

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

WHY I AM A FREETHINKER.

BY

AGNOSCO

(Author of "Freethinking and Free Inquiry," etc.)



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WHY I AM A FREETHINKER.

“Whatever freedom for ourselves we claim,
We wish all others to enjoy the same,
In simple womanhood’s and manhood’s name!
Freedom within one law of sacred might:
Trench not on any other’s equal right.”

—James Thomson.

“In proportion as we love truth more and victory less, we shall become anxious to know what it is which leads our opponents to think as they do.”—Herbert Spencer.

OFTENTIMES has the question forced itself upon such of us as avow our heresy, “Why am I a Freethinker?” Often, too, has the question been put to us by those who do not share our opinions, “Why are you a Freethinker?” The question is a natural one, and one which is to be expected. All of us ought to be able to give the reason why we hold the views we do; if not at the spur of the moment, at least after a little consideration. Briefly to answer the question is the purpose of this essay.

Before, however, we can do so, we must know what meaning we are to put upon the word “Freethinker.” Among our opponents, whether from ignorance or with intent, the word is used in a variety of senses, some of them not over-complimentary. It will be necessary, therefore, to examine a few of these alleged meanings; for, in thus showing what Freethinking is *not*, we shall indirectly be showing what it *is*. Foremost among these insinuations comes the well-worn taunt that a Freethinker is a libertine, a man without moral restraint. This assertion is entirely the result of confusion of thought. “A Freethinker is a man who thinks freely and without being bound down by authority,” our traducers tell us. “Now,

a man who declines to be bound down by, and who refuses to respect, authority, is one without moral restraint, a libertine, and a dangerous citizen." A little attention will show that the word "authority" is here used in two different senses. In the first sentence it means simply a referee upon disputed matters, or a man whose words or writings show him to have a more or less exhaustive knowledge of the subject at issue, or one who is claimed to be such. In the second sentence it is used as equivalent to law or morality, as the case may be. To put it plainly, the expression is equivocal—that is, it involves a quibble. By parity of reasoning, it might be said that, a few years ago, the Protestant Episcopal Church was *not* disestablished in Ireland, because a church belonging to the Protestant Episcopal body can, to this day, be found in almost every village in that country. It is very evident here that a confusion of thought has arisen through regarding "church" in the one instance as meaning a body-corporate, and in the other a building. The reasoning by which a Freethinker is converted into a libertine is equally fallacious, although, as put by opponents, the error is not so apparent.

Taking a matter-of-fact, instead of a logical, view of the question, it may be noted that it is said by those who are most conversant with criminals that a really intelligent adversary to the popular dogmas is rarely, if ever, seen within prison walls. Arguing after the manner which I have just exposed, it is said by certain interested, but unscrupulous, individuals that all drunkards, gamblers, and so on, are Freethinkers. It is evident that, if these men had respected authority, in the sense of the law, they would not have been where they are. They are men without moral restraint, libertines, and therefore Freethinkers. This is certainly a pretty piece of arguing in a circle! I venture to assert that, by means such as this, you could prove anything you felt inclined to prove. To claim as Freethinkers unintellectual "nothingarians" is equally absurd. For Freethinking implies thinking, and thinking is an act of the intelligence. Everybody who has come in contact with the lowest classes knows that, in common with primitive men, they have little ability for forming an independent

judgment. But the word "Freethought" means independent thought, independent judgment. Like the others, this allegation against Freethinkers turns out to be worthless.

It is sometimes urged that Freethought is another word for infidelity or unbelief. The absurdity of this statement will be seen when it is pointed out that "unbelief" is a word having a meaning differing according to the opinions of the user. Mohammedanism is unbelief to a Christian, Christianity is infidelity to a Moslem, and so on. The doctrine that the earth is round is unbelief to the man who believes it to be flat. I have, however, introduced this for the purpose of exposing another example of confusion of thought. A Freethinker, being an infidel (I have seen it stated), is necessarily an untrustworthy man. The word "infidel" is here used in two distinct senses. Literally, an infidel is one who does not share your faith.* A Moslem, not sharing the faith of a Christian, is called an infidel, and *vice versâ*. As otherwise used, the word bears a secondary sense, and, to a logician, is a perfectly distinct word. It is a pity that such playing upon words is indulged in by sober controversialists. Let the words be used in one sense or the other, but *not* in both, in the same connection.

It is sometimes said that Freethinking is identical with scepticism. This is not so. Freethinking is *positive*, scepticism is *negative*. Every man who changes his opinion is a sceptic; but he is sceptic only so long as he halts between two opinions. A convert from Protestantism to Catholicism is a sceptic until he makes a definite acknowledgment of his Catholicism. Scepticism is the transition period of belief.

The average dictionary definition of a Freethinker is "one who disbelieves in revelation." This definition, however, confuses the product with the process, the effect with the cause. Disbelief in revelation is not necessarily a factor in Freethinking. That it usually

* Why not, as Professor Huxley suggested to Dr. Wace, say *miscreant*? Its literal and ancient meaning is "unbeliever" (*mis-croyant*), and it has the advantage of being extremely unpleasant to the person to whom it is applied.

accompanies the latter is due to the principle of Free-thought leading men to question received opinions, and to form what appears to them to be more rational and invulnerable views of nature. Whether a Freethinker accepts revelation or otherwise, he rejects the argument drawn from the antiquity of the belief. Revelation, like every other theory, must be tried solely upon its merits.

Frequently is it asserted to be equivalent to Atheism. The word "Freethinker," however, has no connection whatever with any questions relating to a god or to divinities. It represents neither theological beliefs nor unbeliefs, but a method of philosophic inquiry. Such words as "Atheism," "Agnosticism," "Positivism," and the like, imply Freethinking, it is true; but it is not correct to say that any one of them is synonymous with it. To make the matter clearer, let us look at in another way. Suppose it were asserted dogmatically that there is no God, nor anything answering thereto; suppose it were said that this was the belief of all the great men—all the great warriors, all the great statesmen, all the great poets, prophets, and philosophers, all the great teachers, preachers, and scientists—who had been since the world began; suppose it were said that the truth of this belief was proved by the fact that it had been held for thousands of years; suppose it were enforced by pains and penalties and social ostracism; then, I say, the man who dared to say, "I am a Theist; I believe in the existence of God," would be a Freethinker in every legitimate sense of the word.

A considerable space has now been taken up in discussing what Freethinking is *not*; but the arguments have, I trust, been so put as to have long ago suggested to the mind of the reader what it *is*. That it expresses, not a religious system, but a method of philosophic inquiry, has just been stated; in fact, I have elsewhere maintained that, to be valid, the principle must be applicable, not only to religion, but to science and politics, and every form of human thought and activity. As I have already defined it: "Freethinking is the right of thinking upon any subject independently and without undue restraint, without unnecessary reverence for authority and without being influenced by the fact that

certain beliefs have been held upon that subject from time immemorial."* Beyond the collection of facts every authority is to be regarded as a theorist like ourselves, and the closeness of his observations, the exactness of his reasoning, and the apparent truth of his theory—not his name—must be our guide. The only legitimate restraint is that which flows from the nature of things—those restraints which are due to the limitations of our faculties, or are necessary to our life in society. Briefly, the definition of Freethinking may be summarised in the words of the poet: "Trench not on any other's equal right."

Having thus made manifest what Freethought is, I can now give a few reasons for being a Freethinker. These I shall discuss as three propositions—viz., Freethinking is a necessary condition of progress; it is the outcome of the history of the race and of man's mental and social evolution; and its principle forms the rational basis of ethics.

If we compare China and Western Europe; if we compare Spain with England, or the Catholic with the Protestant Church, we note that in one of each pair progress is an unknown quantity. And with this we find a profound respect for ancestral opinions, or thought fettered by the authority and dogmas of the Church, or a compound of the two.

Long ago Bacon told us that "knowledge is power." Equally true is it that knowledge is essential to human progress. Mark the man of business. Had he no knowledge of his profession, he would make no progress in it. The man who lives in a country village, where every year's business is a repetition, or nearly so, of that of the previous year, does not rise to the top of the tree. He whom we come to recognise as the head of his profession is the man who has obtained a complete knowledge of every branch of it. Still more true is it that the systematised, unified knowledge which we call science—that knowledge which is so completely organised that our astronomers can discuss the chemical composition of stars so distant that light, travelling at

* "Freethinking and Free Inquiry," p. 8.

the enormous rate of eleven million miles per minute, or nearly two hundred thousand every second, takes centuries to reach us ; that our biologists can trace, in two million or more species of living beings, the action of those same laws of matter and motion by which a nebula becomes a world, a cloud falls as rain or condenses as snow, by which the candle burns, or the frost bursts a water-pipe, by which the earth is kept revolving round the sun, or a limited liability company divides into chairman, directors, and shareholders, and its shareholders into "founders" and "ordinary"—has a vast influence in the progress of mankind. To what is our progress due? Is it to the spread of education among the masses? Those most potent factors in education, our books and newspapers, are printed by the application of the laws of mechanics. We are made familiar with the sayings and doings of other nations by the electric telegraph. The principles of higher mathematics show themselves to be our servants in every map. We are informed of the beauties of other lands, of the peculiarities of other races, of the appearances of other worlds, by means of the photograph. Do we owe our progress to political improvements? The science of ethics and the sub-science of jurisprudence meet us here; empirically though the older statesmen had formed their knowledge of political economy, yet they had it to some extent. From the time of Pitt, however, we find that this science has been held to be one of the foundations of political action. "Pitt was the first English minister who really grasped the part which industry was to play in promoting the welfare of the world. He was.....a statesman who saw that the best security for peace lay in the freedom and widening of commercial intercourse between nations; that public economy not only lessened the general burdens, but left additional capital in the hands of industry; and that finance might be turned from a mere means of raising revenue into a powerful engine of political and social improvement."* Perchance our progress is due to industrial improvement.

* Green's "Short History of the English People;" 1880; pp. 769, 770.

Here, more than anywhere else, do we realise the great debt we owe to science. Whether your house be lit with gas or electricity, it is to science that you owe it. The purification of the coal-gas from ammoniacal and bituminous impurities, and the segregation of the crystals of naphthalin, are all chemical processes. So is sugar-refining; so is the fermentation which produces alcohol. That nitrogen, when combining, takes up a large quantity of motion, in addition to what it already contained, which it will give up on decomposition, is a fact partly chemical, but chiefly physical; and the blast used in mines, whether dynamite, or gunpowder, or bellite (which contains an extra quantity as ammonium nitrate), brings the fact into practical use. Turning from the production to the conveyance of commodities, the application of the physical facts connected with the pressure of steam meets us everywhere. The shipbuilder in modern use applies to his vessels the mathematical angle of least resistance. The mechanical laws exemplified by the engineer need merely mentioning. To astronomy we owe our ability to predict the tides. And to what principle are these sciences due? Surely to the right of independent thinking. Conventionalism, the mere repetition of the opinions of the multitude, never yet added to the world's progress. The real agent is now, ever has been, and ever will be, untrammelled freedom of thought. And I am a Free-thinker because I believe that humanity can progress, that humanity ought to progress, and that humanity will progress.

Were I to discuss at length the historical view of Freethought, I should require more pages than are allotted to me for the completion of the whole argument. A study of history will show us that humanity has progressed by a series of revolutions—or, rather, that a series of revolutions stand as landmarks to point out to us the advance of the race. In the early Church, heterodoxy took the form of petty squabbles about the nature of Christ. Passing over to the time of Wyclif, we come face to face with a healthier form of criticism. This famous divine distinctly proclaimed the gospel of Free Inquiry. One significant fact it is necessary to refer to.

Just before Wyclif's time the old feudalism had begun to decay. The men who formerly had been slaves to the barons now became free men. While this social freedom was being born there was coming into existence that political liberty which we associate with that Great Charter of England which contains those memorable words: "To no man will we sell, or deny, or delay right or justice." It was certainly no accident that brought forth at almost the same period the great struggles for freedom, social, political, and religious. If we turn from Wyclif to the reformers of the close of the next century, we are conscious not only of greater learning, but also of greater freedom both from dogma and from conventional thinking. Sir Thomas More, in his "Utopia," preached a gospel of liberty, to which Wyclif was a stranger. In his ideal state considerable freedom of opinion was tolerated. Amid the squabbles of the Tudor period, in which Protestant bigotry vied with the bigotry of the older creed, we to-day can see, to use the words of Green,* that "the real value of the religious revolution of the sixteenth century to mankind lay, not in its substitution of one creed for another, but in the new spirit of inquiry, the new freedom of thought and of discussion, which was awakened during the process of the change."

A century later brings us to Lord Bacon, whose Free-thinking was as much an advance upon More's as that of the latter was upon Wyclif's. Merely to quote the names of Lord Herbert and Hobbes, Locke and Hume, Bentham and Mill, Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer, will serve to show that every advance in thought has left conventionalism further behind than did the last. And it might be added that human life is so short, human capabilities so limited, human opinions so diverse, that it seems presumptuous for any man to claim absolute rectitude. Further, modern philosophy has everywhere confirmed the opinion of the inhabitants of More's "Utopia," who were "persuaded that it is not in a man's power to believe what he list."

I am a Freethinker because Freethought is the out-

* "Short History," p. 352.

come of man's mental and social evolution. Psychologists, or those scientists who deal with the facts presented by a study of the mind, tell us that thoughts—or, as they are called, cognitions—and sensations can be divided into two groups, those which are presentative and those which are representative. These groups merge into one another, and names are given to the different grades in each. They tell us, too, that during man's evolution the simplest presentative cognitions come first, and the more representative last. Liberty is one of the most representative of cognitions, and justice is another. Every one of us knows the joy we feel when our daily or weekly work is done and we can realise our hoped-for liberty. And the origin of the gratification we receive from freedom, of a more abstract sort, such as political or religious, is to be found in the joys experienced from most concrete liberties during generations past. And, as Freethinking is more representative than any of the liberties of which it is composed, political liberty, social liberty, religious liberty, and so on, so we may regard it as a later product of evolution. Just as liberty is the characteristic of more highly-developed men, and is not experienced by savages, so Freethinking is the necessary outcome of a still higher stage of mental evolution.

Primitive man displays neither exactness of thought, scepticism, nor criticism, and little or no modifiability of belief.* As we should expect from one in whose mind these more abstract ideas are absent, he is almost wholly influenced by the beliefs of his rulers or of his ancestors. He is a consistent upholder of the rights of authority and antiquity! We are told that "the Fijians are slaves to custom.....Though they may condemn a thing in itself, yet, if it is 'the custom,' they abide by it. Custom decides the most trifling observance."† Of the Dyaks, Rajah Brooke tells us that "custom seems simply to have become the law, and breaking custom leads to a fine." Kolff tells us of the Arafuras that there is no other "authority among them than the decisions of

* For a longer discussion on this point see "Freethinking and Free Inquiry," p. 60.

† Rev. J. Waterhouse's "The King and People of Fiji" (Wesleyan Con. Off. ; 1866), p. 309.

their elders, according to the customs of their forefathers." So ruled by custom are the Turcomans that even Mohammedanism among them has to adapt itself to their customs. "Long-acknowledged customs," we are told, control the Bechuanas of South Africa. Space will not allow me to give any more examples of how completely primitive man is ruled by the opinions of his ancestors. And the myths which have gathered round the names of great men show us how great has been his respect for authorities. This is all we can expect among men whose individual actions are spasmodic and cannot be trusted. Shall we be reckoned among these? I sincerely hope not. During the progress of civilisation the influence of custom has been considerably weakened. The perusal of the history of our constitution will leave us no doubt as to the dwindling of authority. At first the House of Commons was entirely at the mercy of the king. He called it together when he pleased, and dismissed it when he pleased. Its duty was simply to lay before him petitions; the king, with his council, made the laws. Gradually, but surely, has the popular House gained its supremacy. But, while it has done so, it has lost much of its own authority. It is now governed by the nation at large, and relies for its existence upon the people.

Shall we be condemned, then, for completing what human nature has already worked out? Society is yet far from being perfect. Let us, then, not rest upon our oars; let us be up and doing. Let us remember that our goal lies above us, and not in the depths beneath. Heedless of the rocks that crumble beneath our feet, heedless of pitfall or cranny, fearless of avalanche or ice, having left the reeky atmosphere of bond-thought behind us, let us not be content until we have planted upon the summit of thought the standard which has borne through all our watchword, "Excelsior," in the purer air of unadulterated freedom.

I am a Freethinker because the principle of Free-thought forms the rational standard of morals. Moral action can come into play only when two or more individuals are concerned by that action. As Mr. Spencer

says, in his "Data of Ethics": "Acts are called good or bad according as they are well or ill adjusted to ends;" and he says elsewhere: "The *ultimate* standards by which all men judge of behaviour are the resulting happiness or misery. We consider drunkenness wrong because of the physical degeneracy and accompanying moral evils entailed on the drunkard and his dependents. Did theft give pleasure both to taker and loser, we should not find it in our catalogue of sins."* This extract contains the whole gist of my argument. We consider that the highest morality which gives the greatest possible freedom to every one, and at the same time produces the least friction between all. Two armies go out to war. Now, every man is at liberty to kill any of his opponents. If we take a horde of savages, like the Turcomans, we have still less restraint. But their war cannot be called moral. Their freedom is purchased at the cost of the lives and liberties of their enemies. We do not consider murder and theft wrong because they have been condemned by several great men; nor because they have been considered wrong from time immemorial. We consider them wrong because they infringe the liberties of the victim. In deciding this question we, as Professor Fowler says, "look to the manner in which the action will affect the happiness or pleasure of those whom it concerns, or their welfare or well-being, or the development or perfection of their character."† We do not regard prudence as right because miracles have been worked in its favour, but because the want of it throws the individual upon the charity of others, and thus makes him a burden upon them. Unchastity is condemned because the practice of it would entail the complete, or at least partial, extinction of parental and filial cares and obligations, connubial unhappiness, and the physical and moral enfeeblement of offspring. It would, in fact, entail injuries not only upon one's neighbours, but also on untold future generations. Untruthfulness not only brings misery on the subject by incapacitating him from the trust of others; but, taken in its widest sense, as including deception, breach of faith, etc., it lays its victim open

* "Education," p. 102. † "Progressive Morality," p. 91.

to misery and unhappiness of all kinds. The evil effects of injustice need scarcely be discussed. We have all heard of men who, by a miscarriage of justice, have been reduced from easy circumstances to beggary. And we have sympathised with those who, from the injustice of their "sweating" employers, are dragging out, in the slums of our great cities, a life which is scarcely better than death itself. We have wandered somewhat from our point, still we shall be better able to see that the standard of rational ethics can be expressed in that motto of Freethinking: "Trench not on any other's equal right."

I have now briefly summarised the reasons for my Freethinking. These do not certainly exhaust the subject; but they will, no doubt, suffice for the present. This shall be my creed as a Freethinker: I believe in equal freedom for all men, so far as their natures will allow. To me, one of the grandest articles of religion yet formulated is to be found in these lines of our Freethinking poet:—

"Freedom within one law of sacred might:
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