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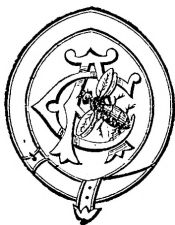
The Atheistic Platform.

XII.

WHY SHOULD  
ATHEISTS BE  
PERSECUTED?

BY

ANNIE BESANT.



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## THE ATHEISTIC PLATFORM.

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## WHY SHOULD ATHEISTS BE PERSECUTED ?

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FRIENDS,—In the old days, when Christianity was feeble and Paganism was strong, when Christians had to plead to Pagans for toleration as Atheists have to plead to Christians now, Christians from time to time put forth an Apology for their faith. Thus Justin Martyr pleaded before the Emperor Antoninus, and other Apologies are to be found in the literature of the early Christian Church. The word Apology was not used in its modern sense of excuse, of submissive phrase; it was an Apologia, a defence of the faith believed in, a vindication of the principles held. To-day, I Atheist, in a Christian community, stand as did the Christian in the second century in a Pagan society; and I put forth an Apologia, a defence, a vindication of my faith. Faith, in the noblest sense of that much-abused word, for it is a belief based on reason, intellectually satisfying, morally regulative, socially reformatory.

I will take it for granted, for the purposes of this lecture, that the majority of you present here—as of the wider public outside—belong to the religion known as Christian. It is to Christians that this vindication of Atheism is addressed, and my aim in this lecture is a well-defined one; I am not going to ask from you any agreement in my speculative views; I am not going to try to convince you that Atheism is speculatively accurate; I am only going to propose to you, and to answer in the negative, the following question: Granted an Atheist or a small number of Atheists, in a Christian community, is there any reason why he or they should be persecuted, for the intellectual, moral, or social doctrines held and published? Is

there anything in Atheism, in its intellectual speculations, in its moral teaching, in its social theories, which makes it dangerous to the prosperity, progress and well-being of the society in which it is professed?

Such is the question I propose to you. I of course shall answer it in the negative, and shall try to show you that whether Atheistic speculations be true or false, the Atheistic spirit is of vital importance to society. And at the very outset let me remind you of the remarkable testimony borne to the social aspect of Atheism by the great philosopher Bacon: "Atheism leaves a man to sense, to philosophy, to natural piety, to laws, to reputation, all of which may be guides to an outward moral virtue, though religion were not; but superstition dismounts all these and erecteth an absolute monarchy in the mind of men; therefore Atheism never did perturb States, for it makes men wary of themselves, as looking no further; and we see the times inclined to Atheism, as the times of Augustus Cæsar, were civil times; but superstition has been the confusion of many States." Yet though he thus wrote, Bacon was not an Atheist, for he said (I here quote from memory): "A little knowledge inclineth a man to Atheism, but deeper search brings him back to religion." These are not, therefore, the words of the Atheist on his own behalf, but the testimony of an opponent who has studied the history of the past.

Strange, indeed, it is to those who know that record of history to remark how Superstition is condoned to-day, while Atheism is condemned. The wildest vagaries of Superstition are excused, while the very word Atheism is held to connote immorality. Take the Salvation Army; it may shut up young lads and lasses for an "all-night service," in which they "creep for Jesus" in a hall with locked doors; when the natural result follows of gross immorality, excuses are made for the leaders that "their motives are good." But let a man be known as an Atheist, and though his life be spotless, his honor unstained, his integrity unsoiled, there is no slander too vile to be believed of him, no libel too baseless or too foul to be credited about his character. Superstition has lighted stakes, built Inquisitions, turned the wheels of the rack, made red-hot the pincers to tear men's flesh, has slaughtered, tormented, burned and ravaged, till the pages of her history are



blotted with tears and drip with blood. Atheism has slain none, tortured none; yet men welcome the cubs of the wolf that will prey on them, and hunt down the watch-dog that would protect.

1. Is there anything in Atheism in its intellectual aspect which should make it mischievous to society? To answer this part of the question we must analyse the Atheistic type of mind and seek its chief and essential characteristic. If you do this you will, I think, find that the Atheistic mind is essentially of the challenging, the questioning, the investigating type. It is of that type which will not accept a thing because it is old, nor believe it because it is venerable. It demands to understand before it admits, to be convinced before it believes. Authority, *quod* authority, it does not respect; the authority must prove itself to be based on reason and on knowledge before cap may be doffed to it or knee bent in homage. Nor is this questioning silenced by an answer that really leaves unresolved the problem. The Atheistic spirit remains unsatisfied until it has reached, to use an expressive Americanism, "the bed-rock" of the matter in hand. If an answer is not to be had, the Atheistic spirit can contentedly keep its opinion in suspense, but cannot believe.

Now there is no doubt that this type of mind—which is in the psychical world like the explorer in the physical—is one which is very unpleasant to the mentally lazy, and unfortunately the majority, even in a civilised land, is composed of mentally lazy people. Words are very loosely used by most folk, and they are apt to be angry when they are forced, by questioning, to try and think what they really do mean by the phrases they employ as a matter of course. We all know how impatient foolish mothers and nurses grow with a child's ceaseless questions. A bright, healthy, intelligent child is always asking questions, and if it is unlucky enough to live among careless, thoughtless people, it too often happens that, unable to answer fully, and too conceited to say "I do not know," the elder person will give it a slap, and tell it not to be so tiresome. The Atheist questioner meets with similar treatment; society, too ignorant, or too lazy to grapple with his enquiries, gives him a slap and puts him in the corner.

None the less is this challenging, questioning type of the most priceless value to society. Without it, progress is

impossible. Without it every childish superstition would be immortal, every mouldy tradition would reign for ever over men. And the challenge is useful, whether addressed to truth or to falsehood. It injures no truth. A truth is vindicated by enquiry; those who hold a truth only become more certain of it when questioning forces them to re-examine the grounds on which it rests. But a lie perishes under investigation as a moth shrivels in the flame. Progress can be made only by re-affirming truth known, by discovering truth hitherto unknown, and by destroying ancient falsehoods. Hence the value to society of the challenging Atheistic type, whether its speculations be right or wrong.

Professor Tyndall has proclaimed in noble words his preference for intellectual effort, rather than for intellectual sleep. In his celebrated Presidential Address at the meeting of the British Association at Belfast, he said, dealing with his own views, and in warning to his hearers: "As regards myself, they are not the growth of a day; and as regards you, I thought you ought to know the environment which, with or without your consent, is rapidly surrounding you, and in relation to which some adjustment on your part may be necessary. A hint of Hamlet's, however, teaches us all how the troubles of common life may be ended; and it is perfectly possible for you and me to purchase intellectual peace at the price of intellectual death. The world is not without refugees of this description; nor is it wanting in persons who seek their shelter, and try to persuade others to do the same. The unstable and the weak have yielded, and will yield to this persuasion, and they to whom repose is sweeter than the truth. But I would exhort you to refuse the offered shelter and to scorn the base repose—to accept, if the choice be forced upon you, commotion before stagnation, the leap of the torrent before the stillness of the swamp."

It is this leap of the torrent which the Atheist faces, feeling that he can better breast the rapids, even if drowning be the penalty, than float idly on down the lazy current of popular opinion. To "refuse the offered shelter and to scorn the base repose" is to show the martyr-spirit that welcomes death rather than dishonor, and the noblest faith in Truth that man can have is proved when he flings

himself into the billows of fact, let them cast him up on what shore they may.

Well was it said by a noble and earnest thinker that Atheism was oft-times "the truest trust in Truth." A legend says that in a pagan land a God was worshipped, at whose shrine was sacrificed all that was most precious and most beloved. At last, revolt was made against the hideous deity, and one man, young and brave, stood forth to challenge the wrath of the mighty God. Round the statue of the deity stood thousands of his worshippers; amid dead silence walked forth the heroic youth, a javelin in his hand. Face to face he stood with the God, and poising his weapon, he cried aloud: "God, if God thou be, answer with thy thunderbolt the spear I fling!" And as he spoke, the strong right arm launched the javelin, and it struck full and fair, and quivered in the heart of the God. An awful silence fell on the crouching multitude, as they waited for the lightning which should flash out in answer to the insult. But lo! there was none, nor any that regarded, and the silence brooded unbroken over the pierced statue, and the blasphemer who had defied the God. There was silence. Then, a long breath of relief; then, a cry of rapture; and the crowd who had knelt flung itself on the riven statue and only a heap of dust told where a God had been. Atheist was that bold challenger, that questioner of a long-held faith; and he freed his nation from the yoke of a spectre, and shivered one of the superstitions of his time. Atheist is each who challenges an ancient folly, and who, greatly daring, sets his life as wager against a lie.

This same questioning spirit, applied to the God-idea, has given Atheism its distinctive name. It finds the God-idea prevalent and it challenges it. It does not deny, but it "wants to know" before it accepts, it demands proof before it believes. The orthodox say: "Do you believe in God?" The Atheist answers: "What is God? You must tell me what you believe in, ere I can answer your question." And then arises the difficulty, for the word "God" is used "rather to hide ignorance, than to express knowledge" (Bradlaugh), and the worshipper anathematizes the Atheist because he does not adore that which he himself cannot explain or define.

Sometimes the Atheist analyses the metaphysical definitions of God and finds them meaningless. One instance



will here serve as well as a dozen. Take the phrase that "God is Absolute Being." But, says Dean Mansel, in his famous Bampton lectures (2nd. Ed., pp. 44, 45, 49), "by the Absolute is meant that which exists in, and by itself, having no necessary relation to any other being. . . . That which is conceived as absolute and infinite, must be conceived as containing within itself the sum, not only of all actual, but of all possible modes of being. For if any actual mode can be denied of it, it is related to that mode, and limited by it; and if any possible mode can be denied of it, it is capable of becoming more than it now is, and such a capability is a limitation. . . . The absolute cannot be conceived as conscious, neither can it be conceived as unconscious; it cannot be conceived as complex, neither can it be conceived as simple; it cannot be conceived by difference, neither can it be conceived by the absence of difference; it cannot be identified with the universe, neither can it be distinguished from it." Such is the description of the Absolute, given by a great Christian philosopher. If then by knowledge or by worship I enter into a relation with God, I at once destroy him as the Absolute. If he be Absolute Existence, he is for ever unknowable to man. Why should the Atheist be persecuted because he refuses either to affirm or to deny that which by the definition of the believer cannot be known or distinguished?

Pass from metaphysics, and take God as "the First Cause." "Every effect must have a cause, and therefore the universe must have a creator." Will you kindly tell me, ere I examine your argument, what you mean by the word "effect"? Only one definition can be given: something that results from a cause. "Everything that results from a cause must have a cause." Granted. "Therefore the universe must have a creator." Stop, not so fast. You must show that the universe *is* an effect, *i.e.*, that it results from a cause, before you can logically make this statement, and that is the very point you set out to prove. You are begging the very question in dispute. Besides if your argument were valid, it would go too far, for then behind your creator of the universe, you would need a creator of the creator, and so on backwards *ad infinitum*. The truth is that in speaking of causation we must keep within the realm of experience; we might as well try to

plumb the mid-Atlantic with a five-fathom line, as try to fathom the mystery of existence with our brief experimental sounding lead. Christians believe where their knowledge ends; Atheists suspend their judgments and wait for light.

"God is the designer of the world, and it shows the marks of his handiwork." Did he design the beast of prey, the carnivorous plant, the tape-worm, the tsetse? did he design that life should be sustained by slaughter, and the awful struggle for existence? did he design the pestilence and the famine, the earthquake and the volcanic eruption? Is "Nature, red in tooth and claw with ravin," the work of all-loving God?

"God is all-good." Then whence comes evil? As long as man has thought, he has wearied himself over the problem of the existence of evil in the work of an all-good God. If evil be as eternal as good, then the Persian view of the co-equal powers of darkness and light as fashioners of the world is more rational than the Christian. If it be not eternal, if there were a time when only God existed and he was good, then evil can only have resulted from his creative will, and sustained approval. Man Friday's question, "Why does not God kill the Devil?" puts in a concrete form the problem that no Christian philosopher has ever solved. The scientific student recognises the nature and the reason for what we call evil; the Christian gazes with hopeless bewilderment at the marring of the work of his all good and almighty God.

Further; from his examination of the many Gods of the world, the Atheist comes to the conclusion that they are man-made. The God of every nation is in the same stage of civilisation as is the nation itself. Such variety would be incredible if there were an entity behind the fancy. Compare the God of the savage and of the European philosopher; the savage worships a concrete being, brutal, bloody, ferocious as himself; the philosopher an abstract idea, a tendency "not ourselves, which makes for righteousness." Is there one reality which is worshipped by the King of Dahomey and by Matthew Arnold? In face of such varieties what can the Atheist think but that "God" is the reflexion of man, an image not an object?

The Atheist waits for proof of God. Till that proof



comes he remains, as his name implies, without God. His mind is open to every new truth, after it has passed the warder Reason at the gate. All his hope for a true theory of the world is fixed on Science, Science which has written for us the only trustworthy record of the past, and which is daily writing new pages of the book of knowledge.

What is there in all this to make men persecute the Atheist? In this intellectual attitude there is surely no crime. Some people say that Atheists lack a sense possessed by others, in that they do not intuit God, as blind men lack the vision others enjoy. Suppose it be so, is that any reason for persecuting them? Do the people who can see try to hunt down those who are blind? I could understand their pitying us if they possess a joy we do not share, but I cannot understand their wanting to make us suffer because we are bereft of a faculty enjoyed by them. And indeed I believe that the noblest and best Christians thus regard the matter, and regard Atheists with generous sorrow, not with hatred. But the vast majority have but little faith in God and little love to man. Our outspoken unbelief stirs the hidden doubts which lie in their own minds, and they fear lest we should wake them into activity. They want to believe, because belief is easy and unbelief hard, belief is profitable and unbelief dangerous, and so they hate and persecute those whose courage is a reproach to their cowardice. It is not Christian faith nor Christian truth that incites to modern persecution; it is Christian hypocrisy and Christian doubt.

Turn from the intellectual to the moral aspect of Atheism and it is on this that the bitterest attacks are made. Atheism being without God, it must seek in man the basis for its moral code, and being without immortality it must find its motives and its sanctions on this side the grave. Atheistic morality must be founded on man as a social being, and must be built up by observation and reflexion. Clearly, then, it must be Utilitarian; that is, it must set before it Happiness as the object of life; all that, generally practised, tends to increase the general happiness is Right; all that, generally practised, tends to decrease the general happiness is Wrong.

To this theory the objection is often raised that Virtue and not Happiness should be the end of life. But what are virtues save those qualities which tend to produce

happiness, vices those which tend to produce misery and social disorganisation? If murder strengthened respect for human life; if falsehood increased confidence between man and man; if love and trust and purity shattered the society in which they flourished; in a word if virtue made society miserable while vice raised and ennobled it, do you think that vice would long be stamped with social disapproval? Men are unconsciously Utilitarian, and what is called virtue is the means to the end, happiness. By the Law of Association the means and the end become joined in thought, and the longing for the end brings about love of the means.

Let me illustrate what I mean by a case in which prejudice is less felt than in that of virtue and happiness. Money is valuable as a means to all it can purchase; when a man earns and saves money, he earns and saves it not for itself but for all which he can procure with it. The little bits of gold and silver have no value in themselves; they are valuable only for the comfort, the enjoyment, the leisure which they symbolise. Yet sometimes the means, money, takes the place of the end it is generally used to procure, and the miser, forgetting the end, sets his heart on the means for itself, and he loves the coins and gathers them together and heaps them up, and denies himself all money could buy for the sake of hoarding the gold. In similar fashion have men learned to love virtue, first for the sake of the happiness it brought, and then by natural transition for itself.

But, it is said, the renunciation of personal happiness is often right; how can Utilitarianism be consistent with the noblest of human virtues, self-sacrifice. When is the renunciation of personal happiness right? When the renunciation of happiness by one renders needless the renunciation of happiness by many; that is, when it tends to the general good. The man who sacrifices himself for nothing is a lunatic; he who sacrifices himself to save others from suffering is a hero. The individual suffers loss, but the general good is increased.

A curious *volte-face* is often made by our antagonists. After declaring that Utilitarianism is low and selfish, they suddenly assert that the Utilitarian motive is too high to affect ordinary folk. The "general good," they say, is too vague and abstract a thing to be used for moralising

the populace. I deny it. If a man is exceptionally degraded, you may find your only appeal must be to himself or to his immediate surroundings, but the great majority answer to a wider summons, as do plants to the sunlight. For your lowest type of man you must use selfish motives, but even with him you may endeavor to at least touch him with family, if not with social claims, and so gradually train him to regard himself as a unit in a community rather than as an isolated existence. Penalty must educate the lowest types into recognition of social duty, but the majority of civilised mankind respond to a higher call. And that this is so we may prove by a mere appeal to statistics. The Atheists, with no fear of hell nor hope of heaven, with only the general good as motive and social happiness as aim, contribute fewer, in proportion to their number, to the criminal classes, than does any Christian sect, with all the supposed advantages of Christianity. If Atheism be morally dangerous to Society, why should Atheism have a cleaner record than that of any Christian body?

I ask again: What is there in our Atheistic Utilitarian code of morals that should justify our persecution? It tends to make us seek the happiness of Society in preference to our own, and to put the general before our individual good. Christians who look to be rewarded for their goodness may scoff at our disinterestedness, but at least it does not injure them, and they lose nothing because we seek not a crown on the other side the grave. To us "Virtue is its own reward;" we sing with Alfred Tennyson, ere he sank into a Baron:

"Glory of warrior, glory of orator, glory of song,  
Paid with a voice flying by to be lost on an endless sea—  
Glory of virtue to fight, to struggle, to right the wrong—  
Nay, but she aimed not at glory, no lover of glory she;  
Give her the glory of going on, and still to be."

But is there anything in the social views of the Atheist which may, perchance, justify his ostracism? And here, at last, we shall come to the *crux* of our difficulty. The Atheist, being without God, cannot recognise as Divine the present order of Society; he claims happiness for all, and he sees one portion of Society rioting in luxury while another is steeped in penury; at one end of the social scale he sees men so wealthy that they cannot even



waste fast enough the riches they own, while at the other men are so poor that they cannot even feel sure whence shall come their next week's food; he notes that the wealthiest are the idlest, while the poorest are the most laborious; that those who produce least consume most, while those who produce most consume least; and he demands social reconstruction.

No one with a brain and a heart can contrast the different conditions into which the children of the rich and the poor are born, and remain satisfied with Society as it is. The rich man's child is born into pure air, into healthy surroundings; its food is carefully suited to its delicate organs; its clothes vary with the changes of the weather; the most watchful care fosters and cherishes it; as its faculties expand it is guarded from every injurious influence; it is coaxed along the right road; all good is made easy and attractive to it, all evil difficult and repulsive; the best education is given to the growing lad that money can buy; body and brain are alike tended and developed; in manhood, life's prizes are open to him, and if he plunges into crime he does it from an inborn tendency that no purity of environment has been able to eradicate.

Now contrast the case of the child born into some filthy overcrowded den in a thieves' quarter. Its father is a burglar, its mother a harlot. It is born into squalor, and foul air, and noisome surroundings; its mother's milk is gin-polluted; its clothes are filthy rags; its education consists of kicks and curses; foul language is its grammar, foul thoughts its mental food; crime is a necessity of its life; there is no possibility open to it save the reeking court and the gaol.

The case of the child of the honest but poor worker is far other than this, but it is not what it should be. The family is but too often overcrowded and underfed; the father is over-burdened with wage-winning; the mother over-sharpened with anxiety; education is rushed through; work comes too early in life; and while dauntless courage, unwearying patience and mighty brain power may raise the poor man's son into prominence, he can only win by most exceptional endowment that which comes to the rich man's son by chance of birth. Again I say, that looking at these tremendous inequalities, the Atheist must demand social reconstruction.

And first, he declares that every adult member of society should be a worker, that none should live who does not labor. There is a certain amount of work to be done, and if some shoulders bear none of the burden, others must bear more than ought fairly to fall to their lot. If an idle class exists in a community, an over-worked class must exist to balance it. The Christian declares that labor is a curse; the Atheist that labor is a good; neither brain nor muscle can be developed without exercise, and both mental and physical effort are necessary for the due growth of man. Even the idle classes recognise that physical exertion is necessary for physical strength, and there is no reason why the muscle developed by them in games, should not be developed equally well, and with equal physical enjoyment, in useful work. I do not want to see games abolished, but I do want to see them more equally distributed. All would be the better if the athletic "aristocrat" spent some of his strength in labor, and the artisan some of his in sport.

Further, the Atheist declares that each should have time of leisure. Without leisure, no mental improvement is possible. If a man is wearied out physically, he is not fit to toil mentally, and only as all take their share of work can all enjoy their share of leisure. Those who make society's wealth have but small share of leisure to-day; and remember that leisure should include time for mental work and for complete relaxation. Healthy human life should be made up of physical effort, mental effort, play, food-time and sleep. Not one of these can be omitted from a healthy life.

And see the gain in enjoyment brought about by the training of mental faculty. Lately I went for a brief holiday into a lonely part of Scotland; there was no "society" there, but there were hills and water and clouds; glorious light and shade and color; radiant glow of flowers and plash of mountain rills. To me, the beauty, the stillness, the ripple of water, the glory of moor and wood, gave the most exquisite enjoyment. But imagine a woman taken from some filthy London court, and set down in the midst of that solitude; ere a day was over she would be wearying for the revelry of the gin-palace, the excitement of the fifth-rate music-hall. Why such difference between her and me? Because I am educated and she is not. Because



my faculties have been drawn out, trained, and cultured. Hers have been dwarfed, withered and destroyed.

I claim for all the joy that I have in life, in beauty, in nature and in art. Why should Society have bestowed so much on me, while it leaves my sister beggared ?

But in order that the adult may be cultivated, the child must be educated. The school-life of the workers is too short. The children's pennies are wanted to swell the wages of the family, whereas the father's wage should be sufficient for all until the children grow into manhood and womanhood. And the children should have technical, as well as book education. In Germany all children learn a trade, and the present Crown Prince is said to be a cabinet-maker, some of his palace furniture having been made by his own hands. If all children were trained in brain and in fingers, then ability, not birth, would decide the path in life. There is many a brain now lying fallow in workshop and behind the plough, which might have been of priceless service to England had it been set to its fit work ; and there is many a brain, high in the council-chambers of the nation, scarce fit to direct the fingers in the most unskilled labor. A just system of national education would classify thinkers and manual laborers aright, and would draft the one for higher education, the other for rougher forms of toil, without regard to the superstition of birth, or to anything save the capacities given by Nature to each child.

Moreover this education should be really "national." All children, rich and poor together, should go to the National Schools. There should be no distinctions, no differences of rank permitted in the schools, save the distinctions of ability and of merit. Thus would class-distinctions be eradicated, and those who had sat side by side on the same schoolbench could never, in later life, dream they were of different clay. To such suggestion as this it is sometimes objected that the vulgar manners of the poor child would coarsen those of the rich. Friends, the Atheist seeks to destroy that vulgarity ; it is the outcome of neglected education, of that absence of refinement of thought and of life, that results from the shutting up of the poor into one dreary round of ceaseless toil. The difficulty would only arise during the first generation of common school-life, and the teachers by careful supervision

might easily prevent any real harm from arising. If any children were found to use coarse language, they could be separated off, until they understood that indecency would not be tolerated. As a rule, absolute coarseness of language and gesture would be found only in the children of the criminal classes, and they should be taught in different schools.

The Atheist looks forward to, and works towards, a Society in which class-distinctions shall have vanished, in which all shall be equal before the law, all shall be given equal opportunities, and shall share equal education in their youth. From that Society both crime and poverty shall have vanished; the workhouse and the gaol shall have passed away. Small wonder then that the Atheist should be persecuted; he is hated by the idle wealthy, by the aristocratic pauper who lives on other men's toil; these set the fashion of social ostracism, and the fashion is followed by the thousands who ape and echo those above them in the social scale. None the less is the Atheist hope already shining above the horizon, and sunned in the warmth of that radiance he waits patiently for the coming noon.