

Infidel Feminism: Secularism, religion and women's emancipation, England 1830-1914

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This important work is long overdue. It identifies two gaps in the existing historiography. The first is that between histories of what became known in the later 19th century as feminism, and histories of Freethought, especially in its more popular manifestation of Secularism; the second gap is chronological, between histories of women political activists in the early 19th century, and women activists in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. That past conflicts between Christians and Secularists over women's best interests 'have been almost entirely passed over in the historiography of the women's movement' (p. 1) is in part a reflection of the sources. Most 19th-century feminists preferred to play down the contribution of their Freethinking sisters to their common struggle on grounds partly of personal belief and partly because to confront Victorian man with just one unpopular cause at a time was thought more than sufficient. Beyond a few middle-class and literary 'honest doubters' female Freethinkers were marginalised as were all Freethinkers in most aspects of Victorian life and this has been reflected in the modern feminist narrative. Where the connection between Freethinking and feminism has been recognised, in the social thought of Robert Owen and, to a lesser extent, the practices of the Owenites, this has been slotted into a stubbornly resilient narrative which sees socialism and radicalism decline after the 1840s, not to be revived until the 1880s when both socialism and the 'New Woman' together rose from the grave of mid-century popular Liberalism. (1) Laura Schwarz bridges these gaps both skilfully and persuasively, and the challenge is now for historians of both feminism and radicalism to take account of her insights in their future researches. In this mission, she has been aided by an increasing appreciation over the past 30 years among historians of all

kinds of the importance of religion to their studies.⁽²⁾ Recognition of the centrality of religion to 19th-century life has brought with it the need to recognise the contribution also of irreligion and the interaction of the two. This is timely, not least because, as Dr Schwartz argues in her conclusion (pp. 219–22), the question of the relationship between secularism (with a lower case initial letter), religion and the position of women is of central importance in the modern world.

The introduction to the themes of the book starts with the familiar late 18th-century feminism of Mary Wollstonecraft, studied most recently by Barbara Taylor ⁽³⁾ but then, more importantly, Dr Schwartz goes on to develop the often-ignored history of organised Freethought throughout the 19th century, in particular the growth of Secularism out of Owenism and Chartism, to bridge the supposed gap between early and late century manifestations of socialism and feminism. The different religious landscapes within which women expressed themselves and their identities, and the interrelationships between the religious and the Secular are then introduced to set up the six thematic chapters that follow.

Chapter one introduces the women Freethinkers who broke all conventions to challenge prevailing ideologies concerning both religion and gender roles in their day. These include some who have become well-known in feminist historiography, such as Emma Martin, an Owenite lecturer who personified the liberating doctrines of socialist-feminism, and Eliza Sharples, the formerly much-neglected radical lecturer known as 'Isis' who co-habited with Richard Carlile, and later provided a home for the young Charles Bradlaugh when he first left his parents.⁽⁴⁾ Others are less well-known but still significant figures including Owenite lecturers Margaret Chappellsmith and Eliza Macauley. Among leading Secularists of the next generation we find Harriet Law, the almost totally neglected Secularist lecturer and journalist who bestrode the 1860s and 1870s like a colossus, large in courage if small in stature. One of Dr Schwartz's many achievements is to rescue Mrs Law (and her daughter, Harriet Teresa Law) from the enormous ignorance of posterity and from the shadow of her better-known contemporary, Annie Besant. The latter's survival in the historical public's consciousness has been ensured by her advocacy of birth-control, her involvement in the match girls strike, and her later adoption of Indian nationalism and theosophy, as well as by endless prurient speculation about her relationship with the Secularist leader, Charles Bradlaugh. Room is also found for women whose significance is in danger of being lost to all but specialists in the field: Kate Watts, second-generation Secularist, lecturer, writer and wife of one of the leading Secularists, Charles Watts; Alice and Hypatia, worthy daughters of Charles Bradlaugh; and Elizabeth Wolstenholme, prominent activist in Freethought causes, though never a Secularist like her free-union partner, Ben Elmy. Then there are others with less overt connections with Freethought, especially in its Secularist manifestation, authors, correspondents and supporters at various times: Sophia Dobson Collet, Sara Hennell, and Harriet Martineau, all of whom influenced the founder of Secularism, George Jacob Holyoake. Finally there are the leaders of the birth-control Malthusian movement, Alice Vickery and her daughter-in-law, Bessie Drysdale. Others are also mentioned, and still more could have been, such as Matilda Roalfe, infidel bookseller in the 1840s; Mary Sowden and Elizabeth Cracknell who, along with the Bradlaugh sisters and Annie Besant, were schooled by Edward Aveling at the London Hall of Science evening classes and then became science teachers in the Secularist movement; Mary Reed, also educated at the Hall of Science, who became a school manager in Poplar; Edith Vance, secretary of the National Secular Society from 1892 to 1927; and the intriguingly-named (or pseudo-named) Hypatia and Martineau Pankhurst of the West Ham National Secular Society (NSS) branch who at the NSS annual conference in 1913 moved a resolution in favour of the equalisation of the legal status of men and women – which was already one of the objects of the NSS. If there is a criticism of Dr Schwarz's admirable survey of these years it is that she has not populated it yet further with the women who were empowered by Secularism, even more than an earlier generation had been by Owenism, to express themselves by their words and actions as the equals of men. Together they made up a powerful ? if untypical ? regiment of women who stormed the establishment of Victorian England and who, through the insights and attitudes gained through their commitment to Secularism and Freethought, made a profound contribution to the development of the women's cause.

The nature of this contribution is then examined in five further chapters, beginning with their conversions to Freethought and what this meant for their understanding of their positions as feminists. Dr Schwartz prefers

the term 'counter-conversion' to the 'loss of faith' favoured by an earlier historiography (5), for she is interested in the positive features of the process whereby women rejected much of what had been dear to them and which the majority of Victorians felt to be 'natural' for them and part of their femininity. In rejecting the dominant Christian narrative they were asserting their independence – from upbringing, conventional expectations, authority of father or husband, and of God. The process which led them to Secularism was also one that enhanced their feminism and gave them the freedom to express themselves as individuals. It was a similar psychological process which led both men and women to find in Secularism a pathway to radical liberalism and even anarchism.

This leads naturally to a discussion in chapter three of women's activism within the Secularist and other Freethought movements. A commitment to freedom of enquiry and expression opened the way for women who sought a platform, whether in the lecture hall or in a periodical, where they could express themselves and challenge by thought, word and deed male stereotypes of the 'proper' female role. As women they addressed predominantly male audiences, and debated with male opponents. Harriet Law in particular, and Annie Besant, could cause great offence with their 'unwomanly' conduct and greatly enjoyed the discomfiture that it caused. Similarly with their pens Sophia Dobson Collet ('Panthea' of Holyoake's *Reasoner*) and Sarah Hennell trespassed into the traditional male preserves of theological writing and 'reason'. This very approach, however, caused a problem, for these women were unrepresentative of their sex. Secularism in particular among the Freethought movements, was – whatever the theory? dominated by men at every level.

Chapter four therefore looks at how these exceptional women worked to promote feminism within this potentially friendly movement which still embodied many of the masculine assumptions of the age. The starting point was that of the Owenites: that what might be deemed 'natural' is in fact the product of circumstances – education in all its forms. Despite many contemporary assumptions, women were religious not because it was 'in their nature' but because of a defective education. The role of Freethought was to emancipate women from their religion-induced ignorance. But some Freethinkers believed that even emancipated women, however equal, might still be different; and some leaders, notably William Stewart Ross ('Saladin') exploded with frustration that the majority of women were so brain-washed by religion as to be its chief supporters and willing forgers of their own chains. Dr Schwartz is perhaps a little harsh in labelling this 'misogyny': Ross was deft in the uses of irony and the object of his frequent sarcasm was woman as debilitated by religion, not woman as such. In his paper, the *Secular Review* (later, the *Agnostic Journal*), he was open to a wide range of authors with new ideas, such as Grant Allen, and he was supported by such advanced women as Lady Florence Dixie ('Izra'), and the notoriously unconventional American Claflin sisters who would not have countenanced misogyny in any form. It was the task of women within free thought to show that it was not inevitable that they should be the natural slaves of religious indoctrination but that woman's liberation could come through honest free thought. For some this demanded the destruction of the Bible and the superstructure of oppression built upon it; for others it meant a careful study and refutation only of parts of the Bible (such as St Paul's views on women) without necessarily rejecting the whole. This was the view expressed by, among others, Lydia Becker, but Harriet Law was of the other opinion and stoutly defended (in order to attack) a literal interpretation of Scripture.

Despite such differences, though, and the consequent marginalisation by mainstream 'religious' feminists of those feminists within the Secularist movement, both Freethinkers and feminists had much in common. This is examined in chapter five. The origins of the *English Woman's Journal*, for example, begun by Barbara Bodichon and Bessie Parkes in 1858, can be traced to an article written by Holyoake in 1847, and indeed more might have been made of that important intellectual coterie in the late 1840s which brought together Secularist Holyoake with the liberal Unitarians of W. J. Fox's South Place chapel and the intellectuals of the Ashurst circle in Muswell Hill, and embraced among others J. S. Mill, F. W. Newman, Sophia Dobson Collet and Sarah Hennell, from whom emerged a galaxy of radical ideas from Mazzinian republicanism to the emancipation of women. (6) One issue which drew together many Freethinking and Christian feminists was the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, although the social purity movement associated with the later National Vigilance Association was more controversial, carrying with it the danger that

Christian moralism could tend towards authoritarianism. Support for votes for women, though, was more wholehearted among Freethinkers, most of whom were political radicals like Harriet Law, a leading member of the Reform League and later the only female member of the International Working Men's Association, put there by Marx to balance the conservatism of the British trade unionists. Some Secularists, though, like Stewart Ross, feared that to enfranchise women while they were still in the thralls of priestdom would be to set back the cause of liberty. There was also a class edge to this: why should middle-class women get the vote when working-class men were denied it? The violent tactics used by the suffragettes were also opposed by Secularist leaders as different as G. W. Foote, Bradlaugh's successor as President of the NSS, and Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, who sought progress by rational and peaceful means.

The final chapter looks at the most divisive issue of all – Freethought and free love. Both Richard Carlile and Robert Owen had questioned the value of traditional Christian marriage in the 1830s, and Owen's son (and probably Owen himself) had advocated birth control by mechanical means, but for most of the Victorian years Secularism sought to demonstrate that a fairly conventional approach to morality could be maintained without the sanctions of supernatural religion. Even the notorious Knowlton Case of 1877, when Bradlaugh and Besant had championed the publication of birth-control information, was principally in defence of freedom of publication and with a Malthusian understanding of the origins of poverty which for Bradlaugh, if not for Besant, was only indirectly concerned with women's rights. However, another more radical work, more overtly about sexual relationships, was to prove far more divisive. This was the *Elements of Social Science* (original title *Physical, Sexual, and Natural Religion*) by a young medical student, George Drysdale, published in 1857. It was defended by Bradlaugh but attacked by almost all the other Secularist leaders, male and female, including Harriet Law and Kate Watts. Drysdale's rejection of the marriage bond went beyond the usual Freethought criticism of the subjection of women in unequal partnerships with men, subject to the law and not to love, and some Freethinkers were prepared to follow his arguments into the advocacy of free unions and free love. In their reaction to this the more conservative Freethinkers were at one with the mainstream of the broader feminist movement. Mary Wollstonecraft's free union with William Godwin and her illegitimate daughter were carefully excised from the collective memory; Charles Drysdale and Alice Vickery concealed the fact that they were not legally married; Elizabeth Wolstenholme was pressed into marrying Ben Elmy when she became pregnant, and even so Millicent Fawcett asked her to remove herself from the suffrage movement to avoid damaging it further. Freethinkers in general were more tolerant of these unions, though their principles of free speech were tested when the Legitimation League, a largely Secularist organisation, was formed by a group of anarchist Freethinkers in the West Riding in 1893. Set up initially to agitate for the legal recognition of illegitimate children, it began to advocate free love. Connections between this interesting group and the publication of Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* then added homosexuality to what most feminists and many Freethinkers already saw as a toxic mix. The strength of Dr Schwartz's argument is that she looks for no easy generalisations about which groups held which views but she appreciates the complex cross currents involved in a discussion of the connections between freedom of publication, birth control information, and women's control over their own sexuality and their relationships with men.

Throughout these thematic chapters the paradoxes and contradictions are not dodged: free thinking and liberty/libertarianism/libertinism seldom made for tidiness. The complications are indeed wider than the scope of any single thesis or book, even one as well-researched as this one. Women in the Freethought movements who opposed this feminism, if they existed, are passed by with the exception of Eliza Lynn Linton; men in the movements who supported them, like Richard Pankhurst, Secularist and advocate of women's enfranchisement ahead of the rest of his family, are shadows in the background; more importantly, those Secularist women who were not prominent but played their parts in audiences and society memberships remain, sadly, largely hidden from this as from all other histories.⁽⁷⁾ But within the confines of the evidence and the scope of one book this is a splendid contribution to scholarship which leaves no excuse for feminist historians to continue their neglect of the important contribution to the advancement of women played by both women and men in the Freethought movements of 19th-century Britain. And there can no longer be any reason for historians of any kind to continue to interpret the 19th-century radical story as one of two socialisms with a liberal consensus between. The achievements of these radical women, like

those of the radical men in the various Secularist and Freethought movements, need to be written back into the continuous history of protest and radical organisation throughout the 19th century.

Notes

1. For example, B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem. Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1983). In her final chapter, Taylor looks forward to the developments covered in this study but without reference to already published work in the field.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The turning point probably came with the papers read at the History Workshop on Religion and Society in 1983, published as *Disciplines of Faith: Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy*, ed. J. Obelkevich, L. Roper and R Samuel (London, 1987). A recent contribution is *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800?1940*, ed. S. Morgan and J. deVries (Abingdon, 2010).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. B. Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge, 2003).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For Martin, see the entry by B. Taylor in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004). For Sharples, see H. Rogers, *Women and the People. Authority, Authorship and the Radical Tradition in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot, 2000).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. S. Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief. Atheists and Agnostics in English Society, 1850?1960* (London, 1977), pp. 104–23.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See M. Finn, *After Chartism. Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848?1874* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 160?1; also E. Royle, 'Leadership and strategy in British radicalism after 1848', in *Hélio Osvaldo Alves. O Guardador de Rios*, ed. J. Paisana (Minho, 2005), pp.283?98, p. 288.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. I attempted to reach some of these women in 'Owenism and the Secularist tradition: the Huddersfield Secular society and Sunday School', in *Living and Learning*, ed. M. Chase and I. Dyck (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 199–217.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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