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SECULAR MORALITY:

WHAT IS IT?

AN EXPOSITION AND A DEFENCE.

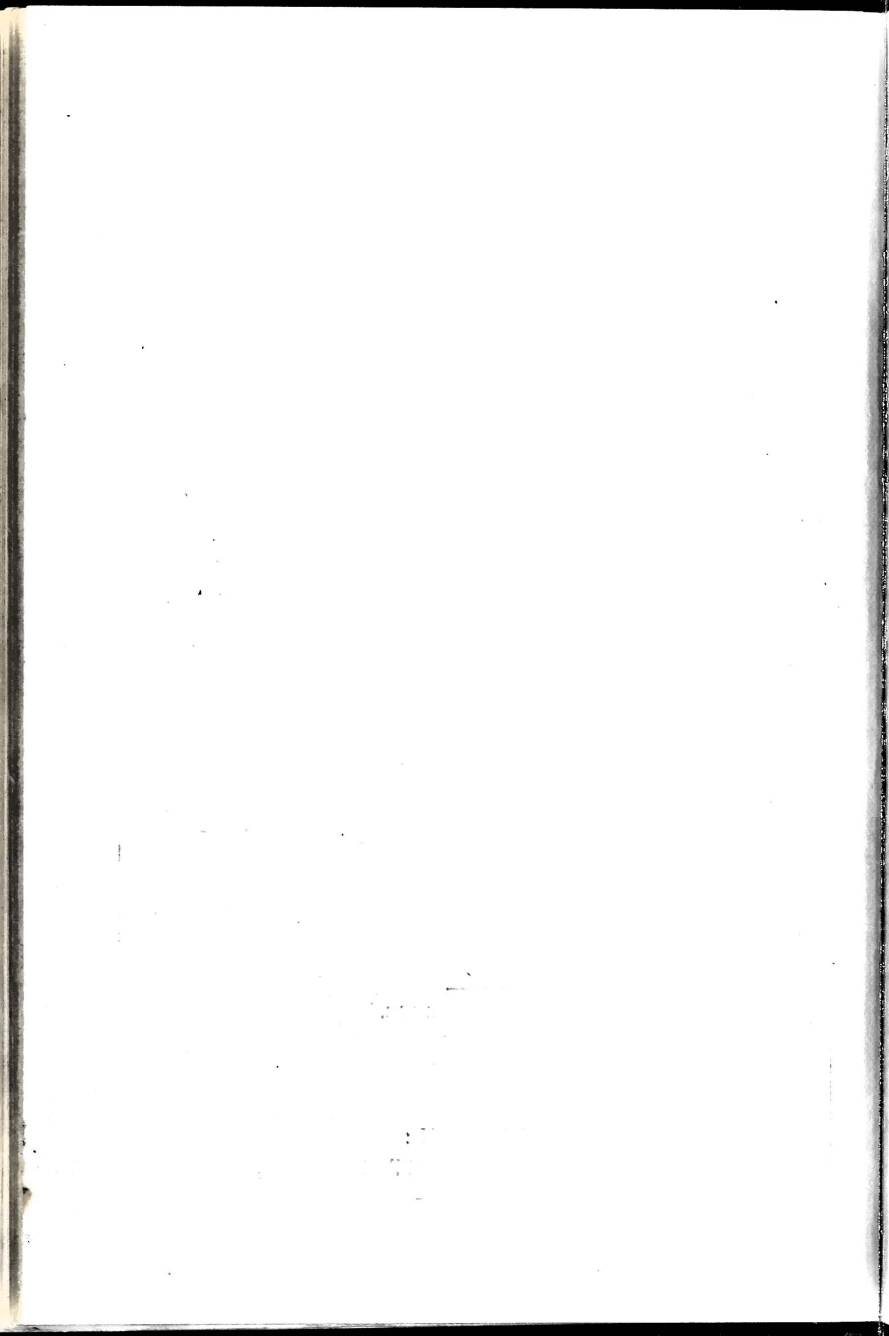
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SECULAR MORALITY.

AMONG the systems of moral philosophy that have been promulgated as guides for human conduct, Utilitarianism occupies the foremost place. It appears to Secularists as more definite and satisfactory than any other, and certainly at the present time it is more generally accepted by thinkers and that class of men whose views mould the intellectual opinions of the age. The principle of Utilitarianism has a regard solely to the uses of things ; hence all actions by it are to be judged of by their use to society, and the morality of an action will consequently depend upon its utility. An important question here suggests itself : What is Utility, and how is it to be judged of and tested ? What, it is urged, may appear useful to one man, another may regard as altogether useless ; who, therefore, is to decide respecting the utility of an act ? The answer will be found in the greatest-happiness principle, which is of itself a modern development of the doctrine, and somewhat in opposition to the first form of Utilitarianism. "Usefulness," observes David Hume, "is agreeable, and engages our approbation. This is a matter of fact, confirmed by daily observation. But useful ? For what ? For somebody's interest, surely. Whose interest, then ? Not our own only, for our approbation frequently extends farther. It must, therefore, be the interest of those who are served by the characters or action approved of ; and these we may conclude, however remote, are not totally indifferent to us. But, opening up this principle, we shall discover one great source of moral distinction." Here it is clear that with Hume the doctrine of utility was intimately associated with

approbation—in fact, the two were inseparably connected. The greatest-happiness principle, as will be seen, grew very naturally out of this, but is a much more recent development.

The utility of acts and objects have doubtless had much to do with the estimation in which these are held in society, whether the fact be recognised or not. Hume says : “ It seems so natural a thought to ascribe to their utility the praise which we bestow on the social virtues that one would expect to meet with this principle everywhere in moral writers, as the chief foundation of their reasoning and inquiry. In common life we may observe that the circumstance of utility is always appealed to ; nor is it supposed that a greater eulogy can be given to any man than to display his usefulness to the public, and enumerate the services which he has performed to mankind and to society. What praise, even of an inanimate form, if the regularity and elegance of its parts satisfy not its fitness for any useful purpose ! And how satisfactory an apology for any disproportion or seeming deformity if we can show the necessity of that particular construction for the use intended. A ship appears more beautiful to an artist, or one moderately skilled in navigation, where its prow is wide and swelling beyond its poop, than if it were framed with a precise geometrical regularity in contradiction to all the laws of mechanics. A building whose doors and windows were exact squares would meet the eye, by that very proportion, as ill adapted to the figure of a human creature for whose service the fabric was intended. What wonder, then, that a man whose habits and conduct are hurtful to society, and dangerous and pernicious to every one who has intercourse with him, should on that account be an object of disapprobation, and communicate to every spectator the strongest sentiment of disgust and hatred ?” That this is so there cannot be the slightest doubt. Nor is this principle a purely selfish one, as some have contended, since the uses of arts refer not simply to their operation upon ourselves individually, but upon society at large. Self-love is no doubt involved here, as, in fact, it is in everything we do. But self-love is not the ruling

principle any further than that it is identical with the love of humanity. The great fact of mutual sympathy here comes in. The reciprocal feeling of joy or sorrow has been experienced probably by every person. The pleasures and pains of our fellows affect us largely, whether we will or no. There is no man so selfish but he finds his joys increased when they are shared by others, and his griefs lessened when he sorrows in company. This fact Hume has worked out at great length, with a view to show why it is that utility pleases. Viewing Utilitarianism, therefore, as simply a question of utility in the lowest sense of that word, it is yet a most potent agent in society, and has much more to do with forming our conclusions as to the morality of certain acts than is usually imagined. The man of use is the man whom society delights to honour; and very properly, for he is the real benefactor of his species. To say that a thing is useful is to bestow upon it a high degree of praise, while no greater condemnation can be passed upon any piece of work than to say that it is useless. Even the supposed gods have been estimated by their utility; for Cicero charges the deities of the Epicureans with being useless and inactive, and declares that the Egyptians never consecrated any animal except for its utility.

The principle of Utilitarianism as a moral system cannot be said to have received a definite shape until it was advocated by Jeremy Bentham. Even with him it did not appear in that clear and explicit form which John Stuart Mill has since imparted to it. In his writings we have for the first time something like philosophic precision. Pleasure and pain are shown to form the basis of utility, and to furnish us with the means of judging of what is useful and what is not.

To speak of pain and pleasure to ordinary persons conveys no idea as to the welfare or otherwise of society, but leads the mind to revert to its own individual good or evil, and then to impart a selfish basis to the whole thing. This was not what was meant by Bentham, as the following passage from his work will show: "By utility is meant that property in any object whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness

(all this, in the present case, comes to the same thing) ; or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered : if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community ; if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual." Bentham takes great pains to show that the community is a "fictitious body composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting, as it were, its members," and that therefore the interest of the community is simply "the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it." He then goes on to affirm that "an action may be said to be conformable to the principle of utility, or, for shortness' sake, to utility (meaning with respect to the community at large), when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it," which is really another way of saying the greatest happiness of the greatest number, or, to use a far more preferable phrase, the greatest amount of happiness for all. "The words ought and right and wrong, and others of that stamp," take their meaning from this principle. This philosophy was full of the practical spirit of the age which gave it birth, and it exhibited an utter disregard for the unproductive theories of the past. The idea of happiness very largely took the place of the old idea of duty, wherein was seen a powerful reaction against the sentimental ethics that had prevailed so long. Its attempt was to base virtue on moral legislation, rather than on feeling, and to construct an ethical code out of the most matter-of-fact materials. Thus self sacrifice, which, of course, is one of the highest and noblest duties of man, is in no way incompatible with Utilitarianism and the pursuit of happiness ; since, whatever pleasures he who practises self-denial may voluntarily forego, it is always with a view of procuring, if not for himself, yet for his fellows, some greater good. The martyr at the stake, the patriot in the field of battle, the physician penetrating into the midst of the death-breathing miasma with a view to alleviate pain, each feels a sense of satisfaction in the act, which is really the intensest kind

of happiness to himself, and, what is more important, he is procuring happiness on a large scale for his fellow creatures. It is not individual, but general, happiness that the Utilitarian has to keep before his eye as the motive of all his actions.

In any moral system it is essential that not only should the code laid down be clear, but the motive to obey it should also be made apparent. In other words, what is termed the sanction of the principle must be pointed out. It would be of little value to have a perfect method in morals unless the sanctions were such as were likely to influence mankind. Now, Mr. Mill has not overlooked this fact in connection with Utilitarianism, but has devoted considerable space to its consideration. He seems to think, however, that no new sanctions are needed for Utilitarianism, since in time—and in an improved state of society—it will have at command all the old ones. He says: "The principle of utility either has, or there is no reason why it might not have, all the sanctions which belong to any other system of morals. These sanctions are either external or internal." He then enlarges upon these with a view to show that the greater number of them belong as much to Utilitarianism as to any other ethical code. The sanction of duty, upon which so much stress is laid by the opponents of Utilitarianism, becomes as clear and as powerful under the new system as under the old. Whatever may be the standard of duty, and whatever the process by which the idea has been attained, the feeling will in all cases be very much the same. The pain occasioned by a violation of what is called the moral law, constituting what is usually termed conscience, will be felt quite as keenly when the law has been arrived at by a Utilitarian process of reasoning, and when the moral nature has been built up upon Utilitarian principles, as in any other case. The ultimate sanction of all morality is very much the same—a subjective feeling in our own minds, resulting from physical conditions, country, and education.

This, then, is briefly the Utilitarianism which we hold to constitute a sufficient guide in morals, and to be worthy to supplant the old and erroneous systems that now pre-

vail. As Secularists, we are content to be judged by this standard. This system we accept as the ethical code by which we profess to regulate our conduct. There can hardly be conceived a higher aim than happiness, especially the happiness of the race. That perfect happiness is not attainable we, of course, admit; but neither is anything else in perfection. Nothing, however, can be more certain than the fact that very many of the present causes of unhappiness could be removed by well-directed effort on the part of society, and the result be a state of things of which, at the present time, we can hardly form any conception. The duty of each of us is to do as much as possible towards bringing this about.

In Mr. Mill's work upon "Utilitarianism" the following passage occurs: "The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals utility, or the greatest-happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure. To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by this theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question. But these supplementary explanations do not affect the theory of life of which this theory of morality is grounded—namely, that pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends, and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as a means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain." It must be understood that the word pleasure here is used in its very highest sense, and includes, consequently, such enjoyments as arise from the culture of the intellect, the development of the sentiments, the use of the imagination, and the action of the emotions. One of the errors into which the opponents of utilitarian happiness frequently fall is that of confounding pleasure with the mere gratification of the animal propensities. If this were so, the whole system would be

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a most despicable one, and unworthy the attention of men of intelligence and moral worth. But it is not; and he who brings this as a charge against it does so either in gross ignorance, or with a view to pervert the truth. Perhaps it was not wise to use the words pleasure and happiness as synonymous, seeing that they are usually employed to mean two very different things; but the explanation having been given that they are so used, no one can plead this use as an excuse for falling into error on the subject.

Secular morality is based upon the principle that happiness is the chief end and aim of mankind. And although there are, doubtless, persons who would warmly dispute this fundamental principle, it is very questionable whether their objection is not more verbal than anything else. That all men desire happiness is certain. The doctrine enunciated in the well-known line of Pope is frequently quoted, and generally with approval:

“Oh, happiness! our being's end and aim.”

When we meet with persons who profess to despise this aspiration, it will be generally found that it is only some popular conception of happiness of which they are careless, while they really pursue a happiness of their own, in their own way, with no less ardour than other people. A definition of happiness itself is not easy to give. Each person would, were he asked to define it, in all probability furnish a somewhat different explanation; but the true meaning of all would be very much the same. To refer again to Pope, what truth there is in the following couplet!—

“Who can define it, say they more or less
Than this, that happiness is happiness?”

With one it is the culture of the intellect; with another, the exercise of the emotions; with a third, the practice of deeds of philanthropy and charity; and with yet another—we regret to say—the gratification of the lower propensities. In each case it is the following of the pursuit which most accords with the disposition of the individual. And wherever this course does not interfere with the

happiness of others, and is not more than counter-balanced by any results that may arise from it afterwards, it is not only legitimate, but moral. Broadly, then, Secular efforts for the attainment of happiness may be said to consist in endeavouring to perform those actions which entail no ill effects upon general society, and leave no injurious effects upon the actors. Such conduct as is here intimated involves the practice of truth, self-discipline, fidelity to conviction, and the avoidance of knowingly acting unjustly to others.

Mr. Mill points out—and herein he differs from Bentham—that not only must the quantity of the pleasure or happiness be taken into consideration, but the quality likewise. He remarks: “It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasure should be disposed to depend on quantity alone.” True, it may not always be easy to estimate the exact respective value of the different qualities of pleasure; but this is not necessary. An approximation to it can be obtained without difficulty. In all those who have had experience both of the higher and lower kinds of pleasure—that is, of the culture of the intellect and the gratification of the passions—a preference is generally shown, at least in theory, for the higher. And the rest are in no position to fairly judge. It may be urged that many a man who possesses the rare wealth of a cultured mind will be found sometimes grovelling in the mire of sensuality, thereby showing a preference for a time for the lowest kind of pleasure, To this it may be replied that the fact is only temporary, and cannot, therefore, be set against the experience of months and years—perhaps of the greatest portion of a life; and, secondly, he does not in his own opinion, even while descending to indulge in the lower pleasure, give up his interest in the higher; so that the defection cannot be looked upon in the light of an exchange. He feels that he will be able to go back again to his intellectual pursuits, and enjoy them as before. Ask him to make a permanent exchange—to give up for ever the higher pleasures, on the condition that he shall have a continuance of the lower to his heart’s content, and probably he will

treat the offer with scorn. "Few human beings," observes Mr. Mill, "would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool; no instructed person would be an ignoramus; no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they with theirs. They would not resign what they possess more than he for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him." Those who neglect their capacities for enjoying the higher pleasures may probably imagine that their happiness is greatest; but their opinion on the subject is worthless, because they only know one side. On this question, therefore, we find a unanimity—at least, with all who are competent to judge of the question.

The most important point to be considered in connection with this question of Secular happiness is that it is not the pleasure of the individual that is considered paramount, but of the community of which he forms a part. The principle of the greatest happiness is often treated in a discussion of this subject as though it meant the greatest possible pleasure that the individual can procure for himself by his acts, regardless of the welfare of his fellow creatures, which would be selfishness in the extreme. Nothing can be more unselfish than Secular morality, since the sole object it has in view is the happiness of the community at large. And every act of the individual must be performed with this in view, and will be considered moral or not in the proportion in which this is done. In corroboration of this view, Mr. Mill truly remarks: "According to the greatest-happiness principle, as above explained, the ultimate end with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality; the test of quality and the rule for measuring it against quantity being the

preference felt by those who, in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison. This being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined, the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which an existence such as has been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but to the whole sentient creation." Two facts of great importance are to be noticed in this extract; first, that happiness is the end of existence, and that all human effort should be bent as far as possible to the attainment of this object; and, secondly, that here, and here only, can the true standard of morality be found. The second principle flows as a necessary consequence from the first. All human action must, therefore, be brought to the test of how far it is conducive to the promotion of the greatest happiness of society at large. The consistent performance of such action will tend to promote the Secular idea of human happiness and the welfare of mankind.

The question is asked, Why is Secularism regarded by its adherents as being superior to theological and other speculative theories of the day? The answer is (1) because we believe its moral basis to be more definite and practical than other existing ethical codes; and (2) because Secular teachings appear to us to be more reasonable and of greater advantage to general society than the various theologies of the world, and that of orthodox Christianity in particular.

First, compare Secular views of morality with the numerous and conflicting theories that have been put forward at various times on the important topic of moral philosophy. From most of those theories it is not easy to reply satisfactorily to the question, Why is one act wrong and another right? There is no difficulty, generally speaking, in pointing out what acts are vicious and what others virtuous; but to say why one is immoral and another moral is a very different matter. Ask for a definition of virtue, and you receive in reply an illus-

tration. You will be told that it is wrong to lie, to steal, to murder, etc.—about which there is no dispute; but why it is wrong to indulge in these acts, and right to perform others, is the business of ethical science to discover. But here again the method that will be resorted to, with a view to reply to this query, will depend upon the moral code believed in by the person to whom the question is put. This method it is, in point of fact, which constitutes what is called ethical science. On looking over the history of moral philosophy, apart from Secularism, we find such diversified and conflicting theories advanced on this subject that it is frequently difficult to arrive at the conclusion that there can be any certainty in the matter whatever. Some hold, with Dr. Samuel Clarke, that virtue consists in the fitness of things; others, with Adam Smith, discover its basis in sympathy; others, with Dr. Reed, Dr. Thomas Brown, and Dugald Stewart, contend for a moral sense; another class, with Miss Cobbe, maintain that there is such a thing as intuitive morality; others, with Paley, assert that virtue consists in doing good to mankind in obedience to the will of God, and for the sake of everlasting happiness; others, with Dr. Johnson, are content with the will of God as a basis, without adding the motive introduced by Paley; and yet others, with George Combe, fancy they have a key to the whole thing in phrenology. Now, all these theories are resolvable broadly into three great classes—first, those who regard the “will of God” as the basis of moral action; secondly, those who contend that the true guide of man in morality is something internal to himself—call it conscience, moral sense, intuition, or any other name that you please to give it; and, thirdly, those who urge that moral science is, like other science, to be discovered by the study of certain external facts. To the latter of these the Utilitarian or Secular system belongs.

A small section of professing Christians have now given up the will of God as the groundwork of their morality. This, however, seems to us inconsistent with their faith, for the following reasons: 1. If the Bible God be the father of all, surely to act in accordance with his

will should be the best guide in life. 2. Christian morality is supposed to consist of the teachings of the Bible, the alleged record of the will of God. 3. If God's *will* is not the basis of Christian ethics, what is, from the Christian standpoint? As Secularists, we cannot regulate our conduct by the Bible records of God's will, inasmuch as that book is so thoroughly contradictory in its interpretation of the said will. In one passage the killing of human beings is forbidden by God, and in another passage special instructions are given by the same being to commit the prohibited crime. The same conflicting injunctions are to be found in the "inspired word" in reference to adultery, lying, retaliation, love, obedience to parents, forgiveness, individual and general salvation, and many other acts which form part of the conduct of human life.

As to the internal guide to morality, nothing can be more clear than the fact that, even if man possesses a moral sense with which he is born into this world, and which is inherent in his nature, its teachings are not very distinct, and the code of law based upon it is by no means definite. For not only do the inhabitants of different countries vary considerably in regard to the dictates of conscience, according to the nature of their education, but the people of the same country will be found to be by no means agreed as to what is right and what wrong, except in a few well-marked deeds. One man feels a conscientious objection to doing that which another man will positively believe to be a praiseworthy act. In this, as in other matters, education is all-potent over the mental character. It would indeed be difficult to reconcile these facts with the existence of any intuitive moral power.

Recognising the difficulties and drawbacks pertaining to the above theories, Secularists seek for a solution of this moral-philosophy problem elsewhere—that is to say, in the eternal results of the acts themselves upon society, and in the effects that invariably spring from them whenever they are performed. It must be distinctly understood that we do not claim perfection for our moral code; but we do believe that it is the best known at the

present time, and that it is free from many of the objectionable features which belong to those theories which we, as Secularists, cannot accept. It may be urged, as an objection to the external test of the result of action, that it tends to make morality shifting and dependent very much upon the circumstances existing at the time. This is doubtless true ; but it is of no value as an argument against the doctrine of utility. For is not all that we have to do with subject to the same law of variation ? Fashions change, customs alter, and even religions become considerably modified by external circumstances. The following stanza in Lord Byron's "Childe Harold" portrays a great truth :—

“ Son of the morning, rise, approach you here ;
 Come, but molest not yon defenceless urn.
 Look on this spot, a nation's sepulchre :
 Abode of gods, whose shrines no longer burn.
 Even gods must yield, religions take their turn ;
 'Twas Jove's, 'tis Mahomet's ; and other creeds
 Will rise with other years, till man shall learn
 Vainly his incense soars, his victim bleeds ;
 Poor child of doubt and death, whose hope is built on
 reeds !”

That Secular teachings are superior to those of orthodox Christianity, the following brief contrast will show. Christian conduct is controlled by the ancient and supposed infallible rules of the Bible ; Secular action is regulated by modern requirements and the scientific and philosophical discoveries of the practical age in which we live. Christianity enjoins as an essential duty of life to prepare to die ; Secularism says, learn how to live truthfully, honestly, and usefully, and you need not concern yourself with the “ how ” to die. Christianity proclaims that the world's redemption can only be achieved through the teachings of one person ; Secularism avows that such teachings are too impracticable and limited in their influence for the attainment of the object claimed, and that improvement, general and individual, is the result of the brain-power and physical exertions of the brave toilers of every country and every age who have laboured

for human advancement. Christianity threatens punishment in another world for the rejection of speculative views in this ; Secularism teaches that no penalty should follow the holding of sincere opinions, as uniformity of belief is impossible. According to Christianity, as taught in the churches and chapels, the approval of God and the rewards of heaven are to be secured only through faith in Jesus of Nazareth ; whereas the philosophy of Secularism enunciates that no merit should be attached to such faith, but that fidelity to principle and good service to man should win the right to participate in any advantages either in this or in any other world.

