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WHAT IS A FREETHINKER?

WITH A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO

MR. R. W. DALE, M.A.,

On "Atheism and the House of Commons."

BY

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"Get knowledge, get wisdom, with all thy getting,
get understanding."

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WHAT IS A FREETHINKER ?

THE Saxon word Free means not in a state of vassalage, not under restraint, not ruled or obstructed by arbitrary or despotic power. When we speak of a Free people we do not mean a wild, reckless gang of robbers, but people subject to fixed laws only, living under government—but one made by the consent of the governed. A Freethinker is one who thinks without the restraint of any church, priest, or king, but under the conditions common to all thinking beings, the laws of their own nature, and those of the great universe of which they form a part.

A very good lexicon (Imperial) defines Freethinker—a Deist, an Unbeliever ; one who discards revelation, and calls it “a softer name.”

Secularism has been erroneously called a disguise or a cover for the harsh sounding names Atheist and Infidel, while the fact is Secularism expresses the policy of a life based on purely human considerations, altogether independent of Atheism and theology of all kinds.

No doubt new names tone down public feeling, cool inflamed bigotry, and give reason and common sense a chance of being heard. But in both these cases here referred to it is not only a change of names, but also of the things signified, which are not represented by the old names. Secularism implies progress towards right and light, and is not a negation. Forty years ago it was a very common saying—

“Give a dog a bad name and you may as well hang him.” At that time, and for hundreds of years before, to be even *suspected* of being a Freethinker was not free from peril. Names require new definitions, because with an increase of knowledge, come new distinctions. I remember the social inconvenience of being called “a Methodist,” and an Unitarian was considered a kind of wild animal, whose habits and peculiarities were not generally known—and hence to be avoided by all prudent people. At that time Christians never met on what they call “common ground.” In fact the “common ground” itself was undiscovered. It is not impossible that by the end of the present century persons of every creed and of no theological creed at all, may meet as *men* for the promotion of all political and social measures for the common good. It will then be seen that the evil is not the inclusion of all, but the exclusion of any, who can render service to society. To ask a man’s theological opinions will then be thought an unpardonable impertinence, showing ignorance or a want of good manners. The public are not very particular in the use of words. Hence VOLTAIRE and PAINE are absurdly called Atheists—a term these two great Freethinkers would have repudiated with as much justice as the Bishop of LONDON or Mr. SPURGEON might, if the term were applied to them. Those two great defenders of Free-thought were devout believers in God and a future state. The same remarks apply to HUME and GIBBON. The term “Atheist” is probably the most popular, the most successful, and certainly the most ancient, of all the names by which people have been held up to the scorn, hatred, or contempt of mankind. More than 2,000 years ago one of the best men alive was called an Atheist: SOCRATES was distinctly charged with Atheism. The Christians who are so fond of the epithet were themselves denounced as Atheists in their early days.

Afterwards Christians denounced each other as Atheists, as ATHANASIUS did ARIUS, as the Catholics did ERASMUS. In a work by Maréchal entitled, "A Dictionary of Atheists," it is shown, as the late GEORGE DAWSON once said to me, that every great man from JESUS CHRIST downwards has been called Atheist. Persons who first disbelieved *in witchcraft* were called Infidels and Atheists by eminent writers of the period. Even telescopes were denounced as atheistical inventions, because they extended human vision beyond the limits fixed by God in the natural eye. The folly or at least the absurdity indulged in by Christians is singularly displayed in their calling Deists infidels and atheists, while they show their affection for Theists as being men and brothers. Deist and Theist mean the same, the only distinction is that one comes to us from the Latin and the other from the Greek. They both believe in God, although they differ about his active interference in writing books, working miracles, and some other matters. It has often struck me as peculiar that the many millions of people in the East who do not believe in a Supreme Being have escaped the wrath of the Christian missionaries. Perhaps being so numerous, and all alike, the application of the opprobrious epithet Atheist would prove a failure. If Atheists were as plentiful as blackberries in England they would probably be deemed as harmless. The majority of Freethinkers have been believers in God and a future state. A Deist, Pantheist, Theist, or an Atheist may be a Freethinker; but a Freethinker may not be either.

A milestone may be made of wood or iron or partly of both—the term indicates now a definite idea apart from its material. A lunatic now need not necessarily be affected by the moon, and many persons are now melancholy who are not always sufferers from black bile. An absurd answer was such an answer as a deaf person would make, but now many

persons who are not deaf make absurd answers. We now say a steamer sails on a certain day, but it may not have a sail on board.

The word person is said to have originated from a mask worn by actors. Their personation of great characters led to others, distinguished by certain forms or peculiarities of character, being called personators or persons. The word became associated with events and persons of the highest importance and the greatest dignity in human affairs—hence the word person was applied to men, and angels, and even God himself was called a person. The word Religion, in early times, meant the obligation of a man to do his duty to and by the State—now it may mean a sort of theological pantomime, or it may mean an intelligible creed deduced from the Old and New Testaments.

The chief distinction between a Freethinker and other thinkers on matters theological is that his own reason is his authority in determining the value of all evidence submitted to it. The Bible, the Church, the Pope, and all the articles of faith, by whomsoever promulgated, are to the Freethinker only *human authorities*, to be tested like all other authorities, and to be accepted or rejected on exactly the same grounds. If a person believes that the Bible or any other book is infallible—inspired by an all-wise supernatural agency, and entirely exempt from error, he is bound to accept, without question, whatever the book says, and therefore cannot be in any rational sense a Freethinker. Of course a Freethinker may believe that God inspires all great writers and speakers; but he holds the right to decide for himself which of the writers or speakers are inspired, and to what extent they claim his allegiance. His intellect, by which he judges, is at least as divine as the intellect which produces the poem or any work of art. He never expects other Freethinkers to

take the same view as himself, however much he may desire it, or try to persuade others. All conclusions arrived at after diligent and honest enquiry are equally justifiable, equally innocent, although they may, in his opinion, differ vastly in importance. The *conclusions* of Freethinkers may be, and doubtless are variable ; but their method of following reason, guided by knowledge and experience, unawed by all authority but truth, is clearly distinctive to all who care to understand in what respect it differs from the method of all other thinkers. A Freethinker is not, as is commonly asserted, a person who repudiates all great authorities, and treats lightly the great faiths of the world. He is the one person, above all others, who takes the trouble to read and examine them. It is the believer, and not the unbeliever, who takes things on trust and assents in most cases without examination. It is a clear indication of industry, intelligence, and patient research if a person obtains the reputation of being a Freethinker. You will seldom find ignorant Freethinkers, or any who lack moral courage. A Freethinker is always an earnest thinker—one who cares to know the truth, and is prepared to suffer the consequences of the most searching enquiry into the claims of what others may superstitiously regard as too sacred for human investigation. It is not a question of dates or great names or reputed divinity, or heavenly origin, with the Freethinker, as is the question with other thinkers in arriving at a conclusion on any subject. It is not what is fashionable or generally believed that influences this mind. It is not the opinion of the majority which determines his belief in any matter. The opinion of a Freethinker on any subject may be the same as that of the majority—it may be the same as all great authorities in the Church or out of it. Some people erroneously imagine that a person who is a Freethinker delights in not agreeing with anybody, and some stupidly

assert that it is his desire to appear odd, to be something unlike anybody else, which induces him to adopt an unfashionable creed. Let those who sincerely think so come out from their Church, and see how the world will treat them, and let us hear the result of the experiment. From what is called "a worldly point of view" a person would be more likely to "get on" in the smallest congregation of the most obscure sect of religionists than by numbering himself among the fraternity of Freethinkers. He will find neither loaves nor fishes among the faithless few—it is more like taking the vow of poverty than rolling in riches. When a person becomes a Freethinker, the question what shall he get by or lose by it in a worldly sense does not occur, but how shall he set himself free from priestcraft and superstition regardless of cost. To become a Freethinker requires that you should set a higher price on freedom and truth than on all else in the world besides. He will forsake all to follow these, believing they will repay him a hundredfold. Those who know the uses of money and the advantages of wealth will never despise them, but he who has tasted freedom will never part with it for silver or gold. We all prize comfort and joy and the pleasures of sense, but without freedom—what becomes of mind, the hope of the world or the worth of human nature?

"Tis Liberty alone that gives the flower
Of fleeting life its lustre and perfume,
And we are weeds without it."

Intellectual freedom is a necessity of progress, one of the conditions of human happiness, the pioneer of civilisation. All that obstructs it, the Freethinker would sweep away—all that promotes it, he cherishes, as it is the heritage of our race, and the great deliverer of humanity from priestcraft, kingcraft, and all other superstitions which afflict mankind.

A Freethinker is often called a Sceptic, which means one who is on the look out—a considerer, one not led away by every story teller. He is sometimes called a doubter, and the intention is to convey the idea that the terms Sceptic or Doubter mean something wicked or derogatory. The fact is the world owes much to Scepticism and doubting. It is the proper state of mind in relation to many things in this world. In a state of uncertainty, in the absence of evidence, where demonstration or proof of any kind is wanting, Scepticism or doubt must prevail in all healthy minds.

What is a Freethinker? I should describe him as one who observes, thinks, and judges for himself. He is one who has freed himself from the bonds of credulity both illiterate and priestly. His spirit breathes charity or good will to all. His hopes, desires, and efforts are in the promotion of the best interests of mankind. He looks on ignorance and poverty as two of the greatest afflictions of mankind, towards the removal of which he devotes his best endeavours. If he has a religion it is as free from intolerance as it is from superstition. He stands pre-eminent among men in intelligence and nobleness of mind. He has the sublime reflection that his life has been spent in the service of humanity: the consciousness of this gives him pleasing thoughts in life and enables him to die in peace.

MR. R. W. DALE'S SERMON.

BEING familiar with newspaper reports of Mr. DALE'S special public utterances, I had formed the erroneous notion that in his case the preacher was absorbed in the politician. Any one labouring under a similar hallucination will be speedily restored to their right mind by a perusal of his sermon on "Atheism and the House of Commons." His view would disqualify the Catholic, Jew, and Freethinker. It is clear that if Mr. DALE were a Chinese he would join the celestials in their denunciation of the consumption of Cow's milk as unnatural and immoral. The sermon in question was preached in Carr's Lane Chapel, Birmingham, June 27th. Referring to what he calls "the remarkable discussions" in the previous week, which, on the last page, become "these disastrous discussions," he says: "We have had it *forced upon our minds* that there are men who can find no evidence that God exists." At the same time he says the existence of God has been the subject of discussion "for many years," "in every part of England," and among "all ranks and conditions of people." If this had been only a political question (which it most assuredly is, simply and purely) Mr. DALE said he "should be satisfied with discussing the subject elsewhere." He says, "There is a certain heat of passion almost always created by political discussions." In days agoe it used to be theological discussions which caused "heat of passion;" it

seems the "heat" has been transferred. The leaders of the House of Commons did not take Mr. DALE's view: they attributed the "heat" to its true sources—theological confusion and religious intolerance. Whenever theological incomprehensibilities and religious fanaticism get mixed up with politics and common sense there is always a fermentation. This discussion shows Mr. DALE to be entirely in the wrong; for it shows that just government is only possible *on the Secular Method*—independent of both Theism and Atheism. If the proceedings of the past few weeks do not make this truth clear to Mr. DALE and his friends—neither would they be convinced if one rose from the dead.

"Many philosophers," Mr. DALE says, "have regarded the existence of God as a metaphysical hypothesis intended to *account* for the *order* of the universe;" and on page 5 he speaks of this same "metaphysical hypothesis invented for the *explanation* of the *origin* of the universe." There is no evidence in this sermon to show that he knows there is any difference between these two statements. The Origin of the world is one thing, the Order of the world is another thing—the study of the latter has given us all our knowledge; the study of the former has resulted in endless disputes of no value, being what Lord BACON calls "milking the barren heifer." Mr. DALE says God is "infinitely more than the great First Cause." These words imply a little first cause, a second cause, and any number of causes. Then he applies the words "eternal" and "infinite" to the same. If you tell me you have an eternal chain, a chain without beginning and without end, and then ask me what I think of the *first* link, my answer is that I don't think anything about it, and am equally sure that you don't. Then, if you get angry, I tell you to your face that you do not know what you are

talking about. It may be well for the sake of some readers to put clearly before them what all this is about.

Given the Universe, as it exists, the question arises—How came it? To answer this question theories have been proposed. Something is assumed for the purposes of argument to explain what is not understood—and this is called an hypothesis. There are three theories or suppositions before the world about the universe more or less satisfactory to those who accept them. To put the whole matter briefly there are three assertions before us about the Universe:—

1. That it is Self-existent.
2. That it is Self-created.
3. That it was created by an External Agency.

Mr. DALE appears to accept the last. In my judgment there is no theory which explains the Origin of the Material of which the Universe consists or of what we call Space, or in any degree enables us to understand their production out of Nothing.

Cardinal NEWMAN thinks it a great question whether No. 1 is not as good as No. 3, that is, whether Atheism is not as consistent with phenomena as Theism.

Sir WILLIAM HAMILTON says, "The only *valid* arguments" for the existence of God "rest on the ground of man's *moral nature*," which Mr. DALE doubtless regards as utterly corrupt.

Mr. DALE appears to have selected the term "Atheism" as a peg on which to hang his scathing denunciations of persons who are *not* Atheists: a more confusing or mischievous proceeding is scarcely conceivable. He says that "Atheism is of two kinds" (which in the nature of things is utterly impossible)—"practical Atheism" and "theoretical Atheism." He says in "theoretical Atheism His existence is denied, and

His authority is, *therefore*, disregarded." It is not usual to disregard the authority of a king who does not exist, as he very seldom has any.

Then "There is practical Atheism, in which all the active powers of man refuse to acknowledge the supreme authority of God, though the fact of His existence is admitted." Mr. DALE should use another phrase instead of "practical Atheism;" and I suggest "impractical Theism," or "inconsistent believing in God." Atheists whether practical or impractical would not profess to believe in God and act as though none existed. The most serious objection to Mr. DALE is his mixing up Atheism with *the denial of all obligations to morality and virtue*. It is the less pardonable in Mr. DALE because he reports a conversation between a friend of his and one who said, "I do not believe in the existence of God, but if I did, I do not see that my life in any one respect would be different from what it is:" and Mr. DALE says this man's character was "*honourable and exemplary*." After this, what right has Mr. DALE to say of theoretical Atheism, "this is *miserable* unbelief?" Surely the believer in God whose conduct is a living lie, ought to be followed by "this is a miserable belief."

The difference between a practical and speculative Atheist is thus expressed: "In the soul of the practical Atheist the dead corpse of faith is still lying," and "from the soul of the speculative Atheist the corpse has been removed." It will take more than Mr. DALE's logic and eloquence to persuade an Atheist, who is also an honest man, to weep over the departed "dead corpse of faith." People seldom miss what they do not want.

Mr. DALE is shocked at the words used by an M.P., "having some God or another" would satisfy the House. Now it so happens that "the hon. mem." who used these

words *accidentally* spoke the truth. It is a fact that "any God" is sufficient for the taking of the oath. I do not accuse the M.P. whose "profanity" is glaring, or Mr. DALE himself, with a knowledge of the accuracy of the statement he made. Mr. DALE says, "The God of the Deist ought not to satisfy you;" but he admits it will do for the House of Commons, for he says the oath "may be taken by a Deist." This shows that the God of the Theist and the God of the Deist are not alike, but "one or the other" will do.

Strange as it may appear in such a discourse Mr. DALE introduces the old eternal problem of good and evil, a Pagan notion which found its way into the Old Testament, and ultimately got fairly landed in Christian doctrine. Here are our friends Light and Darkness struggling as of old. Mr. DALE says, "We think we see Him in a conflict with evil," at the same time confident that "the ultimate victory will be with God."

The terrible things which happen in the physical and moral world Mr. DALE says "sometimes oppress the faith of those who are most loyal to Him." But why should they? Christians believe in a God who said, "I form the light and create darkness: I make peace and create evil. *I the Lord do all these things.*"

It is the assumption that the Lord does *not* "do all these things" which makes all the difficulty. Surely Christians remember that on one occasion God destroyed "every living substance" on the earth. The destruction of the whole world was at once so tragical and complete that "Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark." On another occasion He rained fire and brimstone out of heaven, destroying the cities, inhabitants, and even that which grew upon the ground.

How can Christians forget that He sent His only begotten son into the world to suffer death, exclaiming in agony—"My God! My God! why hast thou forsaken me?" In the face of these recorded facts why resort, as Mr. DALE does, to "some revolt having its origin in *unknown* worlds and under *unknown* conditions." This alternative is utterly uncalled for and purely imaginary. Incredible as it may sound Mr. DALE actually says, "These disorders and evils appear to us to be the signs of some appalling *disturbance* of the *divine order*." It seems beyond belief that any intelligent man could write such a statement; for who can believe it possible to upset any arrangements made by *Almighty* power. Alphonso X. of Castille said if he had been consulted at the creation he could have suggested a better and simpler plan.

Mr. DALE, in this passage, reminds one of the old Greeks, to whom the sky was a concave sphere or dome, with the stars fixed in it, all revolving on a point. It was atheistic to speak of any but "circular motions;" it would have upset "the divine order of things," and, in all probability, stopped the "music of the spheres."

Mr. DALE seems to overlook that *all things* visible and invisible are *the work of God*, and known to God from the beginning of the world. As there is, according to Mr. DALE, only *one source of power* in existence, it follows that whatever happens is according to the will of God, in spite of the will of God, or without the will of God interfering. In either case the attributes Mr. DALE applies to Him fade away. Mr. DALE says God "satisfies the wants of every living thing." Surely that did not apply to those who perished in the flood, or by famine in India recently, or a third of the population of France in the 14th century who died of starvation, or to our own people who daily die of hunger? Mr. DALE says, "We live and move and have our being in God." This

means the Universe and God are one, and not two separate existences. Is it possible that such a sentence by a Greek poet, introduced to the Word of God by Paul, and quoted by Mr. DALE, can express his view? He refers to the Design argument approvingly. This argument implies just the opposite. It means that we are *external* to God, the work of His hand—we are the clay and God the potter. Then again, Mr. DALE says, “There is *no place* which is not consecrated to the manifestation of His power.”

If we tell Mr. DALE what God has done in the past, according to His own account in His own inspired word—if we tell him the plague carried away 5,000 a day, and sweating sickness killed half the people of England—he says, “You may *remind* me of the disorder and confusion of the universe.” But of what use to “remind” one who admits the just and unjust, guilty and innocent, alike suffer and *perish in the presence of God himself*? Mr. DALE goes on with his parable all the same, although virtue and vice are both disregarded by the author of our common calamities. He is no respecter of persons; he smites all alike.

Mr. DALE says, “I agree with those who regard Atheism as destructive of the strongest guarantees and defences of human virtue.” What are the strongest guarantees and defences of human virtue? The answer Mr. DALE makes is faith in a God of perfect righteousness. I “remind” Mr. DALE that this did not furnish guarantees and defences of virtue, or even human life, or of any living thing, in the cases here referred to. And if “the slippery ledge of Theism,” to use Mr. GLADSTONE’S expression, does not furnish these guarantees and defences, how can Atheism be “destructive” of them? Mr. DALE admits the whole case, but takes refuge in “portentous mysteries” in the face of “tremendous difficulties.” Millions upon millions of our fellow creatures have

no Supreme Being in their religion; yet it stirred men's hearts 500 years before Jesus, second to none in antiquity, it spreads its sway over a fifth of the human race. But they have no House of Commons containing members who, according to Mr. DALE "gamble and get drunk and lead a profligate life," and still say—"So help me God!" India has no representation in the House that rests on "the slippery ledge of Theism," and therefore no guarantees or defences of political virtue.

"Faith in a God of righteousness" has not afforded Englishmen "guarantees" of wise and just laws or "defences" against tyranny and robbery. Men may have "faith in God" and honestly believe that all men should be contented, especially if their own situation is a good one. But suppose a change of places!

"Faith in God" lighted the fires of Smithfield, supported the Inquisition in Spain, made torrents of blood flow in Europe. "Faith in God" and the Bible made the Slave and closed the door against his Liberator. The Liberators were embraced by those who had Faith in Humanity, and were tar'd-and-feathered by those who had faith in God. There is no tyranny, no persecution, no war, no revolution which men who have "Faith in God" will not frantically support and promote—if they only have enough of it. Liberty and peace are only possible in countries where men who have "Faith in God" can be kept in check—be restrained by the sceptical and indifferent. Not many years ago in this very town, next door to Mr. DALE's chapel, Catholics and Protestants would have torn each other to pieces but for the Secular Powers.