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## Fighting Creeping Creationism

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**BILL MOYERS:** This week on Moyers & Company...

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** Evolution and climate change aren't scientifically controversial, but they are controversial to Louisiana legislators. And basically, everyone who looked at this law knew it was just a backdoor to sneak creationism into public school science classes.

**BILL MOYERS:** And...

**SUSAN JACOBY:** I never do debates about the existence of God. Why would you do that? Who are you going to convince? I like to talk about public issues.

**BILL MOYERS:** Welcome to this week's broadcast and the "troublemaker" of the year. That's right, my guest is the first recipient of a new award that singles out teenagers who are not afraid to speak their minds on major issues, even when everyone else around them disagrees. Not afraid, in other words, to stir up trouble for a good cause. That's what Zack Kopplin was doing just the other day at a Save Texas Schools rally in Austin, the state capital:

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** Do we want Texas tax dollars being used to fund private schools teaching creationism? Say no Texas!

**BILL MOYERS:** Zack Kopplin was chosen to receive the first "troublemaker" of the year award because he's made waves fighting on behalf of science and against laws making it easier to teach creationism in public schools.

Today's fundamentalists, with political support from the right wing, are more aggressive than ever in crusading to challenge evolution with the dogma of creationism. But they didn't reckon on Zack Kopplin.

Starting at the grass roots in his home state of Louisiana, he's become a formidable adversary nationally, speaking, debating, button-holing politicians, and winning the active support of Nobel laureates, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, The New Orleans City Council and tens of thousands of students, teachers and others around the country who have signed on to his campaign. Troublemakers all. Zack is now 19 and a history major at Rice University in Houston. He's with me now. Welcome to the show.

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** Thank you so much for having me on.

**BILL MOYERS:** What was it about the Louisiana Science Education Act that you didn't like?

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** Well, this law allows supplemental materials into our public school biology classrooms to quote, "critique controversial theories," like evolution and climate change. Now, evolution and climate

change aren't scientifically controversial, but they are controversial to Louisiana legislators. And basically, everyone who looked at this law knew it was just a backdoor to sneak creationism into public school science classes.

**BILL MOYERS:** Who was behind it?

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** Nationally, there's this group called the Discovery Institute. They're a creationist think tank that's been pushing these types of laws all around the country for years and years. They even tried to get one nationally included in George Bush's No Child Left Behind with the Santorum amendment. And so they wrote this law and they passed it on locally to the Louisiana Family Forum, which is our affiliate of Focus on the Family. Senator Ben Nevers, who sponsored it, said the Louisiana Family Forum suggested the law to him because they wanted creationism discussed when talking about Darwin's theory. So we know from the horse's mouth exactly what this law is about.

**BILL MOYERS:** What's your understanding now of creationism? What essentially does it hold?

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** Essentially it's a denial of evolution, mainly based off a literal interpretation of Genesis.

**BILL MOYERS:** That God created the earth, a supernatural power intervened, and that's where we and the universe came from?

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** Yes. And so there're some versions that say the earth is less than 10,000 years old. There're some where they've, creationists have adapted and said, "Well, we got in trouble in the court case when we said that, so we'll say it's millions of years old. But evolution still doesn't happen. We were created in our present form." And that's intelligent design creationism. Intelligent design creationism is still creationism dressed up to look like it's scientific, but it's really not.

**BILL MOYERS:** When did you collide with this notion?

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** So the Louisiana Science Education Act passed back in 2008. It was the summer before my sophomore year in high school. And so I knew about it. My dad's been involved in Louisiana politics my entire life, so it was a dinner conversation. We'd be, like, "We can't believe this bad law is just, like, it's passing. But Governor Jindal will never sign it." We knew Governor Jindal. He's a very smart man. He's a Brown University biology major. And so we decided, "Okay, when it gets to him, he'll veto it."

**BILL MOYERS:** He's also a Rhodes Scholar.

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** He's a Rhodes Scholar, yeah. And so it got to Governor Jindal with overwhelming support. And Governor Jindal started voicing his support for intelligent design creationism, he signed the law and he's defended it ever since. And we were shocked. So for about two years I sort of stewed over this law. I wanted to fight it. I talked to all my friends. And my friends knew I couldn't stand this law. But I never really knew how to take it on at that point. I was still too young to really recognize I had a voice.

**BILL MOYERS:** At what point did you say that to yourself, "This is so important to me for my own reasons of conscience, that I'm going to make it my life as a young man."

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** So, my senior year of high school, I had to do a senior project. And I had friends who learned how to cook healthy food, learned a new language. And I was just, like, none of that interests me. But you know what? But what got my attention was this law. And so on a whim, I sent an e-mail to Dr. Barbara Forrest, who's an expert about, an expert on this issue. She—

**BILL MOYERS:** Teaches philosophy, doesn't she?

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** She teaches philosophy at Southeastern Louisiana. So she was an expert witness at the Kitzmiller versus Dover trial, where—

**BILL MOYERS:** In Pennsylvania.

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** In Pennsylvania, where intelligent design creationism was ruled unconstitutional. And while it's not a Supreme Court case and doesn't have holding across the entire United States, it essentially has put a stop to intelligent design as a serious method of sneaking creationism into the classroom.

But, so she was an expert witness there and she happens to live 30 minutes away from me in Livingston Parish, a local hotbed of creationism. And so I sent an e-mail to her and said, "I'm a student at Baton Rouge Magnet High and I really want to fight this law." And so she apparently looked me up to make sure I wasn't a creationist plant and then set up a meeting with me. And we got going from there—

**BILL MOYERS:** A mole.

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** Yep. I didn't really ever expect it to actually take off the way it did. I sent one e-mail, and suddenly this whole campaign began.

**BILL MOYERS:** Who else helped you?

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** I set up a meeting with Barbara and I asked her, "who should I talk to locally?" We worked out Senator Karen Carter Peterson, who represents a district in New Orleans. And she was one of the few votes against the law when it first passed. So I got her to agree to sponsor a repeal bill. And that was a great meeting. She just said, "Okay, like, when do we get started?" And that was just her response to me, "When do we get started." So, I talked to her and I also talked to Barbara about if we wanted to bring some big names on board, who should I, like, who should I talk to? And one of the people she recommended was Sir Harry Kroto, who is a Nobel Laureate chemist at Florida State. And so I sent him an e-mail. And he immediately called, he sent me an e-mail back and said, "Hey, do you have time to talk on the phone, like, on Friday?" And so we set it up where I had written a letter for Nobel Laureate scientists to our state legislature. I talked to him. And I woke up the next morning with him and about ten other Nobel Laureates having signed the letter. And we just started building from there. And so we have 78 Nobel Laureate scientists onboard.

**BILL MOYERS:** But you haven't repealed the law. It's still in place.

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** I mean, we would, I would've liked the law to be repealed two years ago, or even five years ago now. But it's going to be a long, tough fight. And I think we know that at this point.

**BILL MOYERS:** You realize that you're bucking public opinion. The latest findings from Gallup last June are that 46 percent of Americans believe in creationism. 32 percent believe in evolution guided by God. I guess they would call that a form of intelligent design. And 15 percent believe in evolution without God's help. You're definitely in the minority.

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** I would say we've got about 54 percent that are in the majority because there's a difference between intelligent design and what I think that second option about God guided evolutionists, which be theistic evolution. And there's a lot of people who say that God has caused evolution to happen. But they don't, that's not actually intelligent design. Intelligent design specifically rejects evolution, especially on a large scale. Creationists like to break it up into micro, macro evolution. That's not a legitimate thing. That's not what scientists do. But that's how they say, "We can't accept change over millions of years." And—

**BILL MOYERS:** And the theistic theory?

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** Theistic evolution is to say what the Catholic Church accepts, where Pope John Paul II said there is no conflict between evolution and the doctrine of faith. And they just say, "We think God started evolution. And it's run the way scientists say it's run."

**BILL MOYERS:** Do you think the Gallup poll is simplistic?

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** I think it's very simplistic.

**BILL MOYERS:** Doesn't recognize the varieties of ideas on this subject—

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** Yes, having said that, the 46 percent who think the earth was formed in the last 10,000 years is a very scary number for me.

**BILL MOYERS:** Let me play you a clip from Representative Paul Broun of Georgia. He's a member of Congress. You've heard of him, I'm sure. And this was his appearance at an event organized by the Liberty Baptists Church in his own state.

**PAUL BROUN:** God's word is true. I've come to understand that all that stuff I was taught about evolution, and embryology, and big bang theory, all that is lies straight from the pit of hell. And it's lies to try to keep me and all the folks who are taught that from understanding that they need a savior. You see there are a lot of scientific data that I found out as a scientist that actually show that this is really a young earth. I don't believe that the earth's but about 9,000 years old. I believe it was created in six days as we know them. That's what the bible says.

**BILL MOYERS:** Representative Broun is a medical doctor. He is a member of the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology. If he were sitting here instead of me, what would you say to him?

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** We need to change that attitude. I mean, we need to be teaching evolution and embryology and the big bang theory because, you know, while he may think they're lies from the pit of hell, they're not. They're good, established science. And if our students don't learn it, they're going to be at a disadvantage to the rest of the world, to China, to Britain to France. And we're not going to do what we need to really make the advances to keep our way of life and ensure the survival of the human race, if we don't teach our students science.

He has the freedom to be educated and educate his children the way he sees it. But, we have to make a specific distinction. Not in the public schools, not in publicly funded private schools, like voucher schools. And definitely not educating other people's children.

**BILL MOYERS:** You've taken this fight beyond the Louisiana law into the fight against school vouchers. Why?

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** I didn't initially really care about school vouchers because I was fundamentally a science advocate. And I was worried about evolution. And then last summer I got, a friend sent me an article by Alternet that had exposed a school in Louisiana in this voucher program that was apparently using curriculum that taught the Loch Ness Monster disproved evolution, and the Loch Ness Monster was real.

And so it caught my attention. And I said, "Well, let me look into this more." And so I pulled a list of the voucher schools off our department of education's website and just started going through them. And I'd look up a school and look up its website. And I'd go find a school that said, "Scientists are sinful men." And we are—

**BILL MOYERS:** Sinful?

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** Sinful. And they rejected the things like theories like the age of the earth and anything else they said anything that, like, that that goes against God's word is an error. And so I found a school like that. I found a school that put in their student handbook that students had to defend creationism against traditional scientific theory. And so these are schools receiving millions in public money.

**BILL MOYERS:** Through vouchers—

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** Through vouchers—

**BILL MOYERS:** --transferring public funds from public schools to private religious schools.

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** And recently we, I exposed with MSNBC that over 300 schools in voucher programs in nine states and Washington DC are teaching creationism. We have schools that call evolution the way of the heathen. And so it's become pretty clear if you create a voucher program, you're just going to be funding creationism through the back door.

**BILL MOYERS:** Neal McCluskey at the Cato Institute writes, "Were Kopplin's argument fundamentally that taxpayers should not have their money taken against their will to schools with which they might disagree, it would be one thing: vouchers do transfer taxpayer money, though they provide far more overall freedom than does public schooling. But Kopplin's argument, like the arguments of so many people on numerous education issues, isn't ultimately about freedom. It's about prohibiting others from learning something he doesn't like."

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** I think Neal McCluskey is forgetting about the First Amendment fundamentally. We have a separation of church and state in this country. And creationism is fundamentally religious. And evolution is just science and is not religious.

And I think as you probably have discussed on the show, the free exercise of religion includes religion and non-religion. So this country is fundamentally secular. And there shouldn't be, you, we shouldn't bring in one specific, not even just Christianity, but one specific version of Christianity that would not teach what the Catholics, or the Hindus or the Muslims or the atheists believe in the public schools and teach it instead of established science.

**BILL MOYERS:** Do you ever wake up in the morning and say, "Hey, I'm only 19. I've got Rice, tough school to get out of and get started in my life, in my work. Why am I doing this?"

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** I don't think it's a choice. I think it's something that has to be done. And I'm the one who's in the right position to do it, so I'm going to do it.

**BILL MOYERS:** Well, Zack, I've enjoyed this conversation and I wish you well. Thank you for coming.

**ZACK KOPPLIN:** Thank you so much for having me on.

**BILL MOYERS:** Zack Kopplin is just the latest in a long line of dissenters and freethinkers.

Since America's beginning, every generation has had to engage in the battle over freedom of religion and freedom from religion -- whether it's Roger Williams fighting Puritan intolerance in New England, the deism of Jefferson and Thomas Paine in the early days of independence, or a man you may never have heard of -- an orator so famous in the 19th century that standing-room-only crowds turned out wherever he went -- just to hear him speak.

He captivated audiences -- with his wit and warmth -- and enraged them, too, with his outspoken views on evolution, religion and reason, the separation of church and state, and women's suffrage.

Robert Ingersoll was his name and he's the subject of a new biography by scholar and journalist Susan Jacoby. She's a writer possessed, as the *New York Times* has written, of a "fierce intelligence and nimble, unfettered imagination."

Susan Jacoby specializes in American intellectual history with several books to her name including this favorite of mine, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*.

Her new, must-read book, is *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought*.

Susan Jacoby, welcome back.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** I'm very happy to be back here today.

**BILL MOYERS:** Robert Ingersoll, once our most famous orator, a towering public intellectual between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the 20th century? What drew you to him?

**SUSAN JACOBY:** It's hard to exaggerate how famous he was in the last two decades of the 19th century. Lecturing was then the chief form of mass entertainment, even though newspapers-- newspapers were read and widely circulated, there was no TV. There were no movies. Lecturing is what people went to to be entertained as well as informed.

And like everybody of his generation, his dates are 1833 to 1899. He was in the Civil War. He joined the Republican Party during the Civil War, because he was an abolitionist. But after the Civil War, something happens to him.

He starts speaking out on behalf of separation of church and state, against what religion was silent about, about slavery for so long, and what religion was still silent about, about what needed to be done to provide true equality and education for former slaves. He is an active Republican. He has strong political ambitions. But he decides that speaking out on behalf of reason, on behalf of Darwin's theory of evolution, against attempts to introduce more religion into government, that this is more important to him than his political ambitions.

Which is the thing that first attracted me to him. Because I look around now at people, at congressmen who are so scared about what's going to happen two years from now that they can't vote against the National Rifle Association. And I think, "Who do we have in public life today who would give up big ambitions like that?"

**BILL MOYERS:** You say he was one of those indispensable people, who keep an alternative version of history alive. What was the alternative version of history he kept alive?

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Well, first of all, he should be famous in American intellectual history if he'd done only one thing, which he did. He revived the memory of Thomas Paine. The historical reputation of Thomas Paine so famous, say, by 1800 because of the role he played in the revolution. "These are the times that try men's souls." Even school kids today know that. But he had really been eclipsed.

He was driven out of England, charged with treason, for writing *The Rights of Man*. His book *The Age of Reason*, which was published in 1793, the first part of it, in which he put forward the astonishing idea that the Bible was written by men, not actually directly handed down by God. *The Age of Reason* was published when he was in jail in France under the Jacobins, for opposing the execution of Louis the XVI, because he didn't believe in capital punishment as no free thinkers ever have.

Teddy Roosevelt, the future president, wrote a biography in which he called Paine "a filthy little atheist, which esteems a dirty bladder of water" -- bladder meaning a sack to carry in, not bladder the organ in the body -- "as something to throw on all religion." So Ingersoll revived Paine's reputation.

You can say that because we're not a nation in which the majority of people are freethinkers, although secular America is growing we know from the Pew poll. You can say that he deserves to be obscure. But that's not right. Because history is a relay race. It's not some kind of a thing in which people's attention and views turn overnight.

Look how long it took to obtain women the vote. He is important because he kept this alive into the 20th century, until after the Scopes trial. Stupid intellectuals in New York and Boston decided that religious fundamentalism was dead, because Clarence Darrow had humiliated Williams Jennings Bryan on the stand. Well, as we know now, it wasn't dead at all. It just retired a bit from politics and was biding its time.

**BILL MOYERS:** You call Robert Ingersoll, quote, "One of the most important champions of reason and secular government in American history." And he raised the issue of religion, as you say, the role of religion. That the role it ought to play in the public life of the nation for the first time since the founding generation that wrote the Constitution.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** That's part of his importance, and he made a lot of people aware of something that had been forgotten, which were that ours was the first constitution in the world -- well, the first constitution, basically. I mean, you can't really call the Magna Carta anything like a constitution. It separated church and state. It didn't mention God.

**BILL MOYERS:** At a time when every government in Europe was uniting church and state.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** The fact that the Constitution didn't mention God still stands as -- religious fundamentalists are constantly trying to explain this away, saying it was an accident. Like men like Adams and Washington and Madison did things with words by accident. As Ingersoll pointed out and is true today, the fact that there was no God in the Constitution was debated at every state ratifying convention.

It was said that, "Under this constitution, an atheist, a Jew, or God help us even a universalist could become president," which was true in theory, but has actually not turned out to be true in practice. One thing that was true is you did not have to belong to a church throughout the 19th century to become president, as Ingersoll often spoke of Lincoln. And it very much shows what the attitudes were during the Civil War, which was thought by many to be God's judgment. And Lincoln certainly could not have been an atheist, but he wasn't religious in any conventional sense.

And anyway, this Protestant ministers came to Lincoln and they wanted to amend the Constitution to replace "We the people" not with God, but with Jesus Christ. And Lincoln said, "Well, I will do what my conscience and my sense of my duty to my country command." And what his choice to do was absolutely nothing. And Ingersoll talked about this, about these secular traditions.

**BILL MOYERS:** He actually said the glory of the founding generation was that they did not establish a Christian nation. And he praised those founders who wrote our Constitution for establishing the "first secular government that was ever founded" in the world at a time when government in Europe was still based on union of church and state.

"They knew that the recognition of a Deity would be seized by fanatics and zealots as a pretext for destroying the liberty of thought." Was that the intellectual grounding for his opposition to the claim that we were a Christian nation or that we should have God in the--

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Yes. And I would say that probably the majority of the founders believed in a kind of providence, a deity. They were speaking in the language of natural rights.

They weren't saying there's this kind of God or that kind of God that created you. They were saying, "We're all equal by nature." But it is in fact very important, the Declaration of Independence, while a declaration of independence, did not found our government. That's why we had to have first the Articles of Confederation which didn't work, and then the Constitution.

And it is very significant that they did not put this language in the Constitution. And, of course, the reason they didn't do it wasn't that they were all atheists or anything like that. The reason they didn't do it is they looked at what went on in Europe. And they said, "We don't want any part of it."

One of the things Ingersoll again pointed this out. The last execution for blasphemy in France took place only ten years before the writing of the Declaration of Independence in the town of Abbeville -- the Marquis de la Barre.

It happened only ten years before the writing of the Declaration of Independence, 20 years before the Constitution. This is what the founders were looking to. And it's very understandable that they didn't want to found, not just a Protestant nation, but a Christian nation. They saw what that did there.

**BILL MOYERS:** It turned to war, violence. In fact one of my favorite Ingersoll quotes is from the centennial address he gave in Peoria, Illinois, on the centennial of the Declaration of Independence in 1876. Recollect that, "the first secular government, the first government that said every church has exactly the same rights and no more. Every religion has the same rights and no more. In other words, our fathers were the first men who had the sense, the genius to know that no church should be allowed to have the sword." They knew what the sword and faith had done in Europe.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** And they also knew the history of our own country, which loves to talk about the Puritans as if they were religiously tolerant, when the first thing the Puritans did was set up a theocracy in Massachusetts. And, this not being Europe instead of killing Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams, there was plenty of places, there was Rhode Island for them to go to.

**BILL MOYERS:** Exile them.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Yeah, but it was all right. They could start their own form of religion then. I mean, just as the Mormons got chased all the way across the country. But eventually, there was still land where they could set up and start persecuting Indians who didn't -- who didn't believe, and also other kinds of Protestants who didn't believe with them.

But one of the things was, then when the Constitution comes along, the states still all have all of these laws privileging Protestant Christianity. So also what they were doing in the Constitution is saying, "The federal government isn't going to allow this. We're going to let everyone run for office."

**BILL MOYERS:** Do you think any American politician would dare describe the secular spirit and letter of the Constitution as Ingersoll and others did in his time?

**SUSAN JACOBY:** No, no. Because an American -- the only declared atheist member of Congress, Pete Stark, retired this time. I'm sure Congress is exactly like the polls. I'm sure there are plenty of atheists and various kinds of unorthodox religious people in Congress. But they don't talk about it. You never hear President Obama making a speech about separation of church and state. He will occasionally allude to it.

But I think that either proclaiming allegiance to a religion or shutting up about it is still an absolute requirement.

**BILL MOYERS:** I wonder if you just turn off your mind when you hear or look the other way when you hear or don't even think about it anymore when you hear politicians, including the president, end every speech with "God bless America." They do that routinely, ritualistically.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Nobody realizes that nobody ever did that before 1980. Politicians did not, when I was growing up in the 1950s--

**BILL MOYERS:** Same here. So what do you think when you hear that? I heard it the other day twice in one of the president's speeches.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Public religiosity has become more important. And this is an idea I borrowed from really the great American religious historian Martin Marty. He said, "What this emphasis on symbolism is about is about ownership. It's not about religion. And it's also about a religion which is much more insecure than it was 50 or 100 years ago."

In other words, if you have confidence in the viability of your religious institution and your own faith, you don't need to hear the president saying, "God bless America." Quakers and Baptists in the early 18th

century would have hated that, because they were opposed to government getting in on the religious attack.

But they would have been absolutely horrified at that. Teddy Roosevelt even, who is probably one of the most devoutly religious presidents we ever had. He tried to get "in God we trust" off the coinage. And he was attacked by the then religious right, this religious president, for being atheist.

The reason Teddy Roosevelt wanted God off the coins is the government in his view had no business putting God on money, putting God and mamon together. So we really see how many of these issues that Ingersoll was dealing with, they mirror the things today. We have no spokesman like Ingersoll.

And while we have many spokesman for atheism, among the new atheists, we don't have anybody who is part of sort of the regular public fabric of the nation who talks about these things from all formats all the time, not in terms of -- I never do debates about the existence of God. Why would you do that? Who are you going to convince? I like to talk about public issues. But we don't have in Ingersoll somebody who's that well-known and important, who will come out and talk about the relationship of religion to public issues in this way.

**BILL MOYERS:** How do young people respond to you when you say, "I'm an atheist"? What questions do they ask?

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Bill, I get asked to lecture mostly at religious colleges, historically religious colleges, whether they're Catholic or Lutheran or Episcopalian, not too many of those left, or Baptist. I think because they're more interested in presenting a whole range of views, their questions at religious colleges are extremely intelligent. They know more about secularism than students at secular colleges do, because part of instruction at a liberal religious college with lots of faculty who aren't members of that faith, whether it's Georgetown or whether it's Augustana College.

Part of it is education, not only in different religious traditions. But -- this is why they have people like me to speak, but also secularism, freethought, atheism -- a lot of their parents think they're sending their kids there to get a good orthodox religious education, but what they often get is their first exposure both to kinds of religion and ideas that they haven't.

And I'm often asked questions about -- they, in other words, they're more likely to know that there isn't God in the Constitution than kids at secular universities are. Because they've had courses that discuss the role of religious freedom and religious repression and secularism in the founding of the country. They aren't likely, they aren't likely to be people who, for instance, like this moronic Texas school board, which in its list of thinkers who influenced the revolution two years ago. And it's now, two years ago replaced Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence with Thomas Aquinas. Anybody at a good religious college would know that wasn't true.

**BILL MOYERS:** How do you explain the political agility of fundamentalists to get their worldview inserted into the textbooks?

**SUSAN JACOBY:** How I account for it is they're better organized. Ingersoll was always saying that. That religion is an organization for the perpetuation of its own values.

Freethought is never -- and that was true, by the way, of feminism for a long time. So I think one reason Ingersoll has been forgotten, as Paine was, nobody's come along to do for Ingersoll in this century what he did for Paine. I'm not an orator who gets asked to speak in 50 states or I would gladly do it.

**BILL MOYERS:** He was ahead of the times in so many--

**SUSAN JACOBY:** In everything.

**BILL MOYERS:** He was a feminist. He was for women's rights. He was for eight-hour working days. This in the Gilded Age, when the great wealth was spreading.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** And he was a Republican.

**BILL MOYERS:** He was Republican. His great fear was that invoking divine authority in politics, simply shut down the discussion.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** And how right he was. That what it's intended to do. Because if you believe in divine authority, then how can there be any other answer but what divine authority tells you.

**BILL MOYERS:** And he defended blasphemy, which is impiously speaking of religions, not because he despised religion, but because he wanted to stop the appeal to an authority that could make all the discussion and debate irrelevant.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Well and there were still a lot of state blasphemy laws, which were never enforced because they so clearly violated, you know, not only the 1st, but the 14th Amendment by then. But at the time, you know, it's not until the 20th century that the 14th Amendment gets applied to the rest of the Bill of Rights. And so what Ingersoll was against was anti-blasphemy laws that could send people to jail. And while they weren't enforced, they were still on the books. And there was a blasphemy trial in New Jersey.

**BILL MOYERS:** Morristown, New Jersey.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Yeah, in Morristown, New Jersey.

**BILL MOYERS:** A free thinker was on trial for circulating a pamphlet that denied the Bible was authorized by God and infallible.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Yeah, the same Thomas Paine thing a hundred years later.

**BILL MOYERS:** One of my favorite sites in Morristown is the drum head depicting Thomas Paine writing "Common Sense."

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Yeah. Yeah.

**BILL MOYERS:** Here's what Ingersoll said in the defense of the fellow who was on trial. "I deny the right of any man, of any number of men, of any church, of any state to put a padlock on the lips, to make the tongue a convict. Blasphemy is the word that the majority hisses into the ear of the few."

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Yeah. And it's interesting. After that trial, a number of ministers who attended came up and shook his hand, as well. The jury, of course, found the blasphemer guilty. Although the governor saw to it that he didn't get sent to jail. The governor of New Jersey then was not somebody who wanted New Jersey to go down as the last state that sent somebody to jail for blasphemy. So he commuted it to a fine which Ingersoll paid.

**BILL MOYERS:** \$200 bucks I think it was.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Yeah, something like that.

**BILL MOYERS:** In those terms. But here's the paradox to me. Politicians still, in Ingersoll's time, politicians still had to pay greater obeisance to religion than in the founding generation a century earlier.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Much more.

**BILL MOYERS:** Why?

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Because this idea that we had been created as a Christian nation was, and particularly in Ingersoll's day, this was a period of great unease for Protestant religion, which basically, it wasn't just Christianity. It was Protestant Christianity. And here come all these immigrants after 1880. A lot of them are Jewish from Eastern Europe, who are obviously not Christians. And a lot of them are Catholics from Southern Italy and the Slavic countries. And at that point, the power structure of American cities was still run by Protestants.

Well, with all those Catholics coming up and setting up their parochial school system, the first really large scale religious school system, this is a period of great unease about how -- and American Protestantism itself is splitting in a way that affects our country, as you know very well, to this day, in that we have Protestants of the Henry Ward Beecher variety, who say, "Let's see how our religion can accommodate to the secular knowledge of Darwin's theory of evolution." And you have fundamentalists for whom William Jennings Bryan was the great spokesman, although he wasn't nearly as conservative as some of the anti-evolutionists today.

**BILL MOYERS:** No, he was quite liberal in social policy.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Oh, in social matters, yes. But even on religion, who say, "No, no, every word in the Bible is literally true." And this split in American Protestantism, which really begins to affect every aspect of politics in the late 19th century, which is why Ingersoll's issues were so prominent. This is the split we have today, too. Except that now Protestants have joined forces with the conservative wing of American Catholicism.

**BILL MOYERS:** I'll be back with more from Susan Jacoby in just a moment. But first, this is pledge time on public television. That's why we're taking a short break so you can show your support for the programming you see right here on this public television station.

**BILL MOYERS:** For those of you still with us, sixty-five years ago, the Supreme Court voted eight to one to uphold the rights of one woman and her fifth-grade son who went up against popular opinion to keep religious education out of public schools. Vashti McCollum was the woman's name. She and her family lived through two lower court losses, intimidation from her community in Champaign, Illinois, and three years of what she called "headlines, headaches and hatred." Here's a brief look at the Peabody Award winning documentary, "The Lord Is Not on Trial Here Today," the story of her fight for the separation of church and state in America.

**ED DESSEN** in *The Lord Is Not On Trial Here Today*: She had a terrible time. The town hated her.

**RON ROTUNDA** in *The Lord Is Not On Trial Here Today*: She was not the hero to many people, she was somehow the devil incarnate.

**NARRATOR** in *The Lord Is Not On Trial Here Today*: She was called "that awful woman" by her neighbors, and "that atheist mother" by newspapers across the country. Her friends stopped returning phone calls rather than risk speaking with her. She was branded a communist, and the Illinois State Legislature nearly stopped her and her husband from ever working at the state university again. She received up to 200 letters a day, some of the writers claiming they would pray for her; many wishing for much worse.

**VASHTI McCOLLUM** in *The Lord Is Not On Trial Here Today*: They heard this down at the Piggly Wiggly down there on Main street, They're going to lynch you. Oh I said, is that all?

**NARRATOR** in *The Lord Is Not On Trial Here Today*: All because, in 1945, Vashti McCollum, a young mother of three from Champaign, Illinois, would file a historic lawsuit that would forever change the relationship between religion and public schools in America.

**VICTOR STONE** in *The Lord Is Not On Trial Here Today*: It has been listed as the foundation case for prayer in school and religious education in school.

**DAVID MEYER** in *The Lord Is Not On Trial Here Today*: What McCollum did, was it endorsed a view of the first amendment that pushed public life and religion into separate spheres divided by this wall of separation. I think public opinion polls show that a majority say they think the term, a wall of separation between church and state is written into the text of the First Amendment, and of course it's not. It's an idea, it's a metaphor, that is contestable, but it's one that the Supreme Court put the weight of the Constitution behind in the McCollum decision.

**JIM McCOLLUM** in *The Lord Is Not On Trial Here Today*: All cases involving the crossing of the line regarding establishment of religion – crèches on public property, ten commandments in public buildings and on public property, prayers in schools and this sort of thing, all these stem from the McCollum case. That's basically the significance of the case.

**NARRATOR** in *The Lord Is Not On Trial Here Today*: The case would shine a national spotlight on this small, central Illinois town, turning Vashti McCollum into an unlikely champion of the separation of church and state.

**WALTER FEINBERG** in *The Lord Is Not On Trial Here Today*: What courage it must have taken for a mother and her young children to stand up to that and say "this is something that you can't do. You cannot bring g-d into the public school".

**ANNOUNCER**: We now return to Moyers & Company.

**BILL MOYERS**: You mention that Pew Research study, which shows that the number of people who say they have no religion at all, they call nones, N-O-N-E-S.

**SUSAN JACOBY**: Oh, I hate that so much.

**BILL MOYERS**: But they're growing in number.

**SUSAN JACOBY**: Well I think that there are many more members of that group who are atheists than will admit it. Again, I think a lot of that group just says, "Oh, well, I don't belong to any church." But if asked, "Are you an atheist?" they won't say so.

All of Americans have absorbed the fact that atheism is a bad word. And they think there are a few more who call themselves agnostics. Others prefer to call themselves humanists. You can be all three. An atheist, agnostic, a secular humanist, a freethinker. I'd answer to all of them. But I'm an atheist. And I think a lot of those people are, too. There is a particular group in the Pew Poll, who won't say they're atheists, they say, "I'm spiritual but not religious."

I don't respect people like that very much. Because I think that they've bought into the idea that to be a humanist, to be concerned about your fellow human beings, to show that concern, that you can't say you're an atheist, because that's what so many people think.

It's important to show that atheists who move about in the world, who get married, who love their children, who buy clothes and like makeup, we're just, we're like everybody else who's a humanist in many of our values. We are not--

**BILL MOYERS**: You're just not going to heaven.

**SUSAN JACOBY**: We're just not going to heaven. We're not somebody -- no, but once you can't demonize people, once you know that this person down the block you like is an atheist, you can't think about atheists in the same way. When you began to know that they were people you knew.

**BILL MOYERS**: What's hard about being an atheist in an obviously pluralistic society soaked in religiosity?

**SUSAN JACOBY:** There's nothing hard about it in New York City, obviously. What is hard about it, I can really answer that question, because the "Dallas Morning News" reprinted the piece I wrote about atheism, which mentioned Ingersoll's views that atheism and agnosticism were the same. But this piece I wrote was reprinted in full in the "Dallas Morning News" the week after it ran at the Times.

My author website nearly crashed with e-mails from people of all ages, from all over Texas, saying how thrilled they were to read this piece talking about what their lives were like in small towns in Texas. The oldest person who wrote me a letter was an 85-year-old African American man from Amarillo, who talked to me not only about his experiences as an atheist in Texas, but as an atheist in the African American community in Texas.

In other words, groups in which African Americans are among the most religious people in the country. And while it doesn't translate into economic conservatism, many of them are very religiously conservative. And he said how wonderful it was to have something to show his friends. And I thought, "My God, there really is a hell, an African American atheist for 85 years in Amarillo." He was somebody who revered WEB Du Bois, who, of course, was an atheist, but never got much traction in the African American community on that issue.

**BILL MOYERS:** Why are you an atheist?

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Why? Because it's what makes sense to me. I look at the world around me. I'm an atheist because of -- which has made a lot of people an atheist, because of the theodicy problem. The problem of if there is this all good, all powerful, all loving god, you know, how come kids are shot in Newtown? How come people when I was young died of polio-- a child I knew? How come?

It started me thinking about what every religious thinker has thought about and had to come to grips with, which is how do you account for the problem of evil beside your belief in an all-powerful God? Well, the classic Christian answer, which satisfied Augustine, does not satisfy me or any atheist. Which is that we have free will. And we are responsible for all the evil in the world.

No, I think the evolution of the polio virus and Darwin's theory of how it happened is responsible. That there is no such thing as intelligent design. If God had been an intelligent designer, what purpose would polio serve? Well, the answer to that is it's a mystery. We don't know what God's plans are. That's what my mom told me when I was a kid. My mom stopped going to church when she was 85 years old.

**BILL MOYERS:** Why?

**SUSAN JACOBY:** I asked her why. I knew it couldn't be my influence, certainly. She said, "I've been thinking about the problem of evil. And it makes no sense." She said, "Why should people suffer?" because, of course, she knew so many people unlike her who had lost their minds to Alzheimer's. She said, "This makes no sense." She said, "I do not believe that there can be a God whose plan this could be a part of. I never could have said this when my parents were alive. If being old is good for anything, I can do exactly what I want."

**BILL MOYERS:** What Robert Ingersoll come to mean to you in the great intellectual tradition of America?

**SUSAN JACOBY:** He -- first of all, he shows how even if you don't get remembered for it in perhaps the way you should later on, that doesn't deny the role you play anymore. Nobody knew who Elizabeth Cady Stanton was from about 1900 until the new feminism really began to take hold in the 1980s, because she was written out of the suffragists movement for writing a book called "The Woman's Bible," which criticized all the misogyny in the Bible.

The fact that nobody knows about you and maybe history doesn't give you your just reward and certainly not in every time, because there are fashions in history, doesn't mean that you didn't play an important role.

So he carried on a tradition. And just as those feminists who got written out carried on a tradition which was picked up later on. And the second reason he's so important is that he is a model of what you have to do to fight for an unpopular idea. And you can't do it by hiding behind other labels, because other people are going to criticize you for it.

**BILL MOYERS:** You quote Ingersoll saying that the result of all of this public religiosity that was surrounding him and surrounds us today is that quote, "We reward hypocrisy and elect men entirely destitute of real principle. And this will never change until the people become grand enough to do their own thinking."

**SUSAN JACOBY:** And to admit to their own thinking.

**BILL MOYERS:** What do you mean?

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Not just to do their own thinking, but to open up their mouths and tell other people about their own thinking. When he died, an editor in Kansas said, "There will come a time when men--" he talked about the political career Ingersoll did. "There will come a time when men may run for office and speak their honest convictions in matters in religion. But not yet," he ended his editorial. Can't we say that now? "But not yet."

**BILL MOYERS:** Robert Ingersoll said of Thomas Paine, "His life is what the world calls failure and what history calls success." Can the same thing be said of *The Great Agnostic*?

**SUSAN JACOBY:** I hope so. What I would like to see is history calling his life a success more than it has since the 1920s. That's my aim here. His life was a success. And it should be recognized as a success and a very important contribution to the cause of reason in this country, one which is just as relevant today that was when we were fighting about the same issues 125 years ago.

**BILL MOYERS:** The book is *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought*. Susan Jacoby, thank you very much for being with us.

**SUSAN JACOBY:** Thank you. It's a real pleasure.

**BILL MOYERS:** At our website [billmoyers.com](http://billmoyers.com), our video archive includes more conversations with free thinkers on faith and reason, and god and politics. Novelists Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, evolutionary scientist Richard Dawkins, and writer Martin Amis, and many more. They're all at [billmoyers.com](http://billmoyers.com). I'll see you there and I'll see you here, next time.

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