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SECULARISM,

BY

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SECULARISM.

I.

SECULARISM, as a distinct system of practical philosophy, is still greatly misunderstood and misrepresented by many people of fairly average intelligence. It is a trite thing, prevalent almost in every circle of life, to find orthodox theologians very loud and flippant in their abuse of Secular thought without even possessing the merest elementary knowledge of its import or signification. Many good and pious people, totally unfamiliar with the wide world of ideas, express their abhorrence of it with fear and trembling, believing, in their culpable ignorance, that Secularism is a sort of convenient cover or apology for all the vile and vicious deeds of which mankind is capable. Other devout believers charitably aver that a vain desire for notoriety prompts its advocacy. Epigrammatic Christian phrases frequently contain the declaration that Secularism is but an additional synonym for the word sin.

Of course, the careful and patient student of science and philosophy does not marvel much at the typical inanity and insanity of these Christian ebullitions. His indignation is kept in check by his knowledge of the spiteful attitude which Christian unreason has invariably assumed, and still assumes, towards the expression of a new thought. History forcibly teaches him the lesson that the real progress of a new idea is lamentably slow. The human mind, emerging slowly yet surely from the mire of superstitiousness, is too tenacious of ancient follies and fictions. The slightest mental change necessitates *some* amount of moral courage, and this quality is doubtless a rarity in the world, only to be found here and there among the more solid and sterling characters. No mental effort is required to cherish the fables and dreams of childhood; to blindly obey the mystic influence of early impressions; to faithfully walk in the foot-prints of our superstitious fore-fathers; or to follow silently the thought-fashion of the age. The feeble mind of a child can easily follow these tendencies to perfection; but the birth of saner, sounder, and healthier thought, which brings the world sweetness and light, is solely dependent upon the vigorous activity of a fearless, manly mind. Moreover, moral rectitude and intellectual daring and robustness may be regarded as the surest and safest tests of manhood. But, alas! such noble traits of mind are not too numerous in this modern age of cant. It seems that the coward-crop, like the fool-crop, is perennial. Theology sternly exacts fashion

in thought, which, although involving the basest cowardice, is openly regarded as a sublime virtue meriting eternal reward, while independence of judgment is a crime of the blackest dye—deserving the flames of Hades. Before the world can be reformed, all this powerfully pernicious teaching must undergo thorough neutralisation or eradication. That the bracing and elevating influence of the philosophy of Secularism is capable of this, is my sincere and honest conviction.

II.

The meaning of Secularism.—Secularism has a most distinctive signification, a oneness of meaning. It is a positive affirmation of the supreme value and importance of this life. It means that to make the best possible use of the present existence is, not only to the unit, but to society in general, all in all. The word Secularism is a term which involves the decisive belief, utterly contrary to all theologies, that the powers and capabilities of human nature are reasonably adequate to meet the requirements of human life in all its multitudinous manifestations. This definition of necessity completely repudiates every vestige of dependence on supernaturalism as a necessary factor in human progress. Hence, to aim at the mastery and manipulation of natural forces, with the special object of providing such material conditions as shall lead to the promotion of human purity and happiness, constitutes the very life-blood of Secular thought. This humane and beneficent desire, springing eternally from a consciousness of the efficacy of self-help and self-reliance, is forced upon the intelligent freethinking mind by the extension and systematisation of man's knowledge of nature's intricate processes. Indeed all advancement is human, and not super-human; we know nothing of an intelligent progressive force outside humanity. Each rung in the ladder of progress is made and climbed by human skill and energy. Progress, like learning, has no royal road. The eye of reason has discovered no special supernatural apparatus or magical means whereby mankind can be materially elevated without effort. Perpetual motion would be as easy of discovery.

III.

The basis of Secularism.—The basis of Secular philosophy is sound and impregnable. The storms of controversy may rage as strongly and fiercely as possible about the superstructure of this system of thought, yet its foundation will remain unmoved and firm while human life endures. It has no vague guess or baseless dream for its corner-stone, but the solid and serious facts of conscious existence. If life has its pains and pleasures, if life is real, then Secularism has a basis of indisputable realism, because its teachings are formulated on the assumption of the stern reality of mundane affairs. Whatever development the psychical nature of man, that prolific source of religious consolation to traders in mysticism, may in future undergo, whatever brilliant truth science may hereafter reveal, the successful invalidation of

the basic principle of this philosophy is absolutely inconceivable. As surely as the indestructibility of matter and the conservation of energy have received scientific verification and sanction, so surely is Secularism based upon the stubbornness of the facts of life.

Whether Secularism involves Atheism, has been a question of much discussion. Mr. Bradlaugh and Mr. J. M. Robertson have ably expressed their judgment in the affirmative, while Mr. G. J. Holyoake, Mr. Charles Watts, and Mr. G. W. Foote plausibly maintain that Secularism is neither theistic nor Atheistic. With all due respect to this brilliant trio of Freethought advocates, I must frankly avow my warm appreciation and entire approval of the proposition, that logical Secularism necessarily involves practical Atheism. Because if Secularism has no God, then it is obviously godless, which simply means, even etymologically, Atheism (Gr. *a*, without, *theos*, God). There only seems to exist a verbal distinction between the two.

Philosophically considered, Secularism, while silently ignoring the question of theism (according to its founder, Mr. Holyoake), commits a practical repudiation of all forms of theistic thought by declaring itself absolutely independent of such in working out the problems of life. It does not, in any conceivable sense whatever, regard God as a necessary power or existence, therefore he is most lightly treated as a superfluous quantity, being altogether dispensable, so far as the teaching of Secularism is concerned. This (confessedly) thoughtless relegation of God to the region of unimportant trifles, as a subject, at any rate, unworthy of immediate attention, savors keenly of a spirit of disrespect and real blasphemy of which Atheism, even in its most positive stages, is happily incapable. Without Atheism, Secularism would certainly appear to me a curiously lopsided philosophy.

If I may venture a metaphor, Secularism, in my humble opinion, may be regarded as the visible part of the tree of Atheism. Its roots, and its conditions of growth, are truly godless. It grows healthier and stronger in ratio to the extent that the poisonous weeds of theism become eradicated from the garden of the human mind.

IV.

The teachings of Secularism.—The teachings of Secularism possess a positively inspiring charm. They aim to establish human welfare by purely natural means and methods. They thoroughly distrust the God, or providence, of theology. The salvation of the human race must be the means of human energy, human thought, and human work. Belief in the mystic power of dead gods tends to vitiate true manhood, and to weaken the spirit of self-help. Basing its principles upon natural grounds, Secularism teaches the cultivation and general development of the physical, intellectual, and moral powers of man to the highest degree attainable. It, therefore, encourages discussion, welcomes a fearless interchange of thought, and cherishes mental freedom. It desires man to be truthful, just, sober, virtuous, industrious, and self-reliant, not for the sake of celestial gain, but because these qualities

bring about in human society stability and happiness. There is no real happiness without truth, without sobriety, without effort, without freedom, without justice, without honor, without virtue, or without love.

Human reason, illumined by experience, is our monitor and director along the various paths of life. We know no other guide so reliable, so trustworthy, or so capable of wise discrimination and direction. Secularism therefore seeks to strengthen reason by cultivating its faculties, and to vividly generalise experience by all the means at command.

Secularism is pointedly severe in its moral doctrines. It does not recognise the power of any god to undo an act or forgive a crime when once perpetrated. It emphasises the fact that whenever a deed is once committed, it must undoubtedly have its influence for good or for evil in human society, and that a whole multitude of gods cannot destroy or neutralise its effect. It has no specially-constructed loop-hole whereby scoundrelism and infamy may easily escape their natural punishment at the "eleventh hour." This degrading arrangement, with all its attendant evil influences, is the conspicuous virtue of the Christian scheme of salvation. From the same source we hear much about a wash in the "blood of Jesus;" but Secularism has a decided preference for pure water and Pears' soap. Secularism declares that our actions in every sphere of life concern our fellow-men. It finds, therefore, the source of moral obligation in human nature. Human conduct is tested by, and valued for, its power for good in this life. Moral culture and mental discipline are thus recognised as necessary to strengthen and deepen human love and sympathy, and to purify and ennoble human character.

V.

The destructive and constructive elements of Secularism.—If we were to see a gardener diligently scattering his valuable flower-seed broadcast on a piece of ground densely covered with weeds and brushwood, what would be our first and last impression? Should we not have grave doubts as to his sanity? We should wonder why he had not, like a sensible cultivator, prepared the ground for that purpose by clearing away all the useless and worthless growths. Just so; and our surprise would be quite natural and reasonable in the circumstances. Now the Secularist is the gardener of the human mind. He starts about his work in a proper manner. He seeks to destroy all the useless and worthless beliefs which are only so many mental weeds whose presence is harmful to the growth of better things. From this it will be seen that Secularism has certain necessary destructive work to do.

Secularism, in its struggle for existence, aims, like every other system of thought or theology, to completely destroy all those adverse elements which militate against its success, and with which it finds itself in ceaseless antagonism. I therefore maintain, that Christianity, in its various forms and aspects cannot be logically or practically overlooked

by Secularism. Its hollow claims and pretensions must be openly disputed and discredited before real Secular progress is possible. When people have been born and trained amidst Christian influences, we have to gradually convince them by a process of negative criticism that the Christian doctrines are utterly unworthy of credence, and the Christian God unworthy of worship, before they will abandon these teachings as trivial and unimportant. The magic spell of the Christian superstition must be broken, and its immoral allurements deprived of their enchantment, ere the common multitude can find a sufficiency of importance and interest in human affairs. We must show that heaven and hell are empty dreams, in order to profitably utilise that attention which is at present absorbed in yearning for the former and dreading the latter. All this means destructive work, but work which is highly imperative if Secular ideals are to be endowed with life.

There is a parrot-cry among a certain section of Christian wailers that Secularism is too destructive. Possibly it is for their narrow and puny creeds. It is unsparingly destructive of the foul and false, and of all the priestly obstacles which impede the glorious onward march of freedom, of knowledge, and of enlightenment. Theological religion may be likened unto a huge tree whose fruit is deadly injurious to the mental health and progress of our race, and it is the primary duty of Secularism to raze it relentlessly to the ground.

Let us glance for a moment at the constructive side of Secular philosophy. There is no system on earth more positive and constructive than Secularism. It has humanity for its material, the world for its workshop, and all the sciences and arts for its levers and instruments. It has human duties to perform, human life to make happy, human rights to protect, human liberty to extend, and human knowledge to increase. These objects are truly noble and inspiring; but they are painfully difficult of accomplishment. The barbarous practice of cringing on our knees in offering lazy prayers to God lends us no assistance. Indeed, after many centuries of incessant Christian supplication, God is still deaf and dumb. No audible word has yet escaped his lips, no authentic answer has yet been recorded. Still the priests are busy, still they pray—because still the people pay them well for their trouble. If the clergy sincerely believe in the efficacy of prayer, let them by all means at once call the attention of the deity to the starving unemployed. If he should answer by showering manna from heaven upon the place beneath, then he would furnish us with a little evidence for the first time that he is a being worthy of human gratitude.

But prayer, I fear, rather paralyses man's spirit of self-help, and powerfully retards his advancement. The problems of life are terribly real and serious, and we must meet them with head erect and courageous heart, like the brave soldier meets his foe. Their solution is only possible through the brain of man. No light from heaven is visible. By studying the laws of life we steadily become better able to trace the connection between cause and effect. That a knowledge of the laws of health will guard us against disease, is a common fact. Thus Science is proved to be our Savior.

Secularism is positive to every true and useful thing in life. While it mercilessly sweeps away the dusty *débris* of ancient myths with the broom of Science, it wisely utilises the cleared ground for the erection of purer and saner fabrics that eloquently bespeak the progress and culture of human thought. Being a philosophy based on the verities of the pains and pleasures of this life, and on the improbability of life's conditions by purely human work, Secularism naturally confines itself, in its diverse activities, to the domain of the known, of the verifiable. Recognising the obvious barrenness of supernaturalism for good, it has a reasonable belief in the potency and sufficiency of the powers of man. It knows that the sacredness and sweetness of the domestic temple are the rich products of human qualities, such as justice, equality, fidelity, affection and love. It believes that the persistence of human thought, sincerity, honesty, veracity, liberty, and integrity, endows a nation with the grand and glorious element of lasting stability. It has hope and trust in man. It has faith in his capabilities. It sees in him the power that makes for light and for glory. It beholds in him not God, but rather God's maker and the world's real redeemer.

Secularism is sanity of thought and sanity of action. Science and Secularism have therefore mutual sympathies and reciprocal influences. One materially fosters the development of the other. They never fight or struggle for supremacy. They are invariably hand in hand in firmest friendship.

Secularism teaches us to live one life at a time, and live that well. It professes no knowledge of any other. It neither affirms, nor denies, nor hopes for, immortal life. It regards the realities of this mundane existence as sufficiently adequate to engage the attention and thought of man. If we honestly do our best while living, we need have no fear of the cold still silence of Death, around which theology's base designs have hung a myriad terrors. If there is a life beyond the tomb, true and brave service here in humanity's behalf should be the highest possible qualification to merit and gain its choicest felicity. One thing, above all others, is certain: we live on this earth; this life is modifiable; its sum of pain, or pleasure, may be increased or diminished by the conduct of man; then let us like sane beings so shape our conduct that the sunshine of true happiness may illumine every human heart, and brighten every home. Let us teach our children the stern yet true doctrine, that man must save himself; that they must think and work; and that, however unpleasant it may be to the coward and sluggard—*Labor omnia vincit*.

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