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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

THE
PHILOSOPHY
OF
SECULARISM

BY

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THE PHILOSOPHY OF SECULARISM.

THE present age is one of theological thaw. The Reformation is by some regarded as the most remarkable and important religious movement of modern times; while others consider as still more portentous that sceptical movement of last century, which culminated in the lightnings and thunders of the Revolution, and finally cleared the intellectual atmosphere of its densest and most oppressive clouds of superstition. But probably it will be found that this nineteenth century, which is not, as some writers seem to imagine, rudely severed from its predecessor, has continued less tumultuously, because amidst fewer impediments, the critical work of the eighteenth, and is no less a period of religious disintegration and reconstruction. Traditional beliefs are being silently subverted by new agencies. Science, instead of critically attacking supernatural religion, has surely and irretrievably sapped its foundations. The educated intelligence of to-day is not required to discuss minor points of doctrine and ritual, or the internal discrepancies of revelation, but finds itself confronted with the supreme all-subsuming question of whether the very essentials of faith can be maintained in presence of the indubitable truths of science, and of the rigorous habit of mind it engenders. Heretics, too, are less vigorously cursed for their wicked

obstinacy, a sure sign of theological decadence. On the contrary, when they happen to be eminent in science or literature they are usually treated with marked respect; and the apologetic tone, which heresy has long discarded, is now assumed by those who have hitherto claimed to speak with authority. Christian Evidence Societies invite sceptics to fashionable West-end halls to hear celebrated religious doctors show that the popular faith is after all not so very unreasonable, yet sceptics can hardly be induced to attend; and when these discourses are published sceptics can hardly be induced to read them; the real secret of all this being that such addresses are designed, not so much to meet the objections of those outside the Churches, as to soothe the doubts and allay the misgivings of those inside them. Even in the days of Voltaire, Buffon was obliged to recant what he knew to be true; and doubtless the Patriarch of Ferney himself would have paid a severe penalty for his scepticism, had he not eluded the vigilant malice of his foes by acting on his professed opinion that a philosopher, like a fox, should have plenty of holes to run to when the priests are on his track. But in our days no name commands greater respect than that of Darwin, whose biological theories reverse all time-honored notions of man's origin and history, as the Copernican astronomy reversed the geocentric theory of the universe, so flattering to man's complacent egotism. Huxley, Tyndall and Clifford¹ are

¹ Professor Clifford's death was a sad blow to the cause of Freethought. We have to mourn the loss of a most valiant soldier of progress, fallen prematurely before a tithe of his work was done.

becoming quite fashionable; Mr. Swinburne, whom the daintiest young ladies may read with parental consent if they eschew certain proscribed pieces in *Poems and Ballads*, publishes fiery lyrical impeachments of Christianity, which a century or two ago would have commended him to a fiery death; and even Mr. Carlyle, the noble prophet of our time, was allowed without protest to write scornfully of Hebrew Old-Clothes. These are a few remarkable signs of our religious state in England, and by general admission the educated classes on the Continent are still more "irreligious" than our own. If the Reformation broke the infallibility of the Pope, and secured liberty and progress for Protestants; if the Revolution drove feudalism and mental tyranny from their strongholds in France, and enlisted the bright quick French intellect once for all in the service of reason and freedom it is no less true that the scientific movement of our age, which is co-extensive with civilisation, is doing a vaster though not more necessary work, and is slowly but surely preparing for that great Future, whose lineaments none of us can presume to trace, although here and there an aspect flashes on some straining vision.

The old faiths ruin and rend, and the air is vocal with the clamour of new systems, each protesting itself *the Religion of the Future*. Sweet sentimental Deism claims first attention, because it retains what is thought to be the essence of old beliefs after discarding their reality. Next perhaps comes Positivism,² far nobler

² Positivism is exceedingly well represented in England. Although numerically the smallest of sects, it has four very able

and more vital, which manages to make itself well heard, having a few strong and skilful pleaders, who never lose sight of their creed whatever subject they happen to be treating. But Secularism, which in England at least is numerically far more important than Positivism, although gladly heard by thousands of common people, is scarcely known at all in circles of highest education where its principles are most powerfully operant. Mr. Gladstone, indeed, in his paper on "The Courses of Religious Thought,"³ published many years ago, thought it worth serious notice; but with that exception I am not aware that Secularism has received attention in any first-class publication. Yet the word *secular* is entering more and more into our general vocabulary, and in especial has become associated with that view of national education which denies the propriety of religious teaching in Board Schools. This use of the word points to the principle on which Secularism is based. The interests of this world and life are *secular*, and can be estimated and furthered by our unaided intellects; the interests of another life and world can be dealt with only by appealing to *Revelation*. Secularism proposes to cultivate the splendid provinces of Time, leaving the

advocates in Dr. Congreve, Professor Beesley, Dr. Brydges, and Mr. Frederick Harrison. There are many points of resemblance between Positivism and Secularism. Indeed the resemblance would be almost complete if the Positivists in ignoring theology did not make a god of Comte, and with amazing disregard of that historic development they so emphasize, venerate all his later aberrations, as though he or any man could justly assume to prescribe the ways in which, through all succeeding generations, a great idea shall realise itself in practice.

³ *Contemporary Review*, June, 1876.

theologians to care for the realms of Eternity, and meaning to interfere with them only while their pursuit of salvation in another life hinders the attainment of real welfare in this.

Mr. Gladstone's conception of Secularism, derived of course from its literature, may here be cited. After describing the Sceptic, the Atheist, and the Agnostic, he proceeds :—

“Then comes the *Secularist*. Him I understand to stop short of the three former schools in that he does not of necessity assert anything but the positive and exclusive claims of the purposes, the enjoyments, and the needs presented to us in the world of sight and experience. He does not require in principle even the universal suspense of Scepticism ; but, putting the two worlds into two scales of value, he finds that the one weighs much, the other either nothing, or nothing that can be appreciated. At the utmost he is like a chemist who, in a testing analysis, after putting into percentage all that he can measure, if he finds something behind so minute as to refuse any quantitative estimate, calls it by the name of ‘trace.’”

This account of Secularism is on the whole very fair, but evidently it requires much amplification before it can be perfectly understood by those who have not, like Mr. Gladstone, read Secular literature for themselves. As Mr. Gladstone quoted words of mine in corroboration of his view of Secularism, I may without immodesty undertake to give a fuller explanation of it ; and this can best be done, not dogmatically, but popularly, allowing principles as it were to unfold themselves.

Were I obliged to give an approximate definition of Secularism in one sentence I should say that it is

naturalism in morals as distinguished from supernaturalism; meaning by this that the criterion of morality is derivable from reason and experience, and that its ground and guarantee exist in human nature independently of any theological belief. Mr. G. J. Holyoake, whose name is inseparably associated with Secularism, says: "Secularism relates to the present existence of man and to actions the issue of which can be tested by the experience of this life." And again: "Secularism means the moral duty of man deduced from considerations which pertain to this life alone. Secularism purposes to regulate human affairs by considerations purely human." The second of these quotations is clearly more comprehensive than the first, and is certainly a better expression of the view entertained by the vast majority of Secularists. It dismisses theology from all control over the practical affairs of this life, and banishes it to the region of speculation. The commonest intelligence may see that this doctrine, however innocent it looks on paper, is in essence and practice revolutionary. It makes clean sweep of all that theologians regard as most significant and precious. Dr. Newman, in his *Grammar of Assent*, writes: "By Religion I mean the knowledge of God, of his will, and of our duties towards him;" and he adds that the channels which Nature furnishes for our acquiring this knowledge "teach us the Being and Attributes of God, our responsibility to him, our dependence on him, our prospect of reward or punishment, to be somehow brought about, according as we obey or disobey him." A better definition of what is generally deemed religion could not be found, and such religion as this

Secularism will have no concern with. From their point of view orthodox teachers are justified in calling it irreligious; but those Secularists who agree with Carlyle that whoever believes in the infinite nature of Duty has a religion, repudiate the epithet *irreligious* just as they repudiate the epithet *infidel*, for the popular connotation of both includes something utterly inapplicable to Secularism as they understand it. Properly speaking, they assert, Secularism is not irreligious, but untheological; yet, as it entirely excludes from the sphere of human duty what most people regard as religion, it must explain and justify itself.

Secularism rejects theology as a guide and authority in the affairs of this life because its pretensions are not warranted by its evidence. Natural Theology, to use a common but half-paradoxical phrase, never has been nor can be aught but a body of speculation, admirable enough in its way perhaps, but quite irreducible to the level of experience. Indeed, one's strongest impression in reading treatises on that branch of metaphysics is that they are not so much proofs as excuses of faith, and would never have been written if the ideas sought to be verified had not already been enounced in Revelation. As for Revealed Religion, it is based upon miracles, and these to the scientific mind are altogether inadmissible, being trebly discredited. In the first place, they are at variance with the general fact of order in nature, the largest vessel or conception into which all our experiences flow; adverse to that law of Universal Causation which underlies all scientific theories and guides all scientific research. Next, the natural

history of miracles show us how they arise, and makes us view them as phenomena of superstition, manifesting a certain coherence and order because the human imagination which gave birth to them is subject to laws however baffling and subtle. All miracles had their origin from one and the same natural source. The belief in their occurrence invariably characterises certain stages of mental development, and gradually fades away as these are left farther and farther behind. They are not *historical* but *psychological* phenomena, not *actual* but merely *mental*, not *proofs* but *results* of faith.⁴ The miracles of Christianity are no exception to this rule; they stand in the same category as all others. As Mr. Arnold aptly observes: "The time has come when the minds of men no longer put as a matter of course the Bible miracles in a class by themselves. Now, from the moment this time commences, from the moment that the comparative history of all miracles is a conception entertained, and a study admitted, the conclusion is certain, the reign of the Bible miracles is doomed." Lastly, miracles are discredited for the reason insisted on by Mr. Greg—namely, that if we admit them, they prove nothing but the fact of their occurrence. If God is our author,

⁴ I do not say that miracles are *impossible*, an audacious and quite unscientific assertion rightly stigmatised as such by Professor Huxley in his admirable booklet on Hume. The region of "may be" is infinite, and finite minds blessed with sanity leave it alone, confining themselves to the certain and the probable. A miracle, as Huxley says, is no more impossible than a centaur, but it is just as improbable, and equally requires a tremendous array of unimpeachable evidence to support it. Every scholar knows that no such evidence is extant in the case of Christian or any other miracles.

he has endowed us with reason, and to the bar of that reason the utterances of the most astounding miracle-workers must ultimately come; if condemned there, the miracles will afford them no aid; if approved there, the miracles will be to them useless. Miracles, then, are fatally discredited in every way. Yet upon them all Revelations are founded, and even Christianity, as Dr. Newman urged against the orators of the Tamworth Reading-Room, "is a history supernatural, and almost scenic." Thus if Natural Theology is merely speculative and irreducible to the level of experience, Revealed Religion, though more substantial, is erected upon a basis which modern science and criticism have hopeless undermined.

Now if we relinquish belief in miracles we cannot retain belief in Special Providence and the Efficacy of Prayer, for these are simply aspects of the miraculous.⁵ Good-natured Adolf Naumann, the young German artist in *Middlemarch*, was not inaccurate though facetious in assuring Will Ladislaw that through him, as through a particular hook or claw, the universe was straining towards a certain picture yet to be painted; for every present phenomenon, whether trivial or important, occurs here and now, rather than elsewhere and at some other time, by virtue of the whole universal past. All the forces of nature have conspired to place

⁵ We often hear Prayer defended on emotional grounds, not as a practical request but as a spiritual aspiration. This, however, merely proves the potency of habit. The "Lord's Prayer" contains a distinct request for daily bread. The practice of prayer originated when people believed that something could be got by it, and those who pray now with no such belief are slaves to the fashion of their ancestors.

where it is the smallest grain of sand on the sea-shore, just as much as their interplay has strewn the æther-floated constellations of illimitable space. The slightest interference with natural sequence implies a disruption of the whole economy of things. Who suspends one law of nature suspends them all. The pious supplicator for just a little rain in time of drought really asks for a world-wide revolution in meteorology. And the dullest intellects, even of the clerical order, are beginning to see this. As a consequence prayers for rain in fine weather, or for fine weather in time of rain, have fallen almost entirely into disuse; and the most orthodox can now enjoy that joke about the clerk who asked his rector what was the good of praying for rain with the wind in that quarter. Nay more, so far has belief in the efficacy of prayer died out, that misguided simpletons who persist in conforming to apostolic injunction and practice, and in taking certain very explicit passages in the Gospels to mean what the words express, are regarded as Peculiar People, in the fullest sense of the term; and if through their primitive pathology children should die under their hands, they run a serious risk of imprisonment for manslaughter, notwithstanding that the book which has misled them is declared to be God's word by the law of the land. Occasionally, indeed, old habits assert themselves, and the nation suffers a recrudescence of superstition. When the life of the Prince of Wales was threatened by a malignant fever, prayers for his recovery were publicly offered up, and the wildest religious excitement mingled with the most loyal anxiety. But the newspapers were largely responsible

for this ; they fanned the excitement daily until many people grew almost as feverish as the Prince himself, and "irreligious" persons who preserved their sanity intact smiled when they read in the most unblushingly mendacious of those papers exclamations of piety and saintly allusions to the great national wave of prayer surging against the Throne of Grace. The Prince's life was spared, thanks to a good constitution and the highest medical skill, and a national thanksgiving was offered up in St. Paul's. Yet the doctors were not forgotten ; the chief of them was made a knight, and the nation demanded a rectification of the drainage in the Prince's palace, probably thinking that although prayer had been found efficacious there might be danger in tempting Providence a second time.

Soon after that interesting event Mr. Spurgeon modestly observed that the philosophers were noisy enough in peaceful times, but shrank into their holes like mice when imminent calamity threatened the nation ; which may be true without derogation to the philosophers, who, like wise men, do not bawl against popular madness, but reserve their admonitions until the heated multitude is calm and repentant. Professor Tyndall has invited the religious world to test the alleged efficacy of prayer by a practical experiment, such as allotting a ward in some hospital to be specially prayed for, and inquiring whether more cures are recorded in it than elsewhere. But this invitation has not been and never will be accepted. Superstitions always dislike contact with science and fact ; they prefer to float about in the vague of sentiment, where pursuit is hopeless and no obstacles impede. If there

is any efficacy in prayer, how can we account for the disastrous and repeated failures of righteous causes and the triumph of bad? The voice of human supplication has ascended heavenwards in all ages from all parts of the earth, but when has a hand been extended from behind the veil? The thoughtful poor have besought appeasement of their terrible hunger for some nobler life than is possible while poverty deadens every fine impulse and frustrates every unselfish thought, but whenever did prayer bring them aid? The miserable have cried for comfort, sufferers for some mitigation of their pain, captives for deliverance, the oppressed for freedom, and those who have fought the great fight of good against ill for some ray of hope to lighten despair; but what answer has been vouchsafed?

What hope, what light
Falls from the farthest starriest way
On you that pray?

* * * *

Can ye beat off one wave with prayer,
Can ye move mountains? bid the flower
Take flight and turn to a bird in the air?
Can ye hold fast for shine or shower
One wingless hour?⁶

The dying words of Mr. Tennyson's Arthur—"More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of"—are a weak solace to those who recognise its futility, and find life too stern for optimistic dreams. Salvation, in this life at least, cometh not by prayer, but by valiant effort under the guidance of wisdom and the inspiration of love. Knowledge alone is power.

⁶ A. C. Swinburne, *Felise*.

Ignorant of Nature's laws, we are broken to pieces and ground to dust; knowing them, we win an empire of enduring civilisation within her borders. Recognising the universal reign of law and the vanity of supplicating its reversal, and finding no special clause in the statutes of the universe for man's behoof, Secularism dismisses as merely superstitious the idea of an arbitrary special providence, and affirms Science to be the only available Providence of Man.

Thus theological conceptions obtruded upon the sphere of secular interests are one by one expelled. We now come to the last, and, as the majority of people think, the most serious and important—namely, the doctrine of a Future life and of Future Reward and Punishment. Mr. Gladstone says that, putting this world and the next into two scales of value, the Secularist finds that the one weighs much, the other either nothing, or nothing that can be appreciated. This is very near the truth. Secularism, as such, neither affirms nor denies a future life; it simply professes no *knowledge* of such a state, no information respecting it which might serve as a guide in the affairs of this life. The first question to be asked concerning the alleged life beyond the grave is, Do we *know* aught about it? If there were indisputably a future life in store for us all, and that life immortal, and if we could obtain precise information of its actualities and requirements, then indeed the transcendence of eternal over temporal interests would impel us to live here with a view to the great Hereafter. But *have* we any knowledge of this future life? Mere conjectures will not suffice; they may be true, but more probably false, and

we cannot sacrifice the certain to the uncertain, or forego the smallest present happiness for the sake of some imagined future compensation. Have we any *knowledge* of a life beyond the grave? The Secularist answers decisively No.

Whatever the progress of science or philosophy may hereafter reveal, at present we know nothing of personal immortality. The mystery of Death, if such there be, is yet unveiled, and inviolate still are the secrets of the grave. Science knows nothing of another life than this. When we are dead she sees but decomposing matter, and while we live she regards us but as the highest order of animal life, differentiated from other orders by clearly defined characteristics, but separated from them by no infinite impassable chasm. Neither can Philosophy enlighten us. She reveals to us the laws of what we call mind, but cannot acquaint us with any second entity called soul. Even if we accept Schopenhauer's⁷ theory of will, and regard man as a conscious manifestation of the one supreme force, we are no nearer to personal immortality; for, if our soul emerged at birth from the unconscious infinite, it will probably immerse therein at death, just as a wave rises and flashes foam-crested in the sun, and plunges back into the ocean for ever. Indeed, the doctrine of man's natural immortality is so incapable of proof that

⁷ Schopenhauer was one of the most powerful and original thinkers of this century, and his intellectual honesty is surprising in such a flaccid and insincere age. A physical fact worthy of notice is that his brain was the largest on record, not even excepting Kant's. Those who cannot read his works in the German may find a capital exposition of his main ideas in Ribot's *La Philosophie de Schopenhauer*.

many eminent Christians even are abandoning it in favor of the doctrine that everlasting life is a gift specially conferred by God upon the faithful elect. Their appeal is to Revelation, by which they mean the New Testament, all other Scriptures being to them gross impositions. But can Revelation satisfy the critical modern spirit? When we can interrogate her, discord deafens us. Every religion—nay, every sect of religion—draws from Revelation its own peculiar answer, and accepts it as infallibly true, although widely at variance with others derived from the same source. These answers cannot all be true, and their very discord discredits each. The voice of God should give forth no such uncertain tidings. If he had indeed spoken, the universe would surely be convinced, and the same conviction fill every breast. Even, however, if Revelation proclaimed but one message concerning the future, and that message were similarly interpreted by all religions, we could not admit it as quite trustworthy, although we might regard it as a vague foreshadowing of the truth. For Revelation, unless every genius be considered an instrument through which eternal music is conveyed, must ultimately rely on miracles, and these the modern spirit has decisively rejected. Thus, then, it appears that neither Science, Philosophy, nor Revelation, affords us any knowledge of a future life. Yet, in order to guide our present life with a view to the future, such knowledge is indispensable. In the absence of it we must live in the light of the present, basing our conduct on Secular reason, and working for Secular ends. How far this is compatible with elevated morality and noble idealism

we shall presently inquire and decide. Intellectually, Secularism is at one with the most advanced thought of our age, and no immutable dogmas preclude it from accepting and incorporating any new truth. Science being the only providence it recognises, it is ever desirous to see and to welcome fresh developments thereof, assured that new knowledge must harmonise with the old, and deepen and broaden the civilisation of our race.

In morals Secularism is utilitarian. In this world only two ethical methods are possible. Either we must take some supposed revelation of God's will as the measure of our duties, or we must determine our actions with a view to the general good. The former course may be very pious, but is assuredly unphilosophical. As Feuerbach⁸ insists, to derive morality from God "is nothing more than to withdraw it from the test of reason, to institute it as indubitable, unassailable, sacred, without rendering an account *why*." Stout old Chapman's⁹ protest against confound-

⁸ Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, from which I quote, was translated from the German by Marian Evans (George Eliot). This remarkable work deserves and will amply requite a careful study. The thoroughness with which Feuerbach applied his subtle psychological method to the dogmas of Christianity, accounts for the hatred of him more than once expressed by Mansel in his notes to the famous Bampton Lectures.

⁹ George Chapman was one of those lofty austere natures that put to scorn the flabbiness which a sentimental Christianity does so much to foster; as it were, some fine old Pagan spirit incarnate in an Englishman of the great Elizabethan age. His "Byron's Conspiracy" furnished Shelley with the magnificent motto of *The Revolt of Islam*:—

There is no danger to a man that knows
What life and death is: there's not any law
Exceeds his knowledge; neither is it lawful
That he should stoop to any other law.

ing the inherent nature of good is also memorable:—

“Should heaven turn hell

For deeds well done, I would do ever well.”

Secularism adopts the latter course. Were it necessary, a defence of utilitarian morality against theological abuse might here be made; but an ethical system which can boast so many noble and illustrious adherents may well be excused from vindicating its right to recognition and respect. Nevertheless it may be observed that, however fervid are theoretical objections to utilitarianism, its criterion of morality is the only one admitted in practice. Our jurisprudence is not required to justify itself before any theological bar, nor to show its conformity with the maxims uttered by Jesus and his disciples; and he would be thought a strange legislator who should insist on testing the value of a Parliamentary Bill by appealing to the New Testament. Secularism holds that whatever actions conduce to the general good are right, and that whatever have an opposite tendency are wrong. Manifold objections are urged against this simple rule on the ground of its impracticability; but as all of them apply with equal force to every conceivable rule, they may be peremptorily dismissed. The imperfections of human nature must affect the practicability of any moral law, however conceived or expressed. Christians who wrote before Secularism had to be combated never thought of maintaining that reason and experience are inefficient guides, although they did sometimes impugn the efficacy of natural motives to good.¹

¹ Darwin, Spencer, and nearly all the rest of our modern Evolu-

So thoughtful and cautious a preacher as Barrow, whom Mr. Arnold accounts the best moral divine of our English Church, plainly says that "wisdom is, in effect, the genuine parent of all moral and political virtue, justice, and honesty."² But some theologically-minded persons, whose appearance betrays no remarkable signs of asceticism, wax eloquent in reprobation of happiness as a sanction of morality at all. Duty, say they, is what all should strive after. Good; but the Secularist conceives it *his* duty to promote the general welfare. Happiness is not a degrading thing, but a source of elevation. We have all enjoyed that wonderful catechism of Pig-Philosophy in *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. What a scathing satire on the wretched Jesuitism abounding within and without the Churches, and bearing such malign and malodorous fruit! But it is not the necessary antithesis to the Religion of Sorrow. It is the mongrel makeshift of those "whose gospel is their maw," whose swinish egotism makes them contemplate Nature as a universal Swine's-Trough, with plenty of pig's wash for those who can thrust their fellows aside and get their paw in it. The Religion of Gladness is a different thing from this. Let us hear its great prophet Spinoza, one of the purest and noblest of modern minds: "Joy is the passage from a less to a greater perfection; sorrow is

tionists, believe morality to have had a natural origin. Mr. Wake, however, in his valuable work, *The Evolution of Morality*, while admitting and powerfully illustrating its natural development, apparently holds that its origin was supernatural, the germs of all the virtues having been divinely implanted in our primitive ancestors! Evidently the old superstition about "the meat-roasting power of the meat-jack" is not yet altogether extinct.

² Sermon on "The Pleasantness of Religion."

the passage from a greater to a less perfection." No; suffering only tries, it does not nourish us; it proves our capacity, but does not produce it. What, after all, is happiness? It consists in the fullest healthy exercise of all our faculties, and is as various as they. Far from ignoble, it implies the highest normal development of our nature, the dream of Utopists from Plato downwards. And therefore, in affirming happiness to be the great purpose of social life, Secularism makes its moral law coincident with the law of man's progress towards attainable perfection.

Motives to righteousness Secularism finds in human nature. Since the evolution of morality has been traced by scientific thinkers the idea of our moral sense having had a supernatural origin has vanished into the limbo of superstitions. Our social sympathies are a natural growth, and may be indefinitely developed in the future by the same means which have developed them in the past. Morality and theology are essentially distinct. The ground and guarantee of morality are independent of any theological belief. When we are in earnest about the right we need no incitement from above. Morality has its natural ground in experience and reason, in the common nature and common wants of mankind. Wherever sentient beings live together in a social state, simple or complex, laws of morality must arise, for they are simply the permanent conditions of social health; and even if men entertained no belief in any supernatural power, they would still recognise and submit to the laws upon which societary welfare depends. "Even," says Dr. Martineau,³

³ *Nineteenth Century*, April, 1877.

“though we came out of nothing, and returned to nothing, we should be subject to the claim of righteousness so long as we are what we are: morals have their own base, and are second to nothing.” Emerson, a religious transcendentalist, also admits that “Truth, frankness, courage, love, humility, and all the virtues, range themselves on the side of prudence, or the art of securing a present well-being.”⁴ The love professed by piety to God is the same feeling, though differently directed, which prompts the commonest generousities and succors of daily life. All moral appeals must ultimately be made to our human sympathies. Theological appeals are essentially not moral, but immoral. The hope of heaven and the fear of hell are motives purely personal and selfish. Their tendency is rather to make men worse than better. They may secure a grudging compliance with prescribed rules, but they must depress character instead of elevating it. They tend to concentrate a man’s whole attention on himself, and thus to develope and intensify his selfish propensities. No man, as Dr. Martineau many years ago observed, can faithfully follow his highest moral conceptions who is continually casting side glances at the prospects of his own soul. Secularism appeals to no lust after posthumous rewards or dread of posthumous terrors, but to that fraternal feeling which is the vital essence of all true religion and has prompted heroic self-sacrifice in all ages and climes. It removes moral causation from the next world to this. It teaches that the harvest of our sowing will be reaped here, and to

⁴ Essay on *Prudence*.

the last grain eaten, by ourselves or others. Every act of our lives affects the whole subsequent history of our race. Our mental and moral like our bodily lungs have their appropriate atmospheres, of which every thought, word, and act, becomes a constituent atom.⁵ Incessantly around us goes on the conflict of good and evil, which a word, a gesture, a look of ours changes. And we cannot tell how great may be the influence of the least of these, for in nature all things hang together, and the greatest effects may flow from causes seemingly slight and inconsiderable.⁶ When we thoroughly lay this to heart, and reflect that no contrition or remorse

⁵ Wherever men are gathered, all the air
Is charged with human feeling, human thought ;
Each shout and cry and laugh, each curse and prayer
Are into its vibrations surely wrought ;
Unspoken passion, wordless meditation,
Are breathed into it with our respiration ;
It is with our life fraught and overfraught.

So that no man there breathes earth's simple breath
As if alone on mountains or wide seas ;
But nourishes warm life or hastens death
With joys and sorrows, health and foul disease,
Wisdom and folly, good and evil labors
Incessant of his multitudinous neighbors ;
He in his turn affecting all of these.

James Thomson, *City of Dreadful Night*.

⁶ The importance of individual action, even on the part of the meanest, is well expressed by George Eliot in the concluding sentence of *Middlemarch* :—

“The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts ; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the numbers who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

Even more memorable is the great saying attributed to Krishna, —“He who does nothing stays the progress of the world.”

can undo the past or efface the slightest record from the everlasting Book of Fate, we shall be more strongly restrained from evil and impelled to good than we could be by supernatural promises or threats. The promises may be mistrusted, the threats nullified by a late repentance; but the natural issues of conduct are inevitable and must be faced. Whatever the future may hold in store, Secularism bids us be true to ourselves and our opportunities now. It does not undertake to determine the vexed question of God's existence, which it leaves each to decide for himself according to what light he has; nor does it dogmatically deny the possibility of a future life. But it insists on utilising to the highest the possibilities that lie before us, and realising as far as may be by practical agencies that Earthly Paradise which would now be less remote if one-tithe of the time, the energy, the ability, the enthusiasm and the wealth devoted to making men fit candidates for another life had been devoted to making them fit citizens of this. If there be a future life, this must be the best preparation for it; and if not, the consciousness of humane work achieved and duty done, will tint with rainbow and orient colors the mists of death more surely than expected glories from the vague and mystic land of dreams.

There are those who cannot believe in any effective morality, much less any devotion to disinterested aims, without the positive certainty of immortal life. Under a pretence of piety they cloak the most grovelling estimate of human nature, which, with all its faults, is infinitely better than their conception of it. Even

their love and reverence of God would seem foolishness unless they were assured of living for ever. Withdraw posthumous hopes and fears, say they, and "let us eat and drink for to-morrow we die" would be the sanest philosophy. In his grave way Spinoza satirises this "vulgar opinion," which enjoins a regulation of life according to the passions by those who have "persuaded themselves that the souls perish with the bodies, and that there is not a second life for *the miserable who have borne the crushing weight of piety*"; "a conduct," he adds, "as absurd, in my opinion, as that of a man who should fill his body with poisons and deadly food, for the fine reason that he had no hope to enjoy wholesome nourishment for all eternity, or who, seeing that the soul is not eternal or immortal, should renounce his reason, and wish to become insane; things so proposterous that they are scarcely worth mention."

Others, again, deny that a philosophy which ignores the Infinite can have any grand ideal capable of lifting us above the petty tumults and sordid passions of life. But surely the idea of service to the great Humanity, whose past and future are to us practically infinite, is a conception vast enough for our finite minds. The instincts of Love, Reverence, and Service may be fully exercised and satisfied by devotion to a purely human ideal, without resort to unverifiable dogmas and inscrutable mysteries; and Secularism, which bids us think and act so that the great Human Family may profit by our lives, which exhorts us to labor for human progress and elevation here on earth, where effort may be effective and sacrifices must be real, is more pro-

foundly noble than any supernatural creed, and holds the promise of a wider and loftier beneficence.

Secularism is often said to be atheistic. It is, however, neither atheistic nor theistic. It ignores the problem of God's existence, which seems insoluble to finite intellects, and confines itself to the practical world of experience, without commending or forbidding speculation on matters that transcend it. Unquestionably many Secularists are Atheists, but others are Theists, and this shows the compatibility of Secularism with either a positive or a negative attitude towards the hypothesis of a supreme universal intelligence. There is no atheistic declaration in the principles of any existing Secular society, although all are unanimous in opposing theology, which is at best an elaborate conjecture, and at the worst an elaborate and pernicious imposture.

Educated humanity has now arrived at the *positive* stage of culture. Imagination, it is true, will ever hold its legitimate province; but it is the kindling and not the guiding element in our nature. When exercising its proper influence it invests all things with "a light that never was on sea or land"; it transforms lust into love, it creates the ideal, it nurtures enthusiasm, it produces heroism, it suggests all the glories of art, and even lends wings to the intellect of the scientist. But when it is substituted for knowledge, when it aims at becoming the leader instead of the kindler, it is a Phaeton who drives to disaster and ruin. It is degrading, or at any rate perilous, to be the dupe of fancy, however beautiful or magnificent. Reason should always hold sovereign sway in our minds, and

reason tells us that we live in a universe of cause and effect, where ends must be accomplished by means, and where man himself is largely fashioned by circumstances. Reason tells us that our faculties are limited and that our knowledge is relative; it enjoins us to believe what is ascertained, to give assent to no proposition of whose truth we are not assured, and to walk in the light of facts. This may seem a humble philosophy, but it is sound and not uncheerful, and it stands the wear and tear of life when prouder philosophies are often reduced to rags and tatters. Nor is it just to call this philosophy "negative." Every system, indeed, is negative to every other system which it in anywise contradicts; but in what other sense can a system be called negative, which leaves men all science to study, all art to pursue and enjoy, and all humanity to love and serve? It declines to traffic in supernatural hopes and fears, but it preserves all the sacred things of civilisation, and gives a deeper meaning to such words as husband and wife, father and mother, brother and sister, lover and friend.

Incidentally, however, Secularism has what some will always persist in regarding as negative work. It finds noxious superstitions impeding its path, and must oppose them. It cannot ignore orthodoxy, although it would be glad to do so, for the dogmas and pretensions of the popular creed hinder its progress and thwart Secular improvement at every step. Favored and privileged and largely supported by the State, they usurp a fictitious dignity over less popular ideas. They thrust themselves into education, insist on teaching supernaturalism with the multiplication

table, dose the scholars with Jewish mythology as though it were actual history, and assist their moral development with pictures of Daniel in the lions' den and Jesus walking on the sea. They employ vast wealth in preparing for another world, which might be more profitably employed in bettering this. They prevent us from spending our Sunday rationally, refusing us any alternative but the church or the public-house. They deprive honest sceptics as far as possible of the common rights of citizenship.⁷ They retard a host of reforms,⁸ and still do their utmost to

⁷ Nearly every leading Secularist has suffered in this respect. Mr. G. J. Holyoake was imprisoned for blasphemy; Mr. Bradlaugh had to win the seat which Northampton gave him, by means of almost superhuman energy and resource, in the face of the most bigoted and brutal opposition; Mrs. Besant was and is robbed of her child by an order of the Court of Chancery; and it would be a false modesty not to add that I have suffered twelve-months' imprisonment as an ordinary criminal for editing a Freethought journal.—Here is another fact which must not be forgotten. Mr. Spencer, a Secularist of Manchester, left £500 in his will to assist in building a Secular Hall in that city; but the will was contested by the Christian residuary legatee, and the Court set aside the bequest. Money cannot, therefore, be left to propagate Secularism, which is practically outlawed. This incident occurred so late as 1886.

⁸ The Deceased Wife's Sister Bill is steadily opposed as contrary to Christian tradition. Scarcely any but theological arguments are used against it, and the Bishops fight it as though they were defending the very citadel of their faith.—Down at Middlesborough, quite recently, the County Council decided to erect a crematorium in the interest of the public health, while leaving the cemetery open as before for all who wished their bodies to be disposed of in the orthodox fashion. But before the project could be carried out the Vicar of All Saints called a public meeting to protest against this "outrage on the Christian sentiment of the community." Religious prejudice was profoundly excited by these tactics, the medical officer of health was mobbed by infuriated females, the mayor received anonymous warnings to prepare for his latter end, and finally the project had to be abandoned.

suppress or curtail freedom of thought and speech. While all this continues, Secularism must actively oppose the popular creed. Nor is it just on the part of Christians to stigmatise this aggressive attitude. They forget that their faith was vigorously and persistently aggressive against Paganism. Secularism may surely imitate that example, although it neither intends nor desires to demolish the temples of Christianity as the early Christians, headed by their bishops, destroyed the temples of Paganism and desecrated its shrines.

Properly speaking, Secularism is doing a positive, not a negative, work in destroying superstition. Every error removed makes room for a truth; and if superstition is a kind of mental disease, he who expels it is a mental physician. His work is no more negative than the doctor's who combats a bodily malady, drives it out of the system, and leaves his patient in the full possession of health.

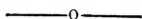
Secular propaganda, by means of lectures, journals, and pamphlets, conducted for so many years, has produced a considerable effect on the public mind. A great change has been wrought during the past generation. Much of it has been accomplished by science, but much also by the energetic labors of Secular advocates. Yet it must be admitted that Secular organisation is relatively defective. The reason of this, however, is by no means recondite. Secularism, as a distinct system, came into existence with the decline of the Socialist movement inaugurated by Robert Owen. When Socialism began to alarm the upper classes fifty years ago, the ministers of religion, conveniently for-

getting that the first Christians were communists, declared war against it, and made its followers determined foes to Christianity. When their movement subsided, the Socialists who were still eager for work accepted the new designation of Secularist, and these poor malcontents became the moving spirits of the new faith. Thus Secularism grew up, like every other system the world has ever seen, amidst distressing poverty; and as organisation is impossible in these days without money, the development of Secular organisation is painfully slow.

Wealthy and "respectable" dissenters from the popular creed generally keep their heresy to themselves. They have given too many hostages to Mrs. Grundy, and are nearly in the same position as the Church of England clergyman who sympathised with Wesleyanism but did not join it, giving nine solid reasons against doing so, namely, a wife and eight children. Some of them, doubtless, would leave money for the promotion of Secularism, but it has already been shown that this is impossible in the existing state of English law. For these reasons, and also because Secularism, like all new systems, appeals to the dissatisfied rather than the contented, its staunchest adherents are found among the *élite* of the working classes. Inquire closely into the *personnel* of advanced movements, and you will find Secularists there out of all proportion to their numerical strength. They are obliged to work in this individual manner, for the bigotry against Secularism is still so strong that few dare to recognise its organisations. They have always assisted the cause of National Education, and now it is carried they are

getting their members on School Boards, and doing their utmost to improve the quality of the instruction given to children, as well as to preserve them from the nefarious influence of priests. They promote Sunday freedom, they are advocates of international peace, they are sturdy friends of justice, they are firm supporters of the emancipation of women, they are lovers of mental and personal liberty, and they are actively on the side of every political and social reform. Their votes can always be depended upon; no one needs to solicit them. Where Christians *may* be they are *sure* to be; not because they necessarily have better hearts than their orthodox neighbors, but because their principles impel them to fight for Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, irrespective of nationality, race, sex, or creed; and prompt them to exclaim, in the sublime language of Thomas Paine, "the world is my country, and to do good is my religion."

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