup> William L. Van Deburg, "Frederick Douglass: Maryland Slave to Religious Liberal" in *Maryland Historical Magazine* 69, no.1 (Spring 1974): 40. As far as this writer knows, Van Deburg is the only writer to situate Douglass's evolution to liberal theology alongside Ingersoll whom Douglass praised in *Life and Time of Frederick Douglass* as "a man with real living human sunshine in his face and honest, manly kindness in his voice" (895). It is hoped that, on the whole, the present article pays Van Deburg's a compliment as an essential, if neglected, study of the arc of Douglass's religious thought.

glimpse of God anywhere"<sup>16</sup>—were a fairer index than creedal pronouncements of the religious character of a man. Ingersoll's liberality, he said, "greatly tended to liberalize my views as to the value of creeds in estimating the character of men.... [G]enuine goodness is the same, whether found inside or outside the church and...to be an 'infidel' no more proves a man to be selfish, mean and wicked, than to be evangelical proves him to be honest, just and humane."<sup>17</sup> Although it is not clear that Douglass had read C. P. Farrell's 1878 volume of Ingersoll's lectures before their 1880 tête à tête at Ingersoll's Lafayette Square home (though we know said volume was on the shelf of Douglass's Anacostia study at his death), he almost certainly knew of Ingersoll's set piece oration "How to Be Saved." Delivered twice at Washington's National Theater, in April and October 1880, "How to Be Saved," which would also see print in October (at the very time Douglass met Ingersoll for what Assing observed to be a "lovely evening"<sup>18</sup> making conversation) argued strenuously against creedal "belief" in favor of "the gospel of deed, the gospel of charity, the gospel of self-denial."<sup>19</sup> It was an ethical if not behaviorist orientation toward the question of salvation "How to Be Saved" assumed. "I tell you to-night," he theologized at the National Theater, "that God will not punish with eternal thirst the man who has put the cup of cold water to the lips of his neighbor. God will not leave in the eternal nakedness of pain the man who has clothed his fellow-men."<sup>20</sup> Live or in print, Douglass could hardly have taken in such words by Ingersoll then and failed to remember the wholly unexpected hospitality of the "famous and noted 'infidel'"<sup>21</sup> who had received Douglass, deprived public quarters, into his Peoria home. In *Life and Times*, Douglass had declared after all that Ingersoll's act was "one which I can never forget or fail to appreciate."<sup>22</sup> Whether Douglass and Ingersoll amiably dialogued about "How to Be Saved" on the "lovely evening" they met in Lafayette Square, or Douglass set alone listening to or reading Ingersoll's oration, what else could Douglass have felt but buoyed (if not intellectually liberated) by the force of Ingersoll's most devout profession in "How to Be Saved"? "There is but one worship, and that is justice!"<sup>23</sup> In so many words, this would be Douglass's credo too.

If these coincidences of common living and thinking and crusading as irreligionists in Washington (where Douglass delivered *his* most extensive preachment on the problem of religious orthodoxy at Bethel Hall at Metropolitan AME Church in 1883) seem a priori still and not enough on their face to establish Ingersoll's influence on Douglass, or Douglass's symbolic value to Ingersoll's credibility among the New England liberals who were Douglass's intimates, then we have the archived record of another meeting of the minds to turn to. No private affair, this coming-together was of a decidedly impersonal, but no less dialogical, sort. Exactly three years from the "the lovely evening" in 1880 Assing boasted of sharing with the two principals—"We were truly

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<sup>16</sup> Frederick Douglass, "A Reform Absolutely Complete: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 9 April 1870" in eds. John Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, 264.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994), 896.

<sup>18</sup> Otilie Assing describes the event this way in a November 13, 1880 missive to "Mr. [Sylvester Rosa] Koehler." "Recently I spent a lovely evening with Douglass at Robert Ingersoll's," she wrote to Koehler. Since neither Douglass nor Ingersoll write about the meeting, we are left to interpret "recently" as a few short days or weeks.

Otilie Assing to Sylvester Rosa Koehler, 13 November 1880, Sylvester Rosa Koehler Papers, Archives of  
<sup>19</sup> Robert Ingersoll, "What Must I Do to Be Saved," in *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*, vol. 1 (New York: Dresden, 1902), [gutenberg.org](http://gutenberg.org).

<sup>20</sup> Ingersoll, "What Must I Do to Be Saved."

<sup>21</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 895.

<sup>22</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 896.

<sup>23</sup> Ingersoll, "What Must I Do to Be Saved."

in our element and it was as if one was among old friends,” she crowed<sup>24</sup>—Douglass and Ingersoll shared billing on a Washington dais, both headliners at a Lincoln Hall mass meeting called to renounce the United States Supreme Court’s striking down of the Civil Rights Act of 1875, dashing America’s Reconstruction hopes. It was a supremely spirited protest event.

While Ingersoll’s biographers cover the occasion of his appearance at Lincoln Hall to their credit,<sup>25</sup> curiously their representation of the business of the night consistently subordinates Douglass’s role to Ingersoll’s as though the latter was but a hype man for the former, Douglass’s significance being limited to properly introducing Ingersoll to the mass gathering. Perhaps the two-hour duration of Ingersoll’s address, a rather pedantic prosecution of the court’s decision to overturn the Civil Rights Act, gave just such an impression to the more than two thousand seated and standing in front of him, too. Dedicated students of Ingersoll, neither Orvin Larson (1993) nor Susan Jacoby (2014), particularly, seems to have understood that the 1883 Lincoln Hall assembly was by and large a Black affair, however, and that it was likely Douglass somewhat more than Ingersoll who gave the gathering its gravity.<sup>26</sup> Both surely had their acolytes on hand.<sup>27</sup> But while Douglass did introduce Ingersoll on concluding his own address—this detail in Larson and Jacoby is not in dispute—such gesture did not mean a higher regard for Ingersoll’s talents was being observed by it the way Ingersoll’s biographers suppose. On the contrary, Douglass’s introduction, such as it was, had the effect, it seems, of underscoring *his* celebrity in this Black-led setting. His special care to present Ingersoll to a crowd of his familiars on bringing his own lengthy address to its jeremiadic close undoubtedly conveyed to some Douglass’s exclusive reach and company. Whatever the motivation, both the form and content of Douglass’s introduction, such as it was, worked just as much to disclose the common commitment of the two reformers to good religion as humanistic praxis, a devotion to which Douglass was to claim later on—and this,

<sup>24</sup> Otilie Assing to Sylvester Rosa Koehler, 13 November 1880, Sylvester Rosa Koehler Papers, Archives of American Art, edan.si.edu.

<sup>25</sup> Orvin Larson, *American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll* (Madison, Wisc.: Freedom From Religion Foundation, 1993); Susan Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013), 210.

<sup>26</sup> For an outline of event organizers and participants, overwhelmingly Black (James Gregory, Francis Grimké, Lewis Douglass, E. M. Hewlett, Rev. W. B. Jefferson, A. T. Augusta, Solomon Brown, Wiley Lane, Christian A. Fleetwood, *inter alia*) see the headnote to Douglass’s “This Decision Has Humbled the Nation: An Address Delivered in Washington, D.C. on 22 October 1883” in eds., John Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Vol. 5, 1881-1895* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 110 and *Proceedings of the Civil Rights Mass-Meeting Held at Lincoln Hall, October 22, 1883; Speeches of Hon. Frederick Douglass and Robert G. Ingersoll* (Washington D.C., 1883), 1 omeka.coloredconventions.org.

<sup>27</sup> Since Black religious history has given little attention to the early outliers from Christian orthodoxy, it is difficult to point to those who were Douglass’s fellow skeptics. According to Christopher Cameron, however, two local African American freethinkers, W. C. Martin and Julius Chilcoat, organized a Washington D.C. meeting of like-minded race men in 1901 to laud and memorialize Ingersoll. Neither man is named in the proceedings of the 1883 event discussed here but, given the Lincoln Hall headliners, it is not unreasonable to imagine that one or both had been attendees at the October mass meeting. Among the more widely known race men to express deep doubts about the Christian faith and Black religiosity, more specifically, William Wells Brown was not silent, according to Cameron in *Black Freethinkers* (2019). While Brown and late Douglass may have been peculiar among public figures to set themselves against dogmatic Christian theology, this is not to say they were alone as irreligionists. One source in Cameron’s study, a “Lord A. Nelson from San Francisco,” for example, claimed in 1888 that he was “an Atheist of the olden type” and that “[t]he woods were full of us.” In whatever way(s) the “olden type” atheist differed from the later one, as Nelson imagined him, the difference could hardly overshadow how aptly expressed the heterodoxy of slave religion was by Nelson, developed as I have emphasized in the deep woods recalled by Douglass in *My Bondage and My Freedom*.



unapologetically—was the right of free men. With a verse by the English poet and essayist (James Henry) Leigh Hunt marshaled for the occasion, Douglass's presentation of Ingersoll was merely ceremonial:

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)  
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,  
And saw, within the moonlight in his room,  
Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,  
An angel writing in a book of gold:—  
Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,  
And to the presence in the room he said,  
"What writest thou?"—The vision raised its head,  
And with a look made of all sweet accord,  
Answered, "The names of those who love the Lord."  
"And is mine one?" said Abou. "Nay, not so,"  
Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,  
But cheerly still; and said, "I pray thee, then,  
Write me as one that loves his fellow men."

The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night  
It came again with a great wakening light,  
And showed the names whom love of God had blest,  
And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.

I have the honor to introduce ROBERT G. INGERSOLL.

Given Douglass's much wordier, even protracted, habits of public discourse, and the comparative brevity of this rhetorical baton-pass to Ingersoll relative to the long address it served to tie up, his Huntian outro was almost curt. Still, in the person of Abō (Abou) Ben Adhem, the eighth-century Sufi mystic, Douglass found not only an apt figure for flattering the magnitude of *Ingersoll's* eminence and importance to American religious reform, but a convenient guide and model *to himself*, a hero-muse of humanistic theology. Put another way, if Douglass's auditors took his poetic summoning of "Abou Ben Adhem" to exalt Ingersoll, they were not necessarily wrong to think this about Douglass's intention; only this understanding of Douglass's invocation of Hunt's poem does not exclude the possibility that Douglass thought to marshal it, *not* in order to flatter the great American infidel, but in order to ribbon his address with a verse to draw together the virtues of the Declaration of Independence, the Sermon on the Mount, the Golden Rule, the Constitution, and the Civil Rights Bill of 1875 into a single vision of incarnational post-orthodoxy. "If [the Civil Rights Bill] is a Bill for social equality," he started his speech's close. Against those outraged that the bill would, in their judgment, presume to legislate or design social (as opposed to civil) equality, Douglass declared:

so is the Declaration of Independence, which declares that all men have equal rights; so in the Sermon on the Mount, so is the Golden Rule, that commands us to do others as we would that others should do to us; so in the Apostolic teaching, that one blood God has made all nations to dwell on all the face of the earth; so is the Constitution of the United States, and so are the laws and customs of every civilized

country in the world; for nowhere, outside of the United States, is any man denied civil rights on account of his color.

Viewed as a poetic peroration to Douglass's discussion, then, rather than a poem properly belonging to his presentation of Ingersoll—that is to say, rather than the poetic first part of a two-part introduction of Ingersoll (three stanzas and the reveal)—Hunt's "Abou Ben Adhem" would seem to offer up its namesake as a figure for Douglass's own emulation in incarnational religion and emancipatory practice, in living and leading "as one who loves his fellow men."

Douglass, of course, was not unaware of the heresy charges he risked with those he called "my old religious friends" in venturing to imagine, and approach, religion ungodded. "I have no doubt," he granted in 1870, "that the avowal of my liberal opinions will drive many from me...and even exclude me from many platforms upon which I was a welcome speaker, but such is the penalty which every man must suffer who admits a new truth to his mind. . . . I bow to no priest either of faith or unfaith. I claim as against all sorts of people, simply perfect freedom of thought."<sup>28</sup> Nor was Douglass indifferent to the prospect of his standing diminished among the Black Methodists (AME and AME Zion) and Presbyterians who were his peers (many with previously welcoming pulpits) in the Black world. Notwithstanding his confidence in the cause of liberal religious individualism and a righteous man's willingness to suffer for his convictions, Douglass's hope of remaining in good standing, if not the good graces, of Black religionists and their churches was a sensitivity not easily overcome, it seems. What else could account for a late nineteenth-century agnostic and humanist's devotion to the *AME Zion Quarterly Review*, writing the editor only two months before his death to commend journal's contents long after he'd criticized Black clergy (for their trafficking in "superstition, bigotry, and priest-craft"<sup>29</sup>) and voicing irreligious sentiments? Or, of what other value could continuous Black church membership at Memorial AME Zion Church in Rochester and Metropolitan AME Church in Washington well after Douglass's agnostic turn?<sup>30</sup>

I surmise that despite having "receive[d] but limited endorsement among my people"<sup>31</sup> for his late theological ideas—renouncing prayer and divine judgment and yielding nothing to religious myth in an age of reason—Douglass kept faith and religious assembly far apart and thus saw no contradiction between his paratheistic musings and his ongoing engagements in and with Black American ecclesiality. In a way, Douglass followed Ingersoll's tack: "Do not imagine for a moment that I think people who disagree with me are bad people," Ingersoll proclaimed in "What We Must Do to Be Saved":

I believe that most Christians believe what they teach; that most ministers are endeavoring to make this world better. I do not pretend to be better than they are. It is an *intellectual* question. *It is a question, first, of intellectual liberty, and after that, a question to be settled at the bar of human reason*"<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Frederick Douglass, "Frederick Douglass to S. R. Koehler" in *Journal of Negro History* 44, no. 3 (July 1959): 278.

<sup>29</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 913.

<sup>30</sup> On the four stages of Douglass's career, see Holland, *Frederick Douglass*, 402ff. Holland posits 1851 at the end of the second quarter with Douglass's renunciation of disunionism.

<sup>31</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 914.

<sup>32</sup> Ingersoll, "What We Must Do to Be Saved" [gutenberg.org](http://gutenberg.org).

Douglass's ongoing convoking with Black religionists and religious bodies—"my old religious friends"—on the other hand, even if it was not against intellectuality, was sacramental beyond reason, its theology rather more felt than cognized. If, as he decried the religious order of his day (circa 1869), "Nothing [was] so imperious, exacting, unreasoning, and intolerant as faith, when it takes full possession of the human mind,"<sup>33</sup> he kept faith in any case with *the religion of Black gathering*, a convocational imperative not unlike the art and practice of assembly enacted at Lincoln Hall. In Sara Jane Cervenak's *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life* (2021), Black gathering refers to "the possibilities of a togetherness that exceeds understanding...forms of togetherness ungivable to axioms of reason and category."<sup>34</sup> Black gathering then is always already religious, then, inasmuch the assembly "exceeds...reason" and agnostic insofar as it is "ungivable to . . . category." Whereas the new truths of religious liberalism that Douglass took up afforded him platforms no less prominent or far-reaching than those granted Ingersoll, Douglass's commitment to Black gathering, salvific in itself it seems, located Douglass "within the circle" of the slave sublime again where, in its postbellum reconfiguration, a new calculus of Black social thought and religious feeling obtained, and the gift that was, and is, the gathering of Black people unencumbered by the worldly weight of antiblackness grants to imagination unthought possibilities of sociality having nothing to do with orthodoxy. In this sense, and in spite of himself, Douglass could be said to have disavowed Black religion, perhaps, but not the Blackness of religion that is its paratheological under/other side. Though "bowing to no priest, either of belief or unbelief," the religion of Black gathering—not to be confused with Black religion—still captivated Douglass apparently. How could it not? For in Black gathering, as Cervenak helps us see, lay not only the possibility of free religion but its practice, even if it passes for the most part unthought. But if free religion lay in Black gathering, then the Blackness of religion must come to be something else other than Black religion in its (White) orthodox, institutional cast. This, it seems, kept Douglass, the agnostic, coming back to Black churches, again and again, in Baltimore, New Bedford, Rochester, and Washington. If the Black church has been orthodox in its precepts, it has been heretical in its promise to refuse bowing as, at last, free people. It was for just such a promise that Douglass's heart could not resist praying, one parish to another, if standing all the while.

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<sup>33</sup> Douglass, quoted in Holland, *Frederick Douglass*, 333.

<sup>34</sup> Sara Jane Cervenak, *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2021), 17.