

British Secular
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ON

RELIGION AND FREETHOUGHT.

IF all mankind minus one were of one opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.—*On Liberty.*

All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility.—*On Liberty.*

Who can compute what the world loses in the multitude of promising intellects combined with timid characters, who dare not follow out any bold, vigorous, independent train of thought, lest it should land them in something which would admit of being considered irreligious or immoral?.....*No one can be a great thinker who does not recognise that, as a thinker, it is his first duty to follow his intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead.*—*On Liberty.*

All Christians believe that the blessed are the poor and humble, and those who are ill-used by the world; that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven; that they should judge not, lest they be judged; that they should swear not at all; that they should love their neighbour as themselves; that, if one take their cloak, they should give him their coat also; that they should take no thought for the morrow; that, if they would be perfect, they should sell all that they have, and give it to the poor. They are not insincere when they say that they believe all these things. They do believe them, as people believe what they have always heard lauded, and never discussed. But, in the sense of that living belief which regulates conduct, they believe these doctrines just up to the point to which it is usual to act upon them..... Whenever conduct is concerned, they look round for Mr. A. and B. to direct them how far to go in obeying Christ.—*On Liberty.*

It [Christian Morality] holds out the hope of heaven and the threat of hell as the appointed and appropriate motives to a virtuous life: in this falling far below the best of the ancients, and doing what lies in it to give to human morality an essentially selfish character, by disconnecting each man's feelings of duty from the interests of his fellow-creatures, except so far as a self-interested inducement is offered to him for consulting them. It is essentially a doctrine of passive obedience; it inculcates submission to all authorities found established..... What little recognition the idea of obligation to the public obtains in modern morality is derived from Greek and Roman sources; as, even in the morality of private life, whatever exists of magnanimity, high-mindedness, personal dignity, even the sense of honour, is derived from the purely human, not the religious, part of our education, and never could have grown out of a standard of ethics in which the only worth, professedly recognised, is that of obedience.—*On Liberty.*

It can do truth no service to blink the fact, known to all who have the most ordinary acquaintance with literary history, that a large portion of the noblest and most valuable moral teaching has been the work, not only of men who did not know, but of men who knew and rejected, the Christian faith.—*On Liberty.*

I am thus one of the very few examples, in this country, of one who has not thrown off religious belief, but never had it : I grew up in a negative state with regard to it.—*Autobiography*.

He [James Mill, his father] looked upon it [Religion] as *the greatest enemy of mankind*: first by setting up fictitious excellencies—belief in creeds, devotional feelings, and ceremonies, not connected with the good of human kind—and causing these to be accepted as substitutes for genuine virtues : but, above all, by *radically vitiating the standard of morals* ; making it consist in doing the will of a being, on whom it lavishes indeed all the phases of adulation, but whom in sober truth it depicts as eminently hateful. I have a hundred times heard him say that all ages and nations have represented their gods as wicked, in a constantly-increasing progression, that mankind have gone on adding trait after trait till they reached *the most perfect conception of wickedness* which the human mind can devise, and *have called this God*, and prostrated themselves before it. This *ne plus ultra* of wickedness he considered to be embodied in what is commonly presented to mankind as the creed of Christianity.—*Autobiography*.

Not even on the most distorted and contracted theory of good which ever was framed by religious or philosophical fanaticism can the government of Nature be made to resemble the work of a being at once good and omnipotent.—*Essays on Religion*.

Belief, then, in the supernatural, great as are the services which it rendered in the early stages of human development, cannot be considered to be any longer required, either for enabling us to know what is right and wrong in social morality, or for supplying us with motives to do right and to abstain from wrong.—*Essays on Religion*.

That because life is short we should care for nothing beyond it is not a legitimate conclusion ; and the supposition that human beings in general are not capable of feeling deep, and even the deepest, interest in things which they will never live to see, is a view of human nature as false as it is abject. Let it be remembered that, if individual life is short, the life of the human species is not short ; its indefinite duration is practically equivalent to endlessness ; and, being combined with indefinite capability of improvement, it offers the imagination and sympathies a large enough object to satisfy any reasonable demand for grandeur of aspiration. If such an object appears small to a mind accustomed to dream of infinite and eternal beatitudes, it will expand into far other dimensions when those *baseless fancies* shall have receded into the past.—*Essays on Religion*.

It seems to me not only possible, but probable, that in a higher, and, above all, a happier condition of human life, not annihilation, but immortality, may be the burdensome idea ; and that human nature, though pleased with the present, and by no means impatient to quit it, would find comfort, and not sadness, in the thought that it is not chained through eternity to a conscious existence, which it cannot be assured that it will always wish to preserve.—*Essays on Religion*.