

SECULARISM:

ITS

RELATION TO THE SOCIAL
PROBLEMS OF THE DAY.

BY

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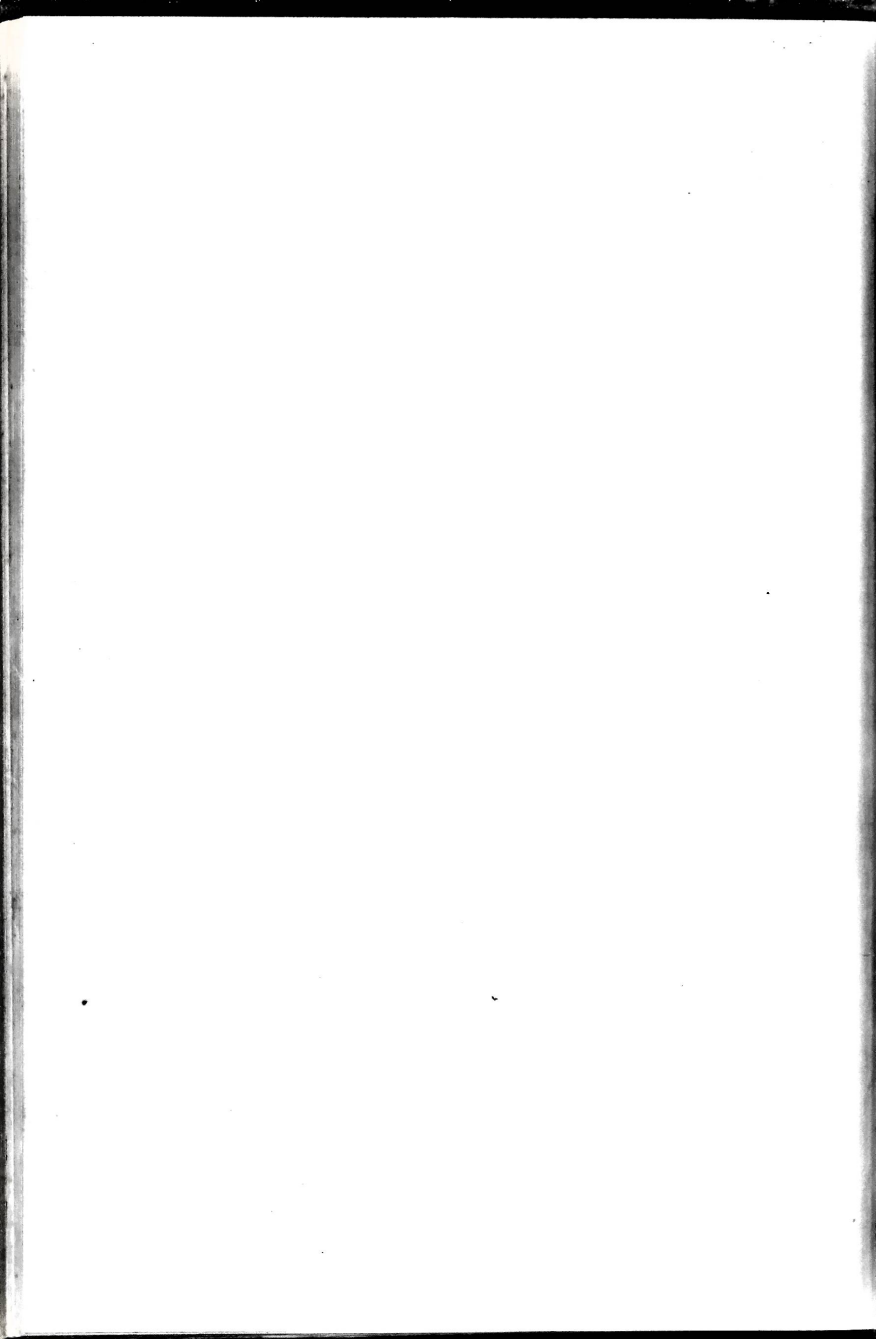
Vice-President of the National Secular Society.

Price Twopence.

London:

WATTS & CO., 17, JOHNSON'S COURT, FLEET STREET.

1894.



SECULARISM:

ITS RELATION TO THE SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF THE DAY.

SECULARISM, in dealing with the social problems of the day, relies upon human reason, not upon "divine" faith; upon fact, not upon fiction; upon experience, not upon a supposed supernatural revelation. It can discover no value in what is termed spiritual proposals as a remedy for existing evils. Hence Secularists can recognise only that as being socially useful which tends to the physical, mental, moral, and political improvement of mankind as members of the general commonwealth. Considerations about matters that are said to transcend the province of reason, and that make the business of this life merely of secondary importance, Secularists deem to be, at the most, only of theoretical interest, and of no real service in the social struggle in which society is at present engaged. The very fact that the theological remedy for social wrongs has had a long and fair trial, with such advantages in its favor as wealth, fashion, and untiring devotion, and yet that it has failed to prevent the present crisis, is a ample proof of its utter inability to successfully grapple with the drawbacks to a healthy state of society. It is, therefore, of the highest importance to seek to destroy faith in theology as a reforming agency, inasmuch as it has been well weighed in the balance of time and experience, and has been found wanting.

Our first duty, then, in my opinion, as Secularists, in reference to social problems, is to expose false remedies, and thus make it easier to establish correct ones. True, many persons think the fallacies of theology have already

been sufficiently exposed, and they urge that to continue the destructive work is only to "beat a dead horse." But is the theological horse really dead? Let the recent conduct of the clerical party upon the London School Board, and the present persistent efforts of Christian exponents of all denominations to put their teachings forward as the only effectual panacea, answer the question. It is still proclaimed even by some "advanced" reformers, that the solution to our social problems would be in following the example of Christ and in adopting his teachings. A greater delusion was never promulgated, and I deem it my duty to say so. Christ is reported to have said, "My kingdom is not of this world," and according to the New Testament he acted as if he believed what he said.

What are our social problems? Principally they are excessive poverty, unjust class distinction, monopoly of the land, unfair accumulation of wealth, the degradation of labor, the predominating rule of the aristocracy, and the absence of genuine secular education among the masses. Probably, the problem of ignorance is likely to be more speedily solved than either of the others named, but Christ did not furnish the key to the solution, and it is worthy of note that his followers have thrown every obstacle in the way of the emancipation of the masses from the curse of the absence of knowledge. In reference to the other stupendous evils mentioned, where and when did Christ propound an efficient scheme whereby the world could be freed from them? Granted, he exclaimed: "Woe unto you that are rich"; "Sell that thou hast and give to the poor." But would it not have been better to have shown how the monopoly of wealth could have been prevented, and how giving to the poor would have been unnecessary? Poverty is a curse, and to be dependent on charity is humiliating.

Seeing that all attempts in the name of religion have been futile in furnishing solutions for our social problems, the duty of all Secularists is to seek some other plan whereby those solutions may be obtained. Among other plans, we have Socialism, Individualism, and Anarchism put forward, and each is claimed by

its advocates as being the true remedy. Now it is evident to me that the Secular Society cannot, in its official capacity, accept either method in its entirety, for to do so would be to ignore the primary object of the Secular organisation, which is to destroy theological errors and to establish the truths, that morality depends upon no form of supernaturalism, and that the actions of daily life can be usefully performed in the noblest manner, unassociated with any of the religions of the churches. The relation of Secularism to all the "isms" named is the same as it is towards the political and religious movements of the day, namely Eclectic—that is, it selects the best from among them all. Provided he does his best to combat existing evils, each member of the Secular party is at liberty to support any movement that seems to him wise and useful, supposing it to be based upon "peace, law, and order." In fact Secularists should feel bound to investigate, as far as possible, all proposals made for the redemption of mankind regardless of sect or party. Special care, however, should always be taken to discriminate between true and false methods, and not to confound vain theories with practical remedies.

It is not my present object to discuss the merits or the demerits of the many professed remedies for social evils now before the public. No doubt there is much in connection with each of them that is commendable; and, as a Secularist, I should defend the right of the exponents of all the schemes to be heard, so long as they confined themselves to argument and intellectual exposition, free from all physical violence. Personally, I cannot accept the theory of Individualism, if it is not based upon regard for the rights of others. Neither can I adopt that phase of Socialism that would entirely obliterate the just claims of the individual; whilst with that form of Anarchism that would destroy individuals indiscriminately Secularism, as I understand its principles, can have no sympathy whatever. It is not a question of motive, but of method, that has to be considered.

While I recognise the right and utility of combination for mutual protection, and for advancing the good of those united, I am not blind to the fact that there may be interests outside of any one particular combination that should be fairly considered. If, for instance, a person accepts the theory that the land, which is the source of all social comfort, should be nationalised, and that the reasonable value of its use should be applied to defraying the national expenditure, it does not follow that he should consent to have his house, his family, and his wages also nationalised. Many persons prefer the form of Socialism known as Co-operation, which is at once legal, rational, and useful. There are approximations to this plan in building societies and in profit-sharing manufacturing concerns. And neither of these involve the extinction of individuals or of individual interests; on the contrary, they contribute to the maintenance of both in their integrity.

In seeking to solve social problems, there is one thing that must always be observed—namely, that, in pursuing our own good in our own way, we should strive not to unnecessarily damage the interests of others. Freedom of thought, of speech, and of action for all is a claim consistent with reason, and essential to human progress. The point here to be insisted upon is that the exercise of personal liberty, which does not infringe upon the freedom of others, is the right of all without any regard to class distinctions. This principle Secularists maintain, without committing themselves to all that is taught in the exercise of that right. If it is asked how true freedom is to be distinguished from that which is false, the answer will be that every individual should be free to give expression to his thoughts; but whether or not such thoughts represent that which will prove beneficial to society must be tested by comparison, and by fair and open discussion.

It will be thus seen that while, in my estimation, Secularism recognises the justice and need of revolution, that revolution must be one of thought and of principles. This cannot be too much emphasised,

more especially at the present time, when revolt, in some instances, has assumed the brutal form of reckless violence in the shape of bomb-throwing, which cannot be too emphatically condemned, as being not only cruel and diabolical in its nature, but also as being a barbarous hindrance to the progress aimed at by all true reformers. I am thoroughly opposed, under the present conditions of society, to all violence which tends to the destruction of persons and property. It indicates either insanity or uncontrolled passion, rather than a clear insight into the causes of social advancement. At any rate, violence, if resorted to at all, should be the last, not the first, process in the struggle for any reform among reasonable beings. Possibly in times past it might have been necessary; but the people did not then possess the means for redressing wrongs that they have at their command to-day. In the past they were kept down by a domineering Church and by a despotic Government, and all political rights were withheld from the masses. Now the Church has lost its former power, and governments must "assume a virtue if they have it not." Besides, the people, although they have not all the political power that is their due, have sufficient to enable them, if they use what they possess wisely, to obtain further reforms in a peaceful manner. Secularism enjoins reliance upon free speech, a free platform, and a free press, in the conducting of our present social warfare. These are weapons more in harmony with the intelligence of the age than is the use of instruments of physical violence. Further, the employment of moral force gives promise of a success that will be useful in its influence and enduring in its results.

To sum up, the duty of Secularists towards our social problems appears to me to be this: To recognise the necessity of discovering the best possible solutions, and, when those solutions are found, to apply them with all the moral force at our command. This useful work must be carried on by each of us in our capacity as social reformers—a task which will be inspired by the genius of Secularism, for no consistent Secularist can remain idle while evils abound that mar the hap-

piness of the human family. The special duty of a member of the Secular organisation consists in demanding that freedom which will enable every reformer to carry on his good work without intimidation or persecution of any kind, and also in doing his utmost to remove such impediments to progress as have been caused by priestly invention, and by the false conceptions of human duty which have been engendered by theological teachings. Here the Secularist will have ample scope for his reforming aspirations. He can commence at the root of the evil, which is the theological errors with regard to the nature and destiny of man, and the persistent opposition of the Church to mental freedom and social independence. When these errors are eradicated from the human mind, it will be in a condition to more readily receive those truths discovered by long and patient study—truths that will form the real basis of the solution of our social problems.

While it is a Secular duty to consider the best means that can be employed to improve the general condition of society, the method adopted by any member of the Secular Society to accomplish this result rests upon his individual responsibility. I am anxious that this fact should be remembered, because it is not my desire that Secularism should be held responsible for the opinions of its adherents upon "outside questions." The official position taken by the National Secular Society in reference to reforms of general social matters may be seen from its published statement under the heading of "Immediate Practical Objects" in the *Secular Almanack* for 1894

Recently Cardinal Vaughan proclaimed that the one remedy for our present social disasters was to be found in the Roman Catholic religion ; and, with a view of applying this remedy, he announced the inauguration of a Roman Catholic Social Army, for the purpose of carrying out his plans. He based his action upon the assumption that our social evils and all the revolutionary proposals for their extinction were due to the presence of Atheism and of other "isms," which he recklessly classed together, regardless of their non-relation. Here is the old theological trick of repre-

senting disbelief in God and Christianity as being the cause of all the wrongs and woes that afflict the human race, and arguing that the only real remedy for such misfortunes is the adoption of the teachings of the Church. The fact is overlooked that such teachings did not prevent, neither have they removed, the very evils which we have to deplore. If, however, Atheism is such a prolific source of evil, it would be reasonable to suppose that the characters of Atheists would be known to be bad, and their policy destructive of the stability of society. But the very opposite is the truth, as personal experience and general history amply testify. Theodore Parker observes: "Atheists are men who aim to be faithful to their nature and to their whole nature. . . . They are commonly on the side of man, as opposed to the enemies of man; on the side of the people as against a tyrant; they are, or mean to be, on the side of truth, of justice, and of love." Bacon says: "Atheism did never perturb States." The Right Hon. William Pitt truthfully acknowledges that "Atheism furnishes no man with arguments to be vicious"; and Professor Tyndall remarks: "If I wished to find men who are scrupulous in their adherence to engagements, whose words are their bond, and to whom moral shiftiness of any kind is subjectively unknown; if I wanted a loving father, a faithful husband, an honorable neighbor, and a just citizen, I should seek him and find him among the band of Atheists." Surely the testimony of the above writers, who knew the character of Atheists from practical experience, is of more value than the opinion of Cardinal Vaughan, whose religion doubtless has prevented him from associating in any way with "wicked Atheists." In the *Weekly Sun*, March 25, Hector Graham writes: "I have associated with a great number of Agnostics in my time, and am constrained to admit that I have always found them happy, honorable men. . . . I put the question seriously—How many Atheists destroy themselves? Hardly any. How many thorough unbelievers are found in gaol? How many promote bogus societies and victimise the fatherless and widows? Alas! the press too often shows us that the promoters of such societies

and companies have been looked upon with respect and adoration, and have been Christians of an eighteen-carat stamp."

But it is not only the nature of Atheism and the characters of Atheists that refute the pious Cardinal's assumption; there are other facts that are equally cogent against him, and these show the utter impotency of his theological schemes to successfully cope with existing social evils. Supposing Roman Catholicism were a cure for social evils, have we not a right to suppose that such evils would have been absent in this country during the Middle Ages, and that they would not be found in Catholic countries to-day? Such, however, was and is not the case. Crime, ignorance, and poverty flourished during the period when the religion of Rome was in the zenith of its power, and when Atheism and other "isms" had comparatively no opportunity to exercise a counteracting influence upon the actions of the Church. And to-day we know of no Roman Catholic orthodox continental country whose government is free from anxiety in consequence of the deplorable condition of the people. Sceptical England, with all its faults, is far ahead socially of many countries where Catholicism is supreme. Before Cardinal Vaughan's spurious remedy can be accepted in this country, credentials of its efficacy must be forthcoming. It has not proved effectual in America. The progress of that great and grand Republic has for years been retarded, and is now being paralysed, through the increasing power of Rome within its domain. The number of voters who profess the Catholic religion in the United States is becoming larger every year, and it is acknowledged that this fact proves a great danger to the development of American free institutions. The influence of these votes is used against public schools and the secularisation of general legislation. But what is worthy of special note, as demonstrating the fallacy of Cardinal Vaughan's claim as to the utility of his remedy for social evils, is that, notwithstanding the power of his Church on the other side of the Atlantic, the condition of the people there is at the present time most

alarming. The reformer stands aghast at the spectacle of a million sober and industrious citizens being without the means of living, having neither money, food, nor shelter, and not having the means of obtaining these requirements by honest work.

If there be any doubt as to the accuracy of what is here stated, let the reader study Henry George's article in the *North American Review* for February last, and it will be found that I have not over-stated the gravity of the social condition of the American people. Henry George describes many of the principal institutions of that country as being converted into charity-collecting and distributing agencies, and every group of workers as taxing themselves for the relief of the thousands of unemployed. He further alleges that the churches in Chicago are thrown open for the shelter of the houseless poor, and that in Ashland (Wis.) a charity pie had been made twenty-two feet in circumference and a quarter of a ton in weight. The continent is represented by him as being visited by an epidemic of charity, and no other subject is allowed to engage so much of public attention. This certainly is an appalling state of affairs—one which cries aloud for an immediate remedy. The Cardinal's faith evidently is useless as a panacea, for more profession of that faith is to be found in the United States than in any other Protestant country; and yet the social evils have been increasing for some time past, until the state of society has reached a degree of wretchedness and poverty that is a disgrace to civilisation. Of course, Henry George professes to see the cause of this gloomy condition of affairs, which he considers to be the wrong regulations regarding the distribution of wealth and the terms of land tenure; and, like the Cardinal, he thinks that he also has discovered a remedy in what is called "the single tax." This means that the increased increment that "now goes to the mere appropriator" should be used to pay all the expenses of the country, and thus abolish all other taxes now imposed for general purposes. The result of this would be, he argues, that an end would be put to speculation in land, which makes it become dearer every year.

In submitting his proposal for remedying our present social evils Henry George thinks he has discovered that the prevailing wrongs in society are largely due to interference by man with the exercise of Almighty Power. He says: "He who made food and clothing and shelter necessary to man's life has also given to man, in the power of labor, the means of maintaining that life; and when, without fault of his own, man cannot exert that power, there is somewhere a wrong of the same kind as denial of right of property and denial of right of life—a wrong equivalent to robbery and murder on the grandest style." It is presumable, from this extract, that Mr. George entertains some peculiar theological notions which he mixes up with his proposed remedy. To my mind it seems most unfortunate that social reformers will encumber their suggested remedies with mystic theological speculations. This, no doubt, has proved one of the causes why such remedies have failed to achieve the object sought. It is my firm belief that, judging from experience, ameliorating efforts will continue to fail until the evils of society are dealt with by purely natural means. The alleged supernatural aid has been evoked long enough without success; and now surely wisdom should prompt us to avail ourselves of those resources of which we have some knowledge, and over which we can have some control. It is not here a question of the truth of Mr. George's theology so much as of its non-adaptability to the purpose at issue, although, as he puts it, God's providential share in the scheme seems to be exceedingly puzzling. For instance, what can be thought of an Almighty "He" who would have so arranged matters that the present evils could be possible? Further, can it be conceived that "He," if he is benevolent and the principal in the concern, would permit "robbery and murder on the grandest style"? Would it not be better to leave all that this "He" is supposed to represent entirely out of consideration in dealing with the social evils, and to seek for the remedy in mundane conditions? Even upon the theological hypothesis, the "bane" being here, the "antidote" should be here also; and our duty is to

seek to discover it, and to apply it to the "ills that flesh is heir to."

This position Henry George admits to be the practical one, despite his theological adulteration ; for he says the solution of the labor problems is to be found as follows : "The opportunities of finding employment, and the rate of all wages, depend ultimately upon the freedom of access to the land, the price that labor must pay for its use" This solution, Mr. George holds, can be speedily put into practice. To this latter statement I cannot assent. No doubt, if its immediate application were possible, improvement upon the existing state of things would follow. But experience proves that the partial remedies that have hitherto been adopted, both in social and political affairs, have been gradual in their growth and slow in producing the desired results True, he refers to the many thousands of families that were enabled to settle on estates in New Zealand through the Land Act of the late Freethinking Premier, Mr. John Ballance. But it must be remembered that this able reformer had a long and hard struggle to secure the moderate relief that he obtained for a few thousand families in that new and fertile country. It took many years of courageous and persistent advocacy of a very able organiser before his efforts were crowned with any success. And when the battle was won, it was not that of the purchase of the land, but merely that it should be held at a rate equivalent to the income or property tax imposed in that colony. It should, however, be remembered that even this modicum of reform was much easier to obtain in a colony possessing new and virgin soil than it would be to "take from mere appropriators" in the old country that which could only be secured by lawful means. As regards England, the probability of any benefit arising from Mr. George's proposal appears very remote. His plan has been before the world now for many years, and at present there is no indication of its being adopted. This, of course, is no argument against its value ; but it shows that Mr. George is rather premature in supposing that his remedy "can be speedily put into

practice." I have not the slightest desire to depreciate any attempt to relieve the burdens of toil, or to check any possible alleviation of social suffering; still, I cannot ignore facts, although I may regret that they exist.

It will be within the knowledge of many of my readers that a whole generation has passed away since J. S. Mill and others inaugurated a movement in reference to the unearned increment, and little or nothing has been done up to date to realise the improvements those reformers suggested. Parliament has also been recently considering the subject of allotments, from which great things are expected. Leading articles in our democratic newspapers are echoing the old cry of "Back to the Land," than which nothing could be better under suitable conditions. But how is the thing to be done? and, even if it could be accomplished, would it be an unqualified advantage without other reforms equally necessary? A small plot of land, to be cultivated in spare hours, by men accustomed to it, might prove a useful investment, if the rent were nominal, of which there is not much hope at present. If, however, anyone expects a beneficial revolution by putting families on a few acres of land in this country, they would, I think, be doomed to disappointment. To make the cultivation of land in England profitable, not only industry is required, but skill, judgment, and the best appliances are necessary, and the latter need an amount of capital which, unfortunately, is not within the reach or at the command of the poor laboring man. Before land in England can become self-supporting to the working classes, the problem of a moneyless people must be dealt with. If some millions of money and some millions of acres of land were placed at the disposal of well-trained and experienced farm laborers, no doubt they would give a good account of themselves. But on any other terms I have but little faith in the advantages of going "Back to the Land."

So far as the problem of the land question is concerned, I fail to see its immediate solution in any one scheme now before the public. Still, many measures

could be adopted to hasten on a solution; such, for instance, as the total abolition of the game laws, the repeal of the laws of entail and primogeniture, and an easy and a cheap mode of transferring land. The present expensive manner of selling it should at once cease, for so long as it is legal to buy and sell land there is no reason why it should not be transferred in as inexpensive a manner as that in which the beasts that feed upon it are sold. All legislation upon this subject should tend to destroy the monopoly of land, and to place it at the command of the people, so that it may be used for the two purposes of providing food and of paying its just share of national taxation. To do this it may be found that the Nationalisation scheme will be the most effectual one to adopt. But ere this can be accomplished and properly worked the toiling classes must recognise that the work of reform will have to be done by themselves. They have depended upon others too long, and now the fact must be faced, that self-help is the only successful aid to rely upon. It will also be necessary to make our Government representative in its character in the fullest sense of the word—a Government by the people, and for the people, irrespective of any particular class. With such a Government, its principal function would be to give force to the public will in removing existing obstacles to the attainment of just laws, so that the work of amelioration may go on unimpeded by that legacy of aristocratic and class distinctions which has so long proved a potent hindrance to the general welfare. In order that such a consummation may be realised, prudence, frugality, disciplined thought, and sound education upon the part of the masses will be necessary. And in proportion as these requisites are possessed and utilised, so, in my opinion, will the remedies be found for the present evils of society. Under such conditions the revolution will not be sudden, but it will be none the less certain in its arrival, and none the less beneficial in its influence.

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