

B2287

NO84

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

SECULARISM;

ITS PRINCIPLES STATED.

BY

CHRISTOPHER CHARLES,

Author of "The Dark Side of Christianity," &c.

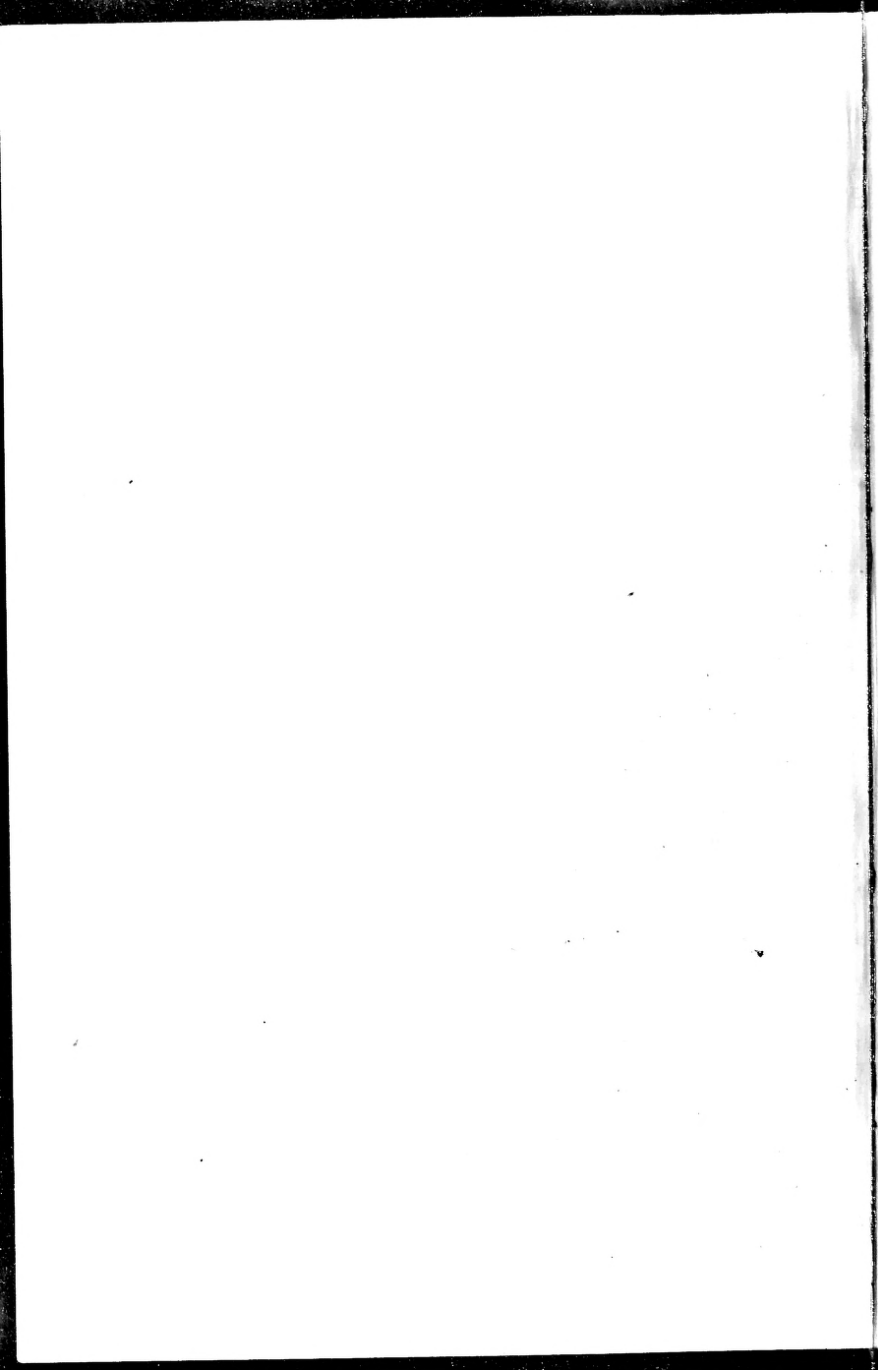
"Let us every day do that which the day requires."—BEN. CONSTANT.

[FOURTH THOUSAND].

LONDON :

AUSTIN & CO., 17, JOHNSON'S COURT, FLEET
STREET, E.C.

PRICE ONE PENNY.



SECULARISM.

ALL our knowledge is derived from nature, and we obtain it by comparison and discrimination. By experience we learn to classify the multitude of objects presented to our minds, we discover the qualities which are common to every object, as also those that are dissimilar. Having found certain peculiarities in an object, these become marks of identity, and to these we give a name by which we refer them to the class they belong, so that afterwards we can make ourselves understood by all who have acquired a knowledge of things, and the names by which their distinguishing characteristics are known amongst men. By this method it is proposed to explain what Secularism is, as it is understood by the writer, and the writer, and those who agree with him, alone are responsible for what is here written.

Every tolerably well-informed man knows that in various parts of this globe, and at different times, certain men, or bodies of men, have given to the world what they have called a religion, or a faith, or a system of life, by which all the believers are supposed to be guided from their cradles to their graves. These systems have been given under the authority of the particular god or divine source believed in at the time. Hence the gods believed in, have given a character to the faith of one country, differing from that of other countries, because the gods themselves were not all alike. No doubt the various faiths of the world appear alike true to the people who believe them, but not so to others. If the faiths all appeared alike true to each man, there would be no differences to keep men apart, but this is not possible, for it is the fact of the faiths differing that accounts for their separate existence, and also for the existence of a separate class of believers following each faith. The tendency of these faiths is to divide and sub-divide

mankind, and this must ever be so; since the declaration of similarity, or agreement in precept or practice, would be individual destruction, and we do not expect that any of the great faiths of the world will end its career by committing suicide.

These various faiths, all resting on some supposed supernatural authority, claim and obtain the allegiance of all who accept the authority. Hence the life of one man is guided by the Old Testament, another by the New, another by the Koran or some other sacred book, another by a priest, and these men are known as Jews, Christians, Mahometans, Buddhists, Brahmins, and a host of other names too numerous to mention. Besides all these, in different countries and at different times, have appeared a few men whose lives have been guided by reason instead of being guided by the Bibles and the priests. These latter reject all the faiths, or such parts of them that do not appear reasonable, hence they have received the names Atheist, Deist, Pantheist, Infidel, Freethinker, Socialist, and, in these modern days, Secularist. The history of these men, called by these names in many cases by their opponents—names used frequently as terms of reproach, so defined as to create a feeling of terror and hatred—is a history of suffering and cruelty, of courage and magnanimity, of tragedy and heroism, such as cannot be paralleled by reference to any other class of men, and which remains unpublished in any popular form to which the reader can be referred. Some sketches may be read in a series of tracts called "Half-Hours with Freethinkers," and in "Heresy, its Utility," by Mr. C. Bradlaugh. Much valuable information on this subject may be obtained in the *National Reformer*, edited by Mr. Bradlaugh, and in the *Reasoner*, edited by Mr. G. J. Holyoake, who for many years was the leading speaker and writer on Atheism and Freethinking in England. It was in the *Reasoner*, many years ago, where suggestions were made that a union of Atheists, Deists, and Freethinkers generally, was possible under the name Secularist. This idea was enforced by Mr. G. J. Holyoake, and in 1856 he published a general statement, entitled "Principles of Secularism Briefly Explained."

The term Secularism has been applied to that class of intellectual conclusions which have been arrived at by reason derived from the observation and experience of mankind. The term Secularism has been defined in language free from

objection, in the literature of our country, by writers who have never declared themselves Secularists. For instance, in the "Imperial Lexicon," we read:—"Secularism means 'an age pertaining to this present world,' supreme attention to the things of the present life." In Black's "Dictionary of Words from the Latin," we read:—"Seculum, a division of time, an age, people of the age, that is, people of this world," hence secularity, which means attention to things of the present life; and secular, relating to worldly matters, as "the secular powers, as opposed to the spiritual powers." From this definition and what has already been said, it will be seen that Secularism, as applied by modern Freethinkers, is a name under which is taught the duty man has to perform to-day, the work of the present age. Its principles concern men in this world, the truth of which can be tested in this life. It takes reason for its guide, morality for its principle, and utility as the test of all the actions and institutions of men. Its aim is to unite men, to promote the good of all by a method which all can understand, and which all who follow reason can consistently adopt.

Reason is the only guide to a man who ceases to rely on alleged revelations, the churches, and the priests: it is his only pilot if he discards all these. The man who fears to follow his reason will be always open to imposture, and he who declines or neglects to use it will ever be subject to the misery which political and religious slavery inflicts. If men would be free, and enjoy the greatest blessings the exercise of their intellectual faculties can bestow, they must take reason as their only guide to distinguish the true from the false, the good from the evil—for reason is the only faculty by which this can be done. All possible truth must agree with reason and be intelligible to reason; whether any doctrine be true or not must be settled by an appeal to this, no matter what authority claims exemption. Things above reason no man can settle, since no man has faculties to know anything of them.

It is the pride of the Catholic, that wherever the church-worshipper goes, he finds facilities for devotion in harmony with his feelings and his convictions.

The Secularist finds reason everywhere—it is more ancient than Churches or Bibles—it is of all times and all countries, and is only bound by the extent and duration of humanity.

Wherever man is, there is reason. In whatever age reason

is used, it proclaims the truths of nature and the rights of man, and the more it is cultivated, the more does science enlarge its boundaries, happiness increase, and the greater security have we for the freedom and prosperity of mankind. Reason being the accepted guide, the free action of it becomes a necessity. Hence freedom of thought, speech, and writing are rights, which the Secularist maintains and exercises.

Knowing that a healthy condition of mind is only possible when free discussion is practised, the Secularist promotes it on all subjects, since it does not appear possible for men to become wise or well-informed on any subject without hearing whatever can be said of it by people who look at it on every side. To prevent intolerance and narrow views of men and things, it is necessary the people should be trained and accustomed to hear all sides of questions stated by those who take sides, and who may be fairly supposed to be the persons best worth listening to. As no king, church, or body of men, has any special authority to decide for others what is true, truth must be the common property of all, and the search for it, and the examination of it must be the common right of all, no man or body of men having any legitimate authority to prevent or control others in the exercise of this natural right. The interference with this right on the part of any government, church, or king, is no more justifiable than such interference would be on the part of the people, and no state or nation can be declared free which does not proclaim unrestricted freedom of thought and speech as the right of every citizen.

Secularism includes the most extreme dissenter on theological matters—the Atheist. Any man who avows himself an Atheist, requires intellectual courage, for no language has been considered too strong to denounce him, and no epithet too vulgar to describe him. But the greatest and clearest minds do not find themselves endowed with faculties fitted for, or capable of deciding, the truth of Theism for him. On subjects which transcend human thought, the advice of those who have thought deepest and most is, that we should sit down in quiet ignorance on matters of which nothing can be known; that, in speculative questions, we can only serve each other by proving; that we should not assume more causes than are required to explain phenomena, that the search for ultimate causes is barren, and the Secularist

advises that instead of taking refuge in assumptions, men should patiently submit themselves to the limits of their intelligence. From considerations such as these, Secularism esteems the Atheist as worthy of fellowship and service, whilst it does not withhold these from others, who do not accept the conclusions at which the Atheist arrives. The Deist or Theist, or any man who accepts the conclusions of reason, who admits the existence of morality apart from revelations and other authorities, who accepts the declarations of science and the facts of nature, can live and work in harmony with the Secular method of promoting the welfare of the people.

The co-operation of others it is useless to invite and futile to expect, since their thoughts and feelings are united with other associations, which it is the object of Secularism to supersede. These persons it is the object of Secularism to convert, and imbue with thoughts and feelings in harmony with reason and science. Secularism adopts reason instead of faith, science instead of revelation, natural morality instead of divine commands; it places dependence on nature instead of providence, in work instead of worship and prayer, and holds that humanity "instead of"* divinity should occupy the thoughts of men, and command their service.

In the Secular view, conduct is before faith, sincerity of opinion higher than assent to creeds, service to mankind now in this world nobler than belief in a future state in another world—for if any are saved, it will be the honest men who devote their talents to the service of humanity. Any other view of the issues of life would distort all our notions of justice, being contrary to reason, and at variance with the dictates of common sense. Opinions on speculative questions may ever vary; but conduct affects everybody, and can be understood by all—so that the question, viewed from a Secular standpoint, What does a man *do*? is of much greater importance than, What does a man *believe*?

* Mr. G. J. Holyoake suggests the word "prior" in place of "instead of" in this sentence. The Theists and Deists of our party doubtless think of humanity "prior" to divinity. But I candidly confess that when a Theist myself I thought of divinity "prior" to humanity. But now, to me, humanity is sufficient to think of; hence divinity is excluded, and humanity substituted. Only those who endorse this view are responsible for it.

Secularism accepts the discoveries of science which reveal the facts of nature, and explain the methods of nature. It looks on science as the providence of human life—as the means of influencing the affairs of men. Nature interpreted by science presents order and method, by the study of which man obtains a guide for daily life—obedience to the conditions or laws of existence being the only mode of living a useful and healthy life. The Secularist sees no supernatural or providential interference with the order of nature in favour of any man or any class. All who comply with the invariable laws of phenomena reap the same results. The idea that a man is either saved or lost, either by sea or land, because of his orthodoxy or his heterodoxy, is an exploded superstition. A good ship, well managed, in fair weather, will carry either parsons or pirates, and the pious are no safer in a storm than the impious.

We may be told that in the days of Christianity, and before nature was subservient to divine will, that miracles happened; but there is no justification for repeating such stories to-day. Miracles now endure but for a season, and do not occur at all in the presence of a free press, and will be totally discarded when the laws of nature are understood by all. Any strange event is now investigated, instead of being blindly believed as miraculous. The age of miracles is past; there is nothing now but invariable law; and there is no reliable evidence that nature was ever controlled by a capricious will, or that the present invariable methods of nature are not as eternal as nature itself.

Many who admit all that has been advanced may still inquire, What of the future? As neither nature nor science affords any light on this subject, Secularism can declare nothing. The love of life and the desire of continuous existence are sufficient to account for the innumerable speculations entered into on this subject.

If it could be proved that man has a soul, a personal existence apart from and independent of his body, capable of existing on some other planet, and if evidence existed of a planet suited for its reception, we might be pardoned for discussing the mode of the soul's transit, and the conditions of its future existence; but in the absence of facts on these questions, each person must be left free to form his own opinion. On questions about which people know nothing, it is the most honest to say nothing—for nothing can serve

us but what is proved. The Secularist takes one world at a time, and finding all his faculties suited to this globe, he deems it the highest wisdom to use them for the purpose for which they are obviously fitted. To make this world what it might be, and what it should be, will prove sufficient for men's capabilities, without troubling themselves about another.

It has been said that Secularism takes morality for its principle. Morality is the quality of an action we call good—that is conduct the tendency of which is the highest good, that is the good of all. Morality is said to depend on religion; but this is a low view of the subject, in which only manners are recognised. In the Secular view, morality depends on nature, experience, and utility. A moral man is one whose state of mind is what we describe as prudent, benevolent, just; and all religions that have any social value depend on morality, and spring from it. A religion without morality is an idle pastime, or a mischievous thing. Moral sense expresses the determination of the mind to be pleased with the affections, actions, or characters of men who are described as temperate, virtuous, or good. This moral sense is acquired by experience—a knowledge of life and action obtained by living in the society of men. If we could devise some plan by which all men would experience the agreeable affections of their natures only throughout their lives, this would be a state of moral perfection; and the nearer we approach this condition of existence, and the longer its duration, the higher our standard of morals may be said to be.

Those who accept this view will see that the conditions of social existence, and the state of men's dispositions towards each other, are the two sources from which a moral life may be expected to result. Thus the cultivation of man's intellect and feelings, and the improvement of his social arrangements, become Secular duties. To use figurative language, we must look on every man as an improveable being, as containing the seeds of every virtue and vice, and that the proportion in which these grow and ripen depends on the natural force of the seed, and the situation in which man is placed.

The Secularist looks upon society as a production of natural causes—a growth in harmony with the laws of nature, as much so as the movements of the solar system.

The results of every instant depend on preceding events, and the future is influenced and determined by the present. Life is a process, and when it is understood—when the order of nature is fully known to man—the order of social life will be known and predicted. In deciding what is moral, we ask what is useful, conducive to human well-being, rather than what is ancient or what is generally believed.

An opinion or practice may be true and good, but not because it is old. Reason deems the useful venerable, and the virtuous noble, irrespective of age and custom. The final test of actions and institutions is, Do they tend to human improvement, and the increase of human felicity? And by this test alone does the Secularist determine whether such actions should be approved, and such institutions be perpetuated or swept away. Experience shows that the practice of honesty and truthfulness is useful to society, and the Secularist holds the obligation to practise them arises, not in divine command, or priestly directions, but out of the relation in which we stand to one another; that without truthfulness all our domestic, social, and commercial relationships would perish. In the absence of morality, society would cease to be. These considerations are sufficient to determine the mind of the Secularist as to his conduct in life. He wants neither the Bible, the Church, nor the priest to give him motives or commands to be virtuous. He knows a good action when he sees it performed, and is sufficiently rewarded by the doing of it. To him the doing good is a pleasure, as well as a profit and a duty. The removal of the causes that produce misery and immorality, and the multiplication of motives to virtue, are social duties, and the Secularist, knowing that the decrease of vice or the increase of virtue produces immediate benefit to himself, he has a more obvious motive for exertion than the promise of eternal happiness or the dread of eternal woe could possibly afford him.

From the foregoing it will be seen that Secularism proposes to unite mankind for the purpose of emancipating them from evils which have resulted from superstition, ignorance, and bad social and political arrangements. Secularism would destroy superstition by sustaining a free platform and a free press for the discussion of all subjects, especially those which existing churches and institutions endeavour to

prohibit. Whilst the latter permit the discussion of superficial and unimportant topics, Secularism maintains the right and duty of discussing all great questions which affect the intellectual, moral, and physical condition of mankind. This is necessary for the good of society—especially for the young men and women—to whom nothing is known except that which the theological and religious party have thought fit to teach them. On the Secular platform, not only the Bible and the history of the Jews, but all books, all art, all science, and the history of all mankind, are guides and instructors for all who place themselves under its influence.

To these varied sources of knowledge and wisdom, the Secularist teacher points with greater confidence, and much greater usefulness than the theological teacher can possibly do with his one collection of orthodox writings.

Nature and utility being his guides, the Secularist requires the cultivation of the intellect—hence he proposes and demands the national secular education of the people, in order that the people may *know* what is required of them to *do*.

Health being one of the most essential conditions of existence, the Secularists promote all improvements in the sanitary and other arrangements of society, whereby the people may obtain pure food, pure air, and live under healthy intellectual and physical conditions.

As all these things depend on the means by which they can be obtained, namely, labour, the Secularist seeks to organise the workers in such a way that the results of their labour shall be equitably shared among them. To this end, co-operation points with unmistakable significance, giving apparently a satisfactory solution to the problem, which is to find a condition of society in which the people will be neither deprived nor poor.

This important and noble aspiration the Secularist may not be able to realise, but this he is working and hoping for, and he earnestly solicits, and cordially accepts, the fellowship of all men and women who are willing and desirous of joining in this mighty and just endeavour.

MR. GLADSTONE'S QUESTIONABLE BOOK.

Second edition, revised, neatly bound in cloth, lettered,
price 1s.,

THE SECULARIST'S MANUAL

OF

SONGS AND CEREMONIES.

EDITED BY

AUSTIN HOLYOAKE AND CHARLES WATTS.

Contents :

- Prefatory Words. By Charles Bradlaugh.
Principles and Objects of the National Secular Society.
A Few Words on Singing. By John Lowry.
Over 100 Songs, Original and Selected, arranged by J. Lowry.
The Essentials of Elocution. By Austin Holyoake.
Recitations, all of a Secular and Progressive Character.
Sentiments and Toasts to be used at Anniversaries and Festivals.
Secular Ceremonies :—Naming of Infants. By C. Watts.
" " Marriage Service. By A. Holyoake.
" " Burial Service. By A. Holyoake.
The Songs and Recitations are from the pens of J. B. Leno, Ernest Jones, Thomas Curtis, Rouget de Lisle, Frederick Burrington, Dr. Sexton, Lee Hayes, J. Lawson, Charles Mackay, Luke Webster, Charles Swain, W. Cam- sell, Mary Howitt, E. H. Guillaume, Robert Nicoll, Eliza Cook, Charles Arnold, Russell Lowell, Longfellow, Ed- ward King, C. Forrest, W. L. Costine, R. Lipsham, J. Wilson, William Maccall, E. H. Burrington, Goethe, Thomas Hood, H. V. Mayer, Shelley, Herbert Gilham, Dr. Wolcott, Leigh Hunt, Thomas Noel, Critchley Prince, J. W. Saxe, Byron, Beranger, Kirke White, Algernon Swinburne, Charles Kingsley, G. J. Holyoake, J. M. Pea- cock, C. Watts, C. Bradlaugh, and many others.

London : Austin & Co., 17, Johnson's Court, Fleet Street.