

**Slaughtering sacred cows:
rebutting the narrative of decline in
the British secular movement from
1890s to 1930s.**

Elizabeth Ann Lutgendorff

Oxford Brookes University

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Dedication

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Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction: the decline of the secular movement?	3
The problem with decline.....	10
Rebutting the narrative of decline.....	14
Chapter 1: A problem of definition: The historiography of the UK secular movement	18
The historiography of the secularist movement.....	20
The focus on decline and its problems.....	29
The ghost of Charles Bradlaugh.....	35
A problem of definition and a profusion of terms.....	38
Rationalist and freethinker.....	39
The Rationalist Press Association.....	43
‘Secularism’, ‘secular’, and secularist.....	46
Ethicism and the ethical movement.....	53
The problem with <i>Varieties of Unbelief</i>	58
Conflict within the movement.....	62
Other issues within the historiography.....	64
An unfinished historiography.....	67
Chapter 2: Political influence: policy making and political theory	69
Bowman versus National Secular Society.....	76
The establishment of the National Secular Society Limited.....	79
The Bowman estate and claim.....	82
John Atkinson Hobson – Labour policy maker and economist.....	89
Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse – Liberal policy theorist and sociologist.....	96
Baron Henry Snell – Secularist organiser, Labour MP and Labour Lord.....	103
John Mackinnon Robertson – Secularist and Labour MP.....	107
Secular influence on Labour and Liberal politics and policy.....	109
The Rainbow Circle - Hobson and Robertson.....	124
Conclusion.....	130
Chapter 3: Secularist internationalism, peace and anti-imperialism	133
Internationalism and peace.....	135
Internationalism as a concept.....	138
The new internationalist organisations.....	144
Internationalist freethought.....	147
Peace activism in the Union of Ethical Societies and The Rationalist Peace Society.....	159
Secularist thought and internationalism beyond organised secularism: J A Hobson.....	162
Hobson and Towards International Government.....	164
H N Brailsford – Labour activist, journalist and internationalist.....	171
Brailsford and Hobson’s involvement in the Union of Democratic Control.....	177
Conclusion: Huxley and UNESCO.....	184
Chapter 4: Literary secularists	187
Wilfred Scawen Blunt: sympathy with Satan.....	196
Ivy Compton-Burnett: no such thing as Providence.....	206
Marjorie Bowen: religion as just another horror trope.....	213
The Thinker’s Library: secularists hidden in plain sight.....	219
Conclusion.....	223

Chapter 5: Secularist support of women’s rights: contraception and the right to knowledge	228
Secularist interest in contraception	230
The secularist press and birth control in the twentieth century	234
The Malthusian League	241
National Birth Rate Commission.....	247
Marie Stopes and the establishment of birth control clinics.....	266
Coda: Suffrage and the Conciliation Bill	280
Coda: Divorce law liberalisation	288
Conclusion.....	291
Conclusion: a changed time for the secular movement	293
<i>Works Cited</i>	<i>304</i>

Abstract

The historiography of the British secular movement ends abruptly after the death of one its most charismatic figures, Charles Bradlaugh. In the academic literature and the movement's own publications, the idea of decline in the movement has been pervasive. This dissertation counters that narrative and argues that there were secularists actively campaigning for secularist causes long into the twentieth century. It examines groups of secularists who were part of established secular organisations, and also those who had noted secularist principles but have not been traditionally associated with organised secularism. It also examines the confusion of terms that surround the history of secularism and how they are interrelated.

The dissertation covers the period from the 1890s to the 1930s, with contextualization from the earlier nineteenth century movement. The first main point of discussion is secularist involvement in politics in the twentieth century, especially in relation to the Liberal Party and early Labour Party politics. The second chapter details secularist internationalism, looking at both traditional secularist organisations and those outside the movement. The third chapter examines individuals who expressed secular ideas in literature. The final chapter concerns women's rights, and the secularist case for contraception, suffrage and divorce. This dissertation concludes by exploring where additional research is needed and how secularist history can add context to twentieth century social movements.

The thesis questions dominant assumptions of decline in the secular movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and provides an alternative thesis: that secularist activism evolved in new ways and assumed new forms, as it no longer had to fight the same battles as it did in the nineteenth century. It also highlights that the history is larger than the secularist organisations themselves. Finally, it argues that secularist history can help us to understand the wider secularisation narrative, in that secularism itself is contested and requires individuals to fight for secular inclusion in wider society.

Introduction: the decline of the secular movement?

The historical study of the UK secular movement in the twentieth century has been partly captured by the sociology of secularisation, with only a few inroads made into the wider historical analysis of secularism and secularists themselves. The historiography has been largely dominated by the traditional secularist movement, loomed over by several larger than life figures and their dramatic clashes with the law and Parliament. Where this thesis begins is where most of the traditional historiography ends, with the Member for Northampton, Charles Bradlaugh's death. To 'widen' the historiography, the history of secularism must move beyond the dominant figures of the nineteenth century and the traditional secularist activities.

As one of the major contributors to the history of secularism, Edward Royle states in *Radical Politics 1790-1900: Religion and Belief*, the genealogy of secularist history begins with "the radical tradition of Thomas Paine" but was "developed in the nineteenth century by Richard Carlile and the blasphemous and seditious press, by the socialist followers of Robert Owen, and by the Secularists led by G. J. Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh."¹ These are the figures that set the standard for what was considered purely secularist activism. The same argument appears in Royle's major work *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*: "British radicalism was shaped by the ideas developed in Paine's writings" and the "golden age

¹ Edward Royle, *Radical Politics 1790-1900: Religion and Unbelief* (Cambridge: Longman Group Limited, 1971), 3.

of Secularism” arrived under Bradlaugh.”² Holyoake also had a connection to Paine through Carlile, as well as the Owenites.³ The secular movement precipitated out of British radicalism, with Paine’s writings linking different movements through time.⁴ Holyoake is again seen as a stepping stone to Bradlaugh, where according to Budd “the movement attained its largest membership and widest influence.”⁵ The nineteenth century has had the greatest attention from historians and thus is seen as the most important and successful period of secularist activism. The main battles concentrated on trials for blasphemy and obscenity against the publishers of the various secularist journals.

Finally, it is impossible to avoid the presence of Charles Bradlaugh in the historiography, for as an openly atheist and republican activist, his journey to take his seat a Member of Parliament became a national news story.

It was an exciting and confrontational battle, played out in both the secularist and mainstream press. Bradlaugh’s legal ineligibility to affirm (rather than swear an oath) set off multiple waves of legal cases (that escalated to the House of Lords), which led to him being ‘imprisoned’ in the Clock Tower. Parliament, unable to deal with the issue effectively or conclusively, ended up forcing multiple by-elections, and Bradlaugh’s subsequent re-elections only added to the drama. Thus, in the secularist movement itself, there is the perception that Bradlaugh’s ultimate victory with

² Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular freethought in Britain, 1866-1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), x.

³ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 2.

⁴ Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief* (London: Heineman, 1977), 10.

⁵ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 53.

the Oaths Act was the paramount action of Secularist agitation in the nineteenth century. While it was undoubtedly important, as it allowed those who fell through the cracks in British law to participate fully in the British legal and parliamentary process, it did not manage to achieve all the movement's goals.

This victory overshadowed the accomplishments of other secularists, most notably the 'Great Blasphemer', George Jacob Holyoake, who established the fledgling secularist movement in the 1840s. However, recent scholarship by Michael Rechtenwald, "rethinks and evaluates the significance" of Holyoake's Secularism, regarding it as a "distinct historic moment of modernity and granting it centrality as both a herald and an exemplar for new understanding of modern secularity."⁶ Holyoake's secularism was also different from Bradlaugh's atheism, which is an important distinction. As Rechtenwald states, Holyoake's Secularism "responded to the failures of Enlightenment rationality to replace religion by admitting to the abiding presence of religion and welcoming the religious believer to its fold."⁷ However, Rechtenwald also makes the point that Secularism was "never neutral" but rather that "the secular always contains substantive elements, including social, political, economic and other content and meaning."⁸ These issues will be explored in the substantive chapters of this dissertation, such as examining secularists involvement in national

⁶ Michael Rechtenwald, *Nineteenth-Century British Secularism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 4.

⁷ Rechtenwald, *Nineteenth-Century British Secularism*, 9.

⁸ Rechtenwald, *Nineteenth-Century British Secularism*, 5. Similarly, Callum Brown argues that even the terms used in the history such as religious and irreligious, were never neutral, but framed by the men and women "who counted themselves part of the birth of social science itself." Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularism 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001), 30.

politics, international organisation, women's rights and cultural contributions to literature.

As mentioned, the Owenites were linked to Secularism through Holyoake. Holyoake had been an Owenite Social Missionary and transformed the waning Owenite movement into what is regarded as the nineteenth century secular movement.⁹ The secularist links are traced through the Owenites and the struggle for extending voting rights to more men across the country through the Chartists. Royle makes the connection that Chartists and Owenites found a new ideological home under Holyoake's brand of Secularism after the momentum of those individual movements started to wane.¹⁰ Budd also makes the argument that Chartists were folded into the secular movement.¹¹ While perhaps not directly related, the remainders of various movements would find a new radical home under secularist activism. It is important to note that the historiography already recognises that radical movements changed and recombined over time, reacting to the cultural and political changes around them. Yet, though both Royle and Budd can recognise the reconfiguration of radical groups that combined to form the nineteenth century secular movement from earlier roots, they could not see that same process of evolution continuing into the twentieth century.

Paine remained contemporary in the minds of secularists through the continued prohibition of publishing *The Age of Reason*, which secularists and atheists in the nineteenth century continued to flout. Richard Carlile was one

⁹ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 22.

¹⁰ Edward Royle, *The Infidel Tradition - From Paine to Bradlaugh* (London: MacMillan, 1976), 63.

¹¹ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 22.

of the prominent publishers of Paine's *The Age of Reason*, which in turn brought him into conflict with the law. He was also one of the witnesses to the Peterloo Massacre, which would be an emblematic moment in the Secularist press for decades after. Carlile's prolific output and publication of different secularist journals set an example for the later freethought and secularist press. In his journal, *The Republican*, he would espouse much of the same anti-clericalism as secularists like Bradlaugh.¹² Carlile's eclectic, or perhaps eccentric, interests also led him to be an early advocate of birth control - another similarity with Bradlaugh and other secularists.

Carlile, like subsequent freethought advocates in the later nineteenth century, was embraced by the movement and held up as a model for secularists. Holyoake himself wrote a pamphlet on Carlile's life. The preface detailed his high regard for the journalist and publisher. He recounted receiving an invitation to have tea with Carlile and wrote: "There was no name known to me in London for whom an invitation could have come which I should have thought a greater honour."¹³ Carlile was also given high praise by another secularist, J M Robertson in his *A Short History of Freethought*, as "A name not to be forgotten by those who value obscure service to human freedom."¹⁴ The testament of his "unyielding struggle for the freedom of the Press, of thought, and of speech," like later secularists was through his imprisonment for publishing.¹⁵ While failing to start a movement, Carlile's

¹² Joel H Wiener, "The Journalism of Richard Carlile," *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter* 9 (1976): 77.

¹³ George Jacob Holyoake, *The Life and Character of Richard Carlile* (London: Holyoake & Co., 1855), v.

¹⁴ J M Robertson, *A Short History of Freethought*, v. II (London: Watts & Co., 1915), 394.

¹⁵ Robertson, *A Short History of Freethought v. II*, 394.

publishing career can be seen as a template for other secularists that followed him.

Although Paine “said little that was new in his controversial book, he had an impact because he “spoke out to the common man – he was an infidel.”¹⁶ Much the same could be said of later secularists, who published what was seen as acceptable for the well to do, but unacceptable for the common. Consequently, this meant certain types of information were legally inaccessible to the working class. In some ways, the history of secularism has been written as the series of blasphemy trials faced by those speaking to the common man: Carlile, Holyoake, Bradlaugh, G W Foote (the president of the National Secular Society after Bradlaugh) and others. Through the unique historical landscape of English law in the post-Reformation world, what was blasphemous (or obscene) meant that British secularist history was one of navigating the courts as well as combating conservative religious and cultural sentiments. This then makes it difficult to see the continuation of such a movement when those legal barriers were overcome.

The history of freethought in general, through the words of freethought writers, has even longer roots. J. M. Bury in *A History of Freedom of Thought*, pressed antiquity into the service of freethought. Putting aside their contributions to literature and art, Bury stated that “our deepest gratitude is due to them as the originators of liberty of thought and discussion.”¹⁷ Pericles in Golden Age Athens “who was personally a freethinker” and Anaxagoras who “was a thoroughgoing unbeliever” are only a few examples

¹⁶ Royce, *The Infidel Tradition - From Paine to Bradlaugh*, 3.

¹⁷ J M Bury, *A History of Freethought* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1926), 22.

among a large pantheon of philosophers and statesmen who had their accomplishments associated with the advancement of freethought.¹⁸ Similarly, the secularist writer and Member of Parliament J M Robertson combed all of history to find those who also contributed to the advancement of freedom of thought. In his two volumes of *A short history of freethought*, Robertson also adopted any and all historical figures to show the advancement of freethought through history. It was only in volume two, that familiar secularists, such as Paine and Bradlaugh, make an appearance. But even with a pedigree of freethought going back over 2,000 years, Bradlaugh was still described as “one of the greatest orators of his age, and one of the most powerful personalities ever associated with a progressive movement.”¹⁹ As well, his publication of the *National Reformer* was given high praise for the “unprecedented diffusion of critical thought among the English masses.”²⁰ Even the opposition to Bradlaugh’s work on the Oaths Act was an important moment in secularist history as “it turned into active freethinkers many who had before been only passive doubters, and raised the secularist party to an intensity of zeal never before seen.”²¹ Through Robertson, we see the tropes that dominate the history of secularism: a black and white struggle, the elevation and equating of Bradlaugh and the *National Reformer* with the secularist movement, and the nineteenth century movement being the height of popular agitation. The secular movement itself would repeat these histories again and again, cementing in their own press (and rest of the

¹⁸ Bury, *A History of Freethought*, 27-28.

¹⁹ Robertson, *A Short History of Freethought*, v. II, 399.

²⁰ Robertson, *A Short History of Freethought*, v II, 400.

²¹ Robertson, *A Short History of Freethought*, v II, 401.

historiography) the importance of these struggles and with the epitome of the agitation reserved for Bradlaugh.

This interpretation of national secular campaigns as synonymous with the secularist movement is also embedded within Susan Budd's *Varieties of Unbelief*. In the first chapter of that often quoted monograph, Budd states: "secularism can only be understood as part of the radical tradition of English urban working-class life."²² As such "secularism was thus one of the organisational links between the radical socialists of the early part of the nineteenth century, and the birth of mass trade and union and labour movement in the 1880s and 90s."²³ Finally, we get the conclusion to 2,000 years of freethought and the brief flurry of secularist agitation with the "process of its rise" being "mirrored in its decline."²⁴

The problem with decline

However, as David Nash states, this can be somewhat misleading as an "examination of the movement in purely national terms cannot do justice to the richness and, more importantly, the diversity of the Secularist experience."²⁵ In addition, and more relevant to this thesis, is that focusing on these sensational campaigns cannot "answer the more interesting questions about how Secularism survived during the period of apparent lull in activity."²⁶ Nor does it contribute to a greater understanding of the continued secularisation of the UK throughout the twentieth century. Yet we can start to

²² Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 10.

²³ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 10.

²⁴ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 10.

²⁵ David Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), 3.

²⁶ Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom*, 3.

get a sense of the historical process of secularisation by examining those periods of secularist decline; and as this thesis will argue, these apparent lulls show a variety of activity in both national and international affairs.

Additionally, the examination of organisations that persisted through the ‘decline’ of the movement can offer further insights into that historical process. For organisations like the Rationalist Press Association, the Union of Ethical Societies or South Place Ethical Society, their history is still largely absent from the wider historiography. The history of South Place as a secularist organisation really began with the ministry of William Johnson Fox, when he took over the congregation in 1824. Fox “filled the pulpit and moulded the character of the Society, building it into a recognised London institution.”²⁷ But the transition of South Place from radical Unitarian chapel to a “humanist ethical organism” was only completed under Fox’s successor, Moncure Daniel Conway.²⁸ The radical Unitarian preacher remade the society into a place of liberal and scientific discussion in the twentieth century.

As for the Rationalist Press Association (RPA), which became the publishing wing of radical and secularist thought long after Bradlaugh, it is rarely mentioned in the historiography. This is despite the success of the Rationalist Press Association as a radical publishing enterprise which manage to grow its subscribers base to over 4,000 members from 1906 to 1933.²⁹ As Bill Cooke states in the opening of *The Blasphemy Depot*, “little mention is made” of publishing organisations like the RPA in secularist

²⁷ S K Ratcliffe, *The Story of South Place* (London: Watts & Co., 1955), 1.

²⁸ Ratcliffe, *The Story of South Place*, 1.

²⁹ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 133.

history.³⁰ However, just like the organisations and secularists who carried on campaigning through the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, they “cannot simply be dismissed as an epilogue to the study of nineteenth century freethought.”³¹ Without a doubt, the direction of secularist agitation shifted into new areas, albeit still championing the same fundamental beliefs as their nineteenth century counterparts, such as free discussion on whatever topic, no matter how controversial or challenging to prevailing moral tastes.

So, what is the history of secularism then? Is it part of 2,000 years of freethought history, with the likes of Pericles, Montesquieu, Spinoza, and Paine as champions of secular thought? Is it a brief strain of radical thought, bridging radicalism and labour activism that then folds within other movements’ history? As David Nash points out, secularism has been a troublesome point within other histories, “inconvenient for historians of Radicalism” or “convenient stepping stone from Chartism to Socialism.”³² Or have scholars of the twentieth century also been caught by a binary view of “Victorian scientific philosophy” and “a single tradition of religious thought” which stopped them from seeing the “full spectrum of the secular and the religious as the latter concretely manifested themselves in the nineteenth-century life and crossed over the twentieth century conceptual boundaries?”³³ Has the narrative, framed by the secularist organisations

³⁰ Bill Cooke, *The Blasphemy Depot: A Hundred Years of the Rationalist Press Association* (Oldham: Rationalist Press Association, 2003), 5.

³¹ Cooke, *The Blasphemy Depot*, 5.

³² Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom*, 1.

³³ Frank M Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 9-10.

themselves, been too simplistic, with the historiography only reflecting the trajectory depicted in the secular press?

As the history of organisations and individuals after Bradlaugh demonstrates, they have a greater historical contribution than merely serving as an epilogue to the nineteenth century. More crucially, “secularism demands a history of its own” which is slowly being written. Most recent monographs attest to the complexity within movements, such as *Infidel Feminism*. Historian Laura Schwartz argues that women’s rights were “integral to the creation of modern definitions of ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’” and yet “have been almost entirely passed over in the historiography of the women’s movement.”³⁴ However, Schwartz also uses the history of secularism for her own ends to further examine radical feminist history. This thesis is an addition to that history, picking up where traditional historiography usually draws the movement to a slow end or see its conclusion as an absorption into other twentieth century movements. Deeper analysis can show that the history of secularism still had an important and often central place within twentieth century movements in the UK. However, the methods of campaign and even the campaigns themselves had changed from the activism of the nineteenth century which centered on blasphemy trials and national campaigns to support Bradlaugh’s parliamentary struggle.

As in Rectenwald’s work, Holyoake’s version of secularism is central to this dissertation. Though no doubt, many of the people examined were irreligious, they were not such vociferous antagonists of the religious establishment as their nineteenth century counterparts. However, twentieth

³⁴ Laura Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation, England 1830-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 1.

century secularists would still confront religious privilege on a regular basis and make secularist arguments in response. As a result, the interpretation of secularism that I use in my argument relies on two propositions: the first is that religion and irreligion will continue to co-exist within society; the second is that public policy must prioritise individual freedom of conscience over the expectations of organised religion. Additionally, as with Rectenwald, this interpretation does not assume a teleological progression of secularism. Rather, secularist principles need to be argued for and contested in the public sphere, whether that be through publishing, politics or other forms of activism.

Rebutting the narrative of decline

The main purpose of this thesis, then, is to rebut the historiographical assessment of decline within the secular movement after the death of Charles Bradlaugh and the waning membership of the National Secular Society. As Nash and Schwartz have stated, secularist history is more than a bridge to other historiographical narratives and, more than this, can often provide additional context for important cultural and political debates. While there may not have been the mass movements from the nineteenth century, individual secularists were often influential within their own spheres – such as Liberal and Labour politics, internationalism and women's rights. Many of the individuals mentioned in this thesis are already well known in other areas, but their role in secularist history has been overlooked or subsumed (or ignored entirely) into another historiographical narrative. However, I will argue that it is difficult to separate secularist intent from their other political activities. They

were not only secularists while writing for secularist papers or journals and Labour activists only while working on Labour policies. Their actions need to be examined as a whole and their motivations better understood if their secularist intent is examined. Crucially, I will show how their secularism was reflected in their own work, and how it demonstrates that the secular movement did not decline, but rather individual secularists and organisations participated in larger social and political movements in the twentieth century.

Many of the people investigated in this dissertation were writers or had a prodigious written output. This was the main source of information for their secularist opinions and campaigning efforts. Unfortunately, as with other areas of secularist history, there is a lack of written letters and more personal information related to the individuals. However, due to the regular and continuous output of some of the individuals, there was a wide selection of material available which covered a broad range of their activities. This includes their monographs but also pamphlets, speeches and journalistic publications. Due to the nature of the dissertation, I focused on the areas where they had a particular secularist focus.

Due to the topics investigated in the individual chapters, different archives and materials were consulted. For the political and internationalist chapters, the archives used were the London School of Economics, Senate House Library, the National Archives, the UN Archives in Geneva, the British Library, the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, the Hull History Centre and University of Reading archives. For the chapter on women and birth control, additional resources from the Wellcome Trust, Hansard and the Churchill Archives online were used. For the entire

dissertation, the Humanist Library and Archives at Conway Hall were consulted (especially the pamphlet and periodical collections), the Bishopsgate Library and Archive and the British Library.

Five chapters follow, each exploring various campaigning efforts by a variety of secularists. However, each will contain a brief biography of each new secularist, and the argument to why they were secularists or offered a secularist point of view in their work. Some of them have been identified as economists, socialists or sociologists, but a large part of their motivations came from their secularist ideals and these are often either downplayed or absent altogether in existing research.

While secularists within the historiography are usually associated with specific secularist organisations, this conceptualisation is too narrow. Instead, secularists can be identified through their relationships with other prominent secularists or the secularist intent expressed in their written work and campaigns. As will be shown, the individuals I include in this thesis may not have been members of the National Secular Society but they demonstrated secularist ideas which found favour and readership amongst the secularist and freethought movements, to varying degrees, in their work and actions.

The first chapter investigates the problems within the historiography as it stands, and the confusion of terms within it. The second chapter focuses on the secularist activism of four individuals: J A Hobson, L T Hobhouse, J M Robertson and Henry Snell. All were involved in the Liberal and Labour movements, either as Members of Parliament or in the development of policy and intellectual underpinning of the movements. The third chapter looks at

the internationalist strands of thinking of some of the same secularists, but also within the traditional secularist movement. It also introduces Henry Noel Brailsford as a secularist. The fourth chapter looks at those even more peripheral to the traditional secularist movement and examines the secularist themes within literature, especially that of George Meredith, Wilfred Scawen Blunt, Ivy Compton-Burnett and Marjorie Bowen. The final chapter looks at secularist interest in women's issues, especially contraception in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It once again features J A Hobson but extends wider to the Malthusian League and the Member for Parliament Ernest Thurtle.

Chapter 1: A problem of definition: The historiography of the UK secular movement

The defining element of the history of the UK's secular movement after the death of its charismatic figurehead, Charles Bradlaugh, is the relative scarcity of interest in the subject. A casual glance across the literature reveals a heavy density of publications on George Jacob Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh but even a detailed search does not reward the researcher with any further illumination on the subject.¹ Even Annie Besant, Bradlaugh's longtime friend and fellow campaigner, often remains only a passing reference in this history. Given that the general discussion of the historiography of secularism is largely restricted to atheist agitators, there is a notable lack of time spent on atheists between Bradlaugh and Bertrand Russell, even in common books on the topic.² It seems that the history of secularism had attached itself to Bradlaugh and Holyoake early on, preventing the study of the movement to shake free from the trajectories of the Great Blasphemer and the Member of Parliament for Northampton.

George Jacob Holyoake (13 April 1817 – 22 January 1906) was a secularist campaigner and founder of the Co-Operative Movement. He founded one of the first modern secularist periodicals *The Reasoner* in 1846.

¹ For the study of Bradlaugh these can range from the academic, such as *The Bradlaugh Case: A Study in Late Victorian Opinion and Politics* by Walter L. Arnstein or *The Infidel Tradition - From Paine to Bradlaugh* by Edward Royle, to the enthusiast, such as *Dare to Stand Alone* by Brian Niblett. Holyoake is always included in any volume on secularist history but is given special attention in *George Jacob Holyoake: A Study in the Evolution of a Victorian Radical* by Lee Grugel and *George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) and The Development of the British cooperative Movement* by Barbara Blaszak.

² David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 220. Chapman Cohen manages to get a brief mention but then there is a large gap until Bertrand Russell.

His prominence within the secularist movement was partly due to his arrest for blasphemy in 1842 – and subsequent conviction. He was also the individual within the movement who defined what is considered the modern concept of ‘Secularism,’ though he had a long history within the Owenite social missionary movement as well.

Holyoake’s star was eclipsed by that of Charles Bradlaugh (26 September 1833 – 30 January 1891), who rose to prominence as the founder and first president of the National Secular Society (one of the main nineteenth century secularist campaigning organisations) and editor of the *National Reformer*, the secular journal founded by Bradlaugh. The *National Reformer* was one of many journals that would report on secularist issues and conflicts with authority to the wider movement. The obscenity trial in 1877 with his friend and collaborator Annie Besant over the birth-control pamphlet *The Fruits of Philosophy* led to further notoriety and national attention.

Finally, elected as the independent Member of Parliament by radicals in Northampton, Bradlaugh had to navigate historical precedent in Parliament and the existing Parliamentary Oaths Act of 1866 to take his seat. In 1833 and 1850, Select Committees were used to determine the process for swearing in newly elected Jewish and Quaker MPs, which was then repeated for Bradlaugh.³ However, after two Select Committees deliberated, another independent vote to allow Bradlaugh to affirm failed, the final House vote resulted in Bradlaugh being denied the ability to affirm or swear an Oath in

³ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 24.

order to take his seat.⁴ Bradlaugh, while being removed from the chamber after the vote, shouted: “I admit the right of the House to imprison me; but I admit no right on the part of the House to exclude me, and I refuse to be excluded.”⁵ He was fighting for his rights as a secularist and an elected MP (and for the rights of those who elected him), making his fight a secularist as well as Liberal cause. Given his stance as an open atheist and republican, it was perhaps naive of him to have assumed that he could take his seat without some opposition. However, even William Gladstone’s son Herbert described the opposition to Bradlaugh in Parliament as “systematic persecution.”⁶ It is easy to see how Bradlaugh’s battle to represent his constituency was a compelling drama for secularists.

The historiography of the secularist movement

Edward Royle has dominated the historiography of the last thirty years but his interest in the subject curtails sharply after 1890 with *Radical Politics, 1790-1900: Religion and Unbelief* and *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: popular freethought in Britain, 1866-1915* being the only major work that ventured past Bradlaugh’s death. *Radical politics, 1790-1900: Religion and Belief* does so as well, but it is only a brief collection totaling 85 pages of his lecture notes, seminar work and reproductions of some original sources. However, Royle does mention some of the unexplored issues left in

⁴ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 24-25. The saga continued, with court cases (several of which were seen by the House of Lords) and the already mentioned multiple by-elections, until the government changed and the new Speaker of the House allowed Bradlaugh to take the oath.

⁵ Walter L Arnstein, “Gladstone and the Bradlaugh Case,” *Victorian Studies*, 5 (1962), 312.

⁶ Arnstein, “Gladstone and the Bradlaugh Case,” 329.

the history of secularism, such as the fact that while the *National Reformer* eventually failed as a publication, the much later established *The Freethinker* thrived.⁷ However, these areas have not been analysed in subsequent investigations by either Royle or any other historian. With Royle being one of the only early dedicated historians investigating the history of secularism, the historiography of post-1890s secularist activism has suffered considerably.

One of the most frequently cited books for the post 1890 period is Susan Budd's *The Varieties of Unbelief*. After Budd, there is mainly David Nash who almost singularly notes the need for a history of secularism apart from the histories of radicalism and socialism.⁸ Nash has examined various areas in the history of secularism, which highlight some of the unexplored areas of research within the historiography. For example, he has investigated local issues to demonstrate secularist campaigns could survive "within a cold climate" of rural outposts.⁹ Nash has also examined the battle for the true biographical narrative of Charles Bradlaugh.¹⁰ Another area which he explored was the importance of death within the secularist community.¹¹ Additionally, Nash investigated how blasphemy contests some of the secularisation narrative and how theoretical models "offer inadequate

⁷ Royle, *The Infidel Tradition*, 69. The *National Reformer* folded in 1893 while *The Freethinker* still exists today, albeit as a digital publication only.

⁸ Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom*, 1.

⁹ David Nash, "Unfettered Investigation: The Secularist Press and the Creation of Audience in Victorian England", *Victorian Periodicals Review* 28 (1995): 126. The article also highlights the "quarrelsome" nature of the national secularist movement, where papers were essentially the mouthpieces of different individuals.

¹⁰ David Nash, "'The Credulity of the Public Seems Infinite': Charles Bradlaugh, Public Biography and the Battle for Narrative Supremacy in Fin-de-siècle England", *Journal of Victorian Culture* 7 (2002): 239-262.

¹¹ David Nash, "Look in Her Face and Lose Thy Dread of Dying': The Ideological Importance of Death to the Secularist Community in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Journal of Religion History* 19 (1995): 158.

explanations of blasphemy.”¹² What Nash’s scholarship demonstrates is that there are many different secularist issues to investigate within the history of secularism.

Callum Brown ventures beyond the nineteenth century to look at twentieth century secularisation narratives in *Becoming Atheist: Humanism in the Secular West*. He takes exception to the more religious revisionist historians pushing a de-secularisation narrative, referring to it as “a wild idea not borne out by any credible evidence.”¹³ This follows on from Brown’s two previous books, *The Death of Christian Britain* and *Religion and the Demographic Revolution* which examine Christian culture up to the 1960s and its collapse thereafter.¹⁴ Brown highlights how the historical contrast between city and country or working class and bourgeoisie are themselves products of the inheritance of evangelical concepts into social science.¹⁵ The result was that it has narrowed the “study of the subject within those early nineteenth-century parameters.”¹⁶ This is readily apparent within some of the secularist historiography.

Brown also argues that women were central to the acceleration of secularisation in the west, due to declining fertility rates, higher education and greater participation in the workforce.¹⁷ Women are often neglected within the nineteenth century historiography, often only playing supporting roles to their male counterparts. But was it only the twentieth century where

¹² David Nash, “Blasphemy and sacrilege: A challenge to secularisation and theories of the modern?” in *Negotiating the Sacred II*, ed. Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Maria Suzette Fernandes-Dias (Canberra: ANU Press: 2008), 18.

¹³ Callum Brown, *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 3.

¹⁴ Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 6.

¹⁵ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 193.

¹⁶ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 193.

¹⁷ Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 6.

women had a role to play when it came to organised secularism? With the focus on white, male and working class secularists in the nineteenth century (and the accompanying blasphemy and obscenity trials), a reexamination of the role of women more widely in wider social campaigns might change the perception of the nineteenth century movement and offer some continuity between the two centuries.

Recently, there has been the addition of *Infidel Feminism* by Laura Schwartz, which highlights the strong current of radical women within early feminist and suffrage movements up to 1915. This is notable for the fact that her research bears out some interesting and influential relationships between the 'infidel' feminists and contemporary suffragettes of the time. Additionally, Swartz notes that: "Secularists active in the women's movement were motivated as much by their Freethinking beliefs as they were by a commitment to women's rights, or rather that these two intellectual currents were intertwined."¹⁸ It demonstrates quite clearly that there is more to the historiography of the secularist movement post 1880 when it is investigated. Additionally, it recognises that dual interests are not easily separated. Secularist ideals informed other kinds of campaigning activities by secularists. The narrow focus of the historiography on what were historically 'secular interests' is one of the reasons for the perception of a decline in the secularist movement post-1890.

Another aspect of the history of feminism that Schwartz raises is the marginalisation of these infidel activists "from the history of the movement."¹⁹ An examination to the depth that Schwartz has researched has not occurred

¹⁸ Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism*, 171.

¹⁹ Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism*, 171.

in most areas where secularists had an interest. As well, many areas of twentieth century secularist interest have been subsumed into other areas of social, political and economic history. However, when these issues and campaigns are examined in more detail, with a secularist focus, a richer and more complex picture of such movements are revealed. This can be seen in the anti-imperial stances of many secularists in the early twentieth century, which add a wider contextualisation to debates of the time. This will be briefly examined in the political and internationalism chapters.

The secularists that I investigate were involved in a diverse set of social and political movements. However, what united them as a platform for activism were the secularist themes that ran through them. A rationalist and human-centered worldview which united progressive positions on women's equality to the right to knowledge to internationalism. Like Schwartz demonstrated with the intertwined links between suffragettes and secularism, I argue that other areas of political and social movements can equally benefit from examining secular intent in nineteenth and twentieth century secularists.

Susannah Wright has also explored examples of secularist activism in the twentieth century, focused on the issue of moral education.²⁰ Education was always going to be a significant issue for secularists, as religious institutions dominated the education system in the UK. In practical terms, this meant that the public effectively subsidised the proselytisation of religion. In 1896, Moncure Conway in the *South Place Monthly Magazine* weighed in on

²⁰ See Susannah Wright, "‘There is something universal in our movement which appeals not only to one country, but to all’: International Communication and Moral Education 1892–1914," *Journal of the History of Education Society* 37 (2008): 807-824; Susannah Wright, *Morality and Citizenship in English Schools: Secular Approaches 1897-1944* (London: Palgrave, 2017).

the debate on moral instruction in schools by comparing what he called “natural” and “educated ignorance”. Of course, he ascribed educated ignorance as “Sabbath-keeping, Church attendance, prayerfulness, orthodoxy and other fictitious things.”²¹ He was displeased that secularists (as well as the general public) were likely to be “heavily taxed for the training of children in Athanasianism and Calvinism, also in Bibliolatry.”²² Of course, faith groups still play a major role in state funded primary and secondary education, another area where secularist battles are still contested in the twenty-first century. In England in 2017, faith schools made up 37% of state funded primary schools and 19% of secondary schools.²³

The Moral Education League was another organisation that campaigned for secular ideas beyond the traditional secular movement’s timeline. Emerging from the Ethical Societies, the Moral Education League actively engaged school boards, produced educational material, and “developed rudimentary mechanisms of professional development.”²⁴ While there had been precedents in the nineteenth century for moral education, the “timetabled secular moral instruction lessons based on a syllabus” was an innovative approach by the Moral Instruction League.²⁵ Thus, the work of the Moral Education League can also demonstrate that outside of the nineteenth

²¹ Moncure Conway, “Moral and Religious Instruction in Schools,” *South Place Monthly Magazine*, October 1896, 1

²² Conway, “Moral and Religious Instruction in Schools,” 1

²³ The government also considered lifting the 50% cap on religious selection for schools. House of Commons Library, *Faith Schools in England FAQ*, Briefing Paper Number 06972, 6 June 2018, 10, 15.

²⁴ Susannah Wright, “Moral Instruction, Urban Poverty and English Elementary Schools” in *Childhood and Child Labour in Industrial England: Diversity and Agency, 1750-1914*, eds, Nigel Goose and Katrina Honeyman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 281. The Moral Education League would change its name in 1909 to the Moral Instruction League which “signalled a focus on curriculum development...” Wright, *Morality and Citizenship in English Schools*, 85.

²⁵ Wright, “Moral Instruction, Urban Poverty and English Elementary Schools,” 282.

century narrative, there were new approaches and campaigns led by secular organisations.

Much of the remaining literature is limited to articles and chapters in collected volumes such as “Secularism as the Common Religion of a Free Society” or *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science*. There is a strong tendency to frame the forces of rational science and religion as opposing forces in a struggle for the search of truth during the nineteenth century.²⁶ Most recently, Michael Rectenwald has re-evaluated nineteenth century secularism in response to the “breakdown of the secularization thesis” and the “pride of place” of the nineteenth century scientific movement within that theory.²⁷ However, in general, there is rarely any attempt to relate these issues back to any wider secularist (or even strictly atheist) movement. Additionally, from the opposite perspective, what is also missing from the historiography is the relationship of secularist activism to the wider social movements of the time. It seems that only republicanism is associated closely with secularist agitation and mostly with Bradlaugh and the mid-nineteenth century. Nash explores this relationship in “Charles Bradlaugh, India and the Many Chameleon Destinations of Republicanism.”²⁸

Furthermore, Bradlaugh (or at least the trial with Annie Besant over the publication of *The Fruits of Philosophy*), had a direct impact on the Malthusian League and their approach to promote birth control. The *Fruits of*

²⁶ John H Evans and Michael S Evans, “Religion and Science: Beyond the Epistemological Conflict Narrative,” *Annual Reviews* 34 (2008): 3.

²⁷ Rectenwald, *Nineteenth-Century British Secularism*, 1-2.

²⁸ David Nash, “Charles Bradlaugh, India and the Many Chameleon Destinations of Republicanism,” in *Republicanism in Victorian Society*, ed. David Nash and Anthony Taylor, (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing Limited 2000), 106-124.

Philosophy is often examined in articles and books on the history of contraception, but several works that look at the secularist angle are “Contraception and the Working Classes: The Social Ideology of the English Birth Control Movement in Its Early Years” and *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England*, both by Angus McLaren.

What one does find, however, beyond a concern for secularism narrowly conceived, is a great deal of research into the general secularisation of society. From the *Secularisation of the European Mind* to the *Death of Christian Britain* there is a wide range of scholarship on the concept of secularisation. However, there is less research on the historical details and events surrounding secularists and their organisations advocating for the secularisation of society. The historiography of the nineteenth century movement contextualises the idea of secularisation with secularist activity. Yet, when it comes to the twentieth century, the secularisation narrative continues, but often lacks the contextualisation of the secularists or secularist movement active at that time.

Indeed, there do not seem to be many attempts to link the activities of secularists and the secularisation narrative of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The closest connection made, it seems, is the relationship between the secularisation narrative and the professionalisation of science, as in *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science* by George Levine. Others that highlight this issue include Frank Turner:

“The most significant issues that mid-twentieth century scholars did not really probe deeply were the actual, specific, concrete character of nineteenth century religion and nineteenth-century secular developments. Both conceptual approaches, rooted in a single

tradition of Victorian scientific philosophy on one hand and a single tradition of religious thought on the other, prevented scholars from confronting in a direct manner the full spectrum of the secular and the religious as the latter concretely manifested themselves in the nineteenth-century life and crossed over the twentieth century conceptual boundaries.²⁹

Nash once again points out that there is much work to be done on local levels and that secularist agitation and the “cultural aspects” of secularism continued to survive, even through apparent “lull” periods.³⁰ Schwartz, writing on feminism, also notes that by investigating the relations between freethought and religion, “It reveals the extent to which their respective ideological stances developed not only in opposition to, but also in dialogue with, each other.”³¹ This same idea needs to be applied more widely across secularist history as such an investigation can reveal a more complete picture of social and political movements and their move towards the more liberal and secular society during the twentieth century. For example, the radical nature of the peace movement against the dominant ideology of Empire in the UK reveals the secularist influence of John Atkinson Hobson and Henry Noel Brailsford on organisations like the Union of Democratic Control. The dialogue, in this case, occurred within peace organisations, with other peace organisations, and with the wider political and prevalent pro-Empire attitudes of the time. However, secularists like J M Robertson had voiced anti-Imperialist sentiments before the peace movement as well. Before the Boer War broke out, Robertson had already called imperialism the “practice of international burglary.”³² What secularists also highlighted was

²⁹ Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority*, 9.

³⁰ Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom*, 3.

³¹ Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism*, 2.

³² David Nash, “Taming the God of Battles: Secular and Moral Critiques of the South African

the awkward deployment of religion to legitimise international conflicts. This was especially evident within the Boer War, with the “unpleasant reminder” of two Christian countries who both buttressed the justification for war with religion.³³ As these examples demonstrate, secularist history can encompass distinctive critiques of major events of the time.

The focus on decline and its problems

The literature that does touch upon secular groups such as the National Secular Society or the South Place Ethical Society is littered with concluding lines about the decline of the movement but very little evidence to credit these statements. Examples of this phenomenon are represented by the *The London Heretics 1870-1914*: “By the turn of the century the Secularists had already dwindled and divided. The Rationalist Press Association survived, but as a pioneer book club, not as an active Freethinking society. The Positivists had virtually disappeared.”³⁴ Despite the chapter entitled ‘The Final Years: Decline and Fall’ about the Positivist movement in the UK, T R Wright acknowledges that the twentieth century positivists “sought to extend their influence beyond the movement itself.”³⁵ However, there are some remarks about work yet to be done from the historical side:

“Freethought is no longer a topic of historical interest... To be fully

War,” in *Writing a Wider War: Rethinking Gender, Race, and Identity in the South American War, 1899-1902*, eds Greg Cuthbertson, Albert Grundlingh and Mary-Lynn Suttie (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 271.

³³ Nash, “Taming the God of Battles”, 280.

³⁴ Warren Sylvester Smith, *The London Heretics 1870-1914* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1968), 279.

³⁵ T R Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comptean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 240. These twentieth century Positivists included S H Swinny, F S Marvin, Philip Thomas and F J Gould.

understood, however, Secularism must be studied in context broader than freethought. It was indeed part of a larger process through which the working classes were becoming more integrated with the rest of Victorian society. The story of Secularism and of Holyoake's role in that movement is only beginning to be adequately delineated."³⁶

Edward Royle points to the decline of membership for the National Secular Society: "The year 1885, though, probably represents the turning point in the history of secularism. References to decline and setbacks begin to occur."³⁷

Or even more devastatingly:

"Arguably the secular movement briefly tasted power through the election of Charles Bradlaugh to parliament...Nonetheless the apparent peak of its potential was over by the time the Twentieth century commenced and it had appeared...to be a largely spent force by the outbreak of the First World War."³⁸

The problem with Royle's analysis in *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans* is that he also echoes the arbitrary distinctions of secularists (specifically of the National Secular Society) and the various groups that constitute the secular movement. But of course, this period of decline from the National Secular Society occurred at the same time as the period of the growth of ethicism and ethical societies. The changing times could pose a potential problem for an individual organisation but not for a movement as a whole. Thus tying the fortunes of a secular movement to one organisation gives the overall impression of decline.

What is also telling is that Royle states that at the turn of the century, "the NSS underwent a complete change in character. From being a large national organisation...it became a small pressure group..."³⁹ which aligned it

³⁶ Lee. E. Grugel, *George Jacob Holyoake: A study in the Evolution of a Victorian Radical* (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1976), 73-74.

³⁷ Royle, *The Infidel Tradition*, 69.

³⁸ Royle, *The Infidel Tradition*, 69.

³⁹ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 41.

more closely with modern organisations. Where Royle and others have seen this as a step back, it could in fact represent something more modern and progressive, in line with how to better effect change at a national political and legal level.

Far fewer pages have been written about the decline of organised secularism or anything that came after Bradlaugh, even though the National Secular Society and other organisations continued to operate and reinvent themselves well into the twenty-first century. Not only that, but secularists would have greater successes in Parliament and within their respective political parties than Bradlaugh may have had: both J M Robertson and Henry Snell were elected to Parliament not long after Bradlaugh's death in 1891.

Other than these cursory remarks and dismissal of almost the entirety of the twentieth century secular movement, there are scant direct examinations of the movement as a whole or even as individuals. Where articles and books have been published, these are generally focused on one person or tangentially related to the secular movement - such as the focus on Frederick James Gould and Moral Education.⁴⁰ For example, David Nash looks at Gould's work with the Leicester Secular Society and Gould's attempt to turn the "abstract theory" of Positivism "into practice."⁴¹ However, even these examinations are few and far between, with the remainder written by the main promulgators of the movement in the nineteenth century about their colleagues. There is also a surfeit of amateur historians who tend to focus

⁴⁰ Robert Bérard, "Frederick James Gould and the Transformation of Moral Education," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 35 (1987): 234.

⁴¹ David Nash, "F J Gould and the Leicester Secular Society: A Positivist Commonwealth in Edwardian Politics" *Midland History* 16 (1991): 130.

on individuals rather than providing any deeper historical analysis. Such examples of this are *He Dared to Stand Alone* (2010), *Pioneers of Johnson's Court* (1929) and *100 Years of Freethought* (1967).⁴² However, these lack wider historiographical contextualisation, are usually written for anniversaries or celebratory events, and are often quite biased and of narrow scope (for example, simple chronologies of important events). In the case of *Pioneer's of Johnson's Court* and *100 Years of Freethought*, they were written by members of the secularist organisations themselves. They also have a tendency to re-emphasise the roles of Bradlaugh, Holyoake or Annie Besant, rather than examining any of their more recent contemporaries - even though in many cases they would have still been alive at the time. For example, *Vision and Realism* focuses on the 100th anniversary of *The Freethinker*. While it does have sections on different political movements at the time, they are very short and mostly re-quote texts from *The Freethinker*. The section on feminist issues is only seven pages and while it attempts to cover suffrage and contraception, the majority of the text only focusses on free speech issues.⁴³ The *Story of South Place* included J A Hobson, but mostly related biographical facts and no larger examination of his place within the movement or wider society.

As they do not examine secularists outside their narrow focus, the twentieth century (and to some extent the nineteenth century) secularist

⁴² David Tribe, *100 Years of Freethought* (London, Elek Books: 1967). F J Gould, *The Pioneers of Johnson's Court* (London: Watts & Co., 1929). Bryan Niblett, *Dare to Stand Alone: The Story of Charles Bradlaugh – Atheist and Republican* (Oxford: Kramedart, 2010). Many of these books are almost hagiographic when it comes to their description of the main actors of the secularist movement. They are generally glowing portraits rather than discerning histories of the topics and people they cover.

⁴³ Jim Herrick, *Vision and Realism: A Hundred Years of the Freethinker* (London: G W Foote & Co., 1982), 59-66.

literature, gives the impression that you had to be a member of a secular society in order to make a secularist contribution. This extended to the “old guard positivists” who were unconvinced of the merits of collaboration, even as Gould and others were broadening the movement.⁴⁴ Even though secularists would often reach back into the past to include Greek philosophers and French revolutionaries as freethinkers, the movement seemed to have more difficulty incorporating secularists from outside traditional secular organisations and campaigns. Thus, they would repeat past victories and nineteenth century heroes as anniversaries rolled around, rather than examine their place contemporaneously.

The lack of historical attention is, ironically, inversely proportional to the amount of material available to study this area. From the membership rosters of the ethical societies, the Rationalist Press Association and the National Secular Society, to the *Thinker's Library*, to the many short and long running periodicals to archival material, there is enough information to discern the events and successes that defined the movement in the twentieth century. The attention paid to Bradlaugh has also clouded the view of the wider secular movement and especially the history of the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Taking a step back from the Oaths Act and Bradlaugh's election to power, one finds a diverse group of people and organisations who were interested and active in wider social issues, women's rights, peace and social justice. Additionally, with Bradlaugh's death, intransigence against socialism within the movement was also largely removed. However, this did

⁴⁴ Wright saw this approach as moving “towards Modernism and towards other brands of unbelief.” This example is particularly interesting because it demonstrates that the movement was unable to see beyond the narrative it had constructed about its own history. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity*, 247.

not mean that secularism was no longer relevant, rather secularists worked within the new Labour Party, and helped shape economic and social policies on a scale greater than Bradlaugh could have ever done as an independent Member of Parliament.

There is some detailed historiography on secularists from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when you step out of the sole focus on the secularist movement. They were motivated by secularist principles and embedded these secularist values into the wider social campaigns they were a part of. Notable examples include Leonard Trelawney Hobhouse and John Atkinson Hobson. Both were members of secular organisations and contributors to the secularist press, as well as the national press with the *Manchester Guardian* and the *New Statesman*. It was their contribution to wider society in the form of economic, political and sociological expertise that brought them to the attention of other areas of historical inquiry. Hobson has been examined in the light of economic history, as has Hobhouse for the history of sociology.⁴⁵ What is missing is the synthesis between two aspects of their history: first, the complete lack of research within the secularist literature by these individuals; and second, the missing aspects of how their secularist worldview contributed to their liberalism or economic and sociological theories.

This sort of synthesis is apparent to some extent in *Infidel Feminism*, which looks at secularism and suffrage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Schwartz states:

⁴⁵ For examples see: Michael Freeden, ed., *Reappraising J. A. Hobson: Humanism and Welfare* (London, 1990); John M. Hobson and Colin Tyler, eds., *Selected Writings of John A. Hobson, 1932-1938: The Struggle for the International Mind* (London: Routledge, 2011); John E. Owen, *L. T. Hobhouse, Sociologist* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1974).

“...the issue of women’s rights was integral to the creation of modern definitions of ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’ in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when feminists and anti-feminists, Christians and Freethinkers battled over who had women’s best interests at heart. Such contests were fundamental to the development of feminist thought in England, but have been almost entirely passed over in the historiography of the women’s movement.”⁴⁶

This is the analysis that now needs to be applied to other areas of nineteenth and twentieth century movements such as liberalism, socialism, peace and anti-imperialism. This can establish what happened in the secular movement in the twentieth century, determining if its activism died after Bradlaugh or just evolved in new and diverse ways. Additionally, it can add further illumination to the historiography of wider social movements, which may provide additional context to the gradual secularisation of society. These secularists may have only had a small part to play in that social evolution, but they were nevertheless at the forefront of liberal, secular and modern discussions at the turn of the twentieth century.

The ghost of Charles Bradlaugh

There are three central issues that have led to an inconsistent and misleading view of the UK secular movement from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century within the current literature. The first is what is defined as the secular movement. There is no consistency or, it can be argued, a methodology for the categorisation of the wide range of groups that would agitate for a more secular state or culture. The second is the lack of in-depth scholarship on the organisations that were the main lobbyists, writers

⁴⁶ Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism*, 1.

and campaigners in the movement as discussed above. Where there is some discussion, it is brief, glossed over and only very rarely is sufficient evidence provided for the conclusions. From this, it is automatically inferred that there was a decline in the movement with no discussion of the period after Charles Bradlaugh was elected to Parliament or after his death. The most often quoted evidence for the decline for the *entire secular movement* is the National Secular Society's membership numbers.⁴⁷ Bradlaugh's ghost has been hanging over the history of the organisation, as he was president for much of its operation in the nineteenth century (and a prominent figure within the movement itself).

Third, the historiography has led to a static interpretation of the secularist movement, rather than allowing for change within its structures, members, methods and activities. The change from a Bradlaugh-dominated National Secular Society to the more social and educational activities of ethical societies is seen as a decline, rather than as a different method utilised in the pursuit of secular aims. It often seems that the National Secular Society is the only organisation that could possibly represent secularism and with its loss of numbers in the late nineteenth century, so too went the entire movement. In comparison, it would be similar to equating the decline of one branch of a Christian denomination with the decline of the entire Christian religion. It leads one to the wider conclusion that after the main republican and secular agitation that followed on from George Jacob Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh, there has been relatively little interest or engagement with what was happening in the British secular movement.

⁴⁷ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 36.

What the current historiography also often does is gloss over the fissures in Bradlaugh's dominance. There were real challenges to his leadership of the National Secular Society, as well as constant heckling in the secularist press.⁴⁸ At a more local level, we can see the more moderate views of Holyoake prevail over the blustery republican rhetoric of Bradlaugh. Bradlaugh's dominance and credibility also depends on where one looks. Even Henry Snell (a secularist MP and Lord in the twentieth century), who greatly admired Bradlaugh said:

"I have had never been so influenced by a human personality as I was by Charles Bradlaugh... That does not mean, however, that I uncritically accepted all his opinions. On the contrary, there were both in his social and his metaphysical teaching barriers that I could not cross; but I had an unclouded belief in his sincerity and capacity, and in his absolute devotion to truth."⁴⁹

Snell also mentioned that, on the whole, Bradlaugh's writings were "quite valueless" but he nonetheless still admired him.⁵⁰ When on campaign form, Bradlaugh seemed iconic, but on a local level his ideas did not dominate the entire movement as described in the historiography. In the obituary of Holyoake in the *Co-Operative News*, the author stated: "But secularism was not exempt from the difficulties of organised movements. It had its Right, Left and Centre parties" which is readily admitted in the historiography in Bradlaugh's opposition to socialism, but that is as far as the critique usually gets.⁵¹ While Bradlaugh made a powerful impression on the secular

⁴⁸ Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism*, 185.

⁴⁹ Lord Henry Snell, *Men, Movements, and Myself* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1938), 31.

⁵⁰ Snell, *Men, Movements, and Myself*, 31.

⁵¹ Hull History Centre, U DLB/1/122 George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906), "Death of Mr G. J. Holyoake: A peaceful end to a strenuous career," *The Co-operative News*, January 27, 1908, 92.

movement, a more balanced discussion of his legacy might benefit the history of the movement as a whole.

A problem of definition and a profusion of terms

The terminology describing unbelief has shifted over time, evolving from a vilification of those who left the church toward a positive articulation of a worldview without religion. However, the historiography has focused on the narrow distinctions describing unbelief, and allocating these definitions as precursors to, part of, or excluded from organised secularism. As well, by focussing on narrow differences, the history of secularism ignores those individuals who made secularist arguments, but may not necessarily have articulated that belief through a label such as freethinker, humanist or secularist. These definitions should be seen as a continuum, reflecting the changes in how individuals and organisations articulated unbelief over time, or pressed for the ability to express freedom of conscience and belief. Seen as an evolution of unbelief, the addition of ethical societies and arrival of humanism in the twentieth century can be counted as part of that continuum, rather than being arbitrarily excluded. Secularist history could move beyond the narrow scope of secularist organisations by also including those individuals who expressed secular intent through their actions, for example in their written work or political activism.

One of the earliest words used to describe unbelief, and adopted quite readily by those non-believers who were particularly anti-clerical was infidel or infidel radicals. The use of infidel was used more in the definitions and actions of the irreligious, rather than non-conformists. Royle defines it as

those with the “temerity to convey to the lower orders the heresies of the respectable”.⁵² It was also a term heavily linked to the radical politics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵³ This is probably more pertinent to the mid-nineteenth century campaigners than the later secularists – however, it would be a term used interchangeably by all secularists throughout their history. The interchangeability of these kinds of words by all secularists in the nineteenth and twentieth century is widespread. However, as will be seen below, at their core they championed reason and freedom of conscience over religious privilege and demands in public life. At the same time, there is a shift from articulating a simple rejection of religion to a positive and humanitarian worldview.

Rationalist and freethinker

It is somewhat difficult to disambiguate the possible meanings of rationalist and rationalism as they have their own history but also because of their relationship to philosophy. However, the definition of rationalist that is most pertinent to this inquiry is: “one who applies scientific methods of reasoning or calculation to social and economic life”.⁵⁴ When employed by secularists within secularist organisations, this sometimes led to an anti-religious slant on the definition of rationalism: “the principle of regarding reason as the chief or only guide in matters of religion, or of the employing ordinary reasoning to criticise and interpret religion doctrines.”⁵⁵ However, some rationalist

⁵² Royle, *Radical Politics*, 18.

⁵³ Royle, *Radical Politics*, 18.

⁵⁴ J A Simpson and E S C Weiner eds, *Oxford English Dictionary: volume XIII Quemadero – Roaver* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 219.

⁵⁵ Simpson and Weiner eds, *Oxford English Dictionary: volume XIII Quemadero – Roaver*, 219.

organisations defined rationalism with a more neutral tone, privileging the elevation of human reason rather than relying on an anti-religious message.

For example, Charles Watts (the founder of the Rationalist Press

Association) wrote:

“The Rationalist Press Association, in its Prospectus, defines Rationalism ‘As the mental attitude which unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason and aims at establishing a system of philosophy and ethics verifiable by experience and independent of all arbitrary assumptions or authority’”.⁵⁶

The same sentiment was reiterated in the founding of the Conway Memorial Lectures (the annual lectures curated by the South Place Ethical Society after Moncure Conway’s death). In the inaugural lecture, John Russell defined rationalism in “The Task of Rationalism”: “Rationalism is the mental attitude which unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason and aims at establishing a system of philosophy and ethics verifiable by experience and independent of all arbitrary assumptions of authority.”⁵⁷ Or as he later simply put it: “The Rationalist puts his trust frankly in powder and manure – things he can analyse, experiment with, put to the proof.”⁵⁸ While there is an implicit reaction against arbitrary authority (often religious authority) in rationalist definitions, there is also a positive turn towards a reliance on human reason and the scientific method to guide human direction.

Freethought, as with infidel, is one of the older terms that is often paired with secularism. Possibly reaching back into the seventeenth century, freethinkers were those who refused “to submit...reason to the control of

⁵⁶ Charles Watts, *The Meaning of Rationalism* (London: Watts & Co., 1905), 1.

⁵⁷ John Russell, “The Task of Rationalism,” *Conway Memorial Lecture* (London, 1910), 14.

⁵⁸ Russell, “The Task of Rationalism,” 42.

authority in matters of religious belief.”⁵⁹ *The Freethinker* characterises some of the more anti-theist publications in relation to freethought, though some of the ethical societies (which were not always anti-theist) would also adopt the term. *The Freethinker* was from the beginning unabashedly anti-theist. From the first issue, George William Foote set the tone of the journal:

“We will not bore you with a long introductory address, containing a catalogue of promises that may never be kept. *The Freethinker* is an anti-Christian organ, and must therefore be chiefly aggressive. It will wage relentless war against Superstition in general, and against Christian Superstition in particular. It will do its best to employ the resources of Science, Scholarships, Philosophy and Ethics against the claims of the Bible as a Divine Revelation; and it will not scruple to employ for the same purpose any weapons of ridicule or sarcasm that may be borrowed from the armoury of Common sense.”⁶⁰

However, the term was not monopolised simply by anti-theists: it was a word that all groups utilised for their own ends. It also was, according to J M Robertson, not a solely English phenomenon but one that extended far back into time and across the world.⁶¹ It was even more popular on the continent, with freethought societies established in both Germany and France.⁶²

Freethought and freethinking can be seen as the application of rationalism to areas of science, religion and politics. As Chapman Cohen, the editor of *The Freethinker* in the early twentieth century, wrote in his autobiography:

“Freethought is something that is always to be achieved, not something that is established once for all. To use a somewhat cant term, Freethought is dynamic, not static.”⁶³ Karl Pearson, one of the appointed lecturers at the

⁵⁹ J A Simpson and E S C Weiner eds, *Oxford English Dictionary: volume VI Follow-Haswed* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 168.

⁶⁰ “To our readers,” *The Freethinker*, 1, May 1881, 1.

⁶¹ Robertson, *A Short History of Freethought*, v. II, 1.

⁶² Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe: 1848-1914* (London, MacMillan: 2000), 166.

⁶³ Chapman Cohen, *Almost an Autobiography: The Confessions of a Freethinker* (London: The Pioneer Press, 1940), 7.

South Place Ethical Society, offered a more chastened view of freethought than *The Freethinker*:

“You will see at once what a positive, creative task the freethinker has before him. To reject Christianity, or to scoff at all concrete religion, by no means constitutes freethought, nay is too often sheer dogmatism. The true freethinker must not only be aware of the points wherein he has the truth, but must recognise the points where he is still ignorant. Like the true man of science he must never be ashamed to say: Here I am ignorant, this I cannot explain”.⁶⁴

Freethought then is quite a catch-all term, but while heavily identified with the anti-theist *Freethinker* and G W Foote, it had a much longer history, more akin to the process of the scientific method than anything specifically anti-religious. It can be best summarised as the want to express one’s own beliefs, with no submission to a higher authority than oneself, closely aligning it with rationalism. It also did not confine itself to any one topic, freethought was applicable to all areas of human life, which perhaps allowed it to be such a usefully malleable term and applied widely across the centuries. Thus, it was a natural moniker for secularists in the early struggle for secularism in the early nineteenth century but no less relevant to those who came after.

Freethinker, rationalist and infidel (and at various times ‘Blasphemer’), were terms that prioritised reason over supernatural deities or other authorities. In the nineteenth century all of these individualistic identities could still find a home in the secular movement, now further galvanised by persecution of their open irreligiosity. However, by interpreting non-belief as ever shifting dialogue with society, it becomes less important about the meaning behind individual definitions but rather the intent behind them. In all

⁶⁴ Robertson, *A Short History of Freethought v II*, 18.

cases, these individuals and groups argued for a society where they could talk and publish openly about their unbelief, their championing of science and reason, as well as their criticism of religion without persecution. Therefore the changes in terminology that are advanced in the early twentieth century should be seen as part of that existing continuum, but one that articulated a more inclusive, progressive and humanitarian worldview, rather than one that was strictly anti-religious or solely preoccupied with reason.

The Rationalist Press Association

The Rationalist Press Association was also a late addition to secular history and thought. Formed as the Propaganda Press Committee in 1890, its contribution to the movement seems rather undervalued. This is occasionally mentioned in passing, such as in *The Making of a Post-Christian Britain*:

“In the present century secularism has been led by the Rationalist Press Association, founded in 1899, and the Ethical Union of 1896. These have proved resourceful and well-directed pressure groups and the ‘Thinker’s Library’ series of the Association, which began publication in 1930, has provided militant secularism with a particularly effective outlet. As early as 1932 for example, the series had sold 300,000 of what an alarmed champion of orthodoxy, C.S. Lewis, called ‘a glut of cheap scientific books written on atheistic principles.’⁶⁵

As will be examined later, the *Thinker’s Library* while very popular, mixed heterodox authors such as Charles Bradlaugh and Joseph McCabe with more accepted writers such as Charles Darwin and Edward Gibbon.

Charles Watts’ circumvention of traditional publishing houses to

⁶⁵ Gilbert, *The Making of a Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularization of Modern Society* (London: Longman, 1980), 56.

produce rationalist and secularist literature was rather successful and by 1927 there were over 3,000 subscribers (up to 5,000 by 1947).⁶⁶ The Rationalist Press Association while sometimes mentioned has largely only had one major treatment and that itself was not an academic investigation but for its centenary – *The Blasphemy Depot: A Hundred Years of the Rationalist Press Association*. Other than that, this organisation, which did much to normalise alternative and freethought literature, only gets periodic mentions and a substantial investigation into its history and influence is still missing from the historiography.⁶⁷ There were also other friendly publishers such as George Allen & Unwin who were non-conformists and liberals that published authors such as John Ruskin, J A Hobson, Julian Huxley and Bertrand Russell. Again, while not formally part of the secularist network, George Allen & Unwin would be a main publisher for secularist thought in the twentieth century.

The other point to consider with all these groups was the potential reach of any lectures, which were a sustained part of the activities of various groups. The South Place Ethical Society established the long running Sunday Lectures and only concerted research will reveal how many other such talks were organised by other secular organisations (though there have been some examinations of the Halls of Science in that regard). J W Gott petitioned sympathisers to contribute the British Secular Union Lecturer's Fund to proselytise in Lancashire and Yorkshire in 1913.⁶⁸ He continued to

⁶⁶ Colin Campbell, *Towards a Sociology of Irreligion* (London: MacMillan, 1971), 88.

⁶⁷ Campbell, *Towards a Sociology of Irreligion*, 88. While informative, Colin Campbell in *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* allows only a few pages for its discussion.

⁶⁸ Hull History Centre, U DP/152/2, Letter from J W Gott to Mr Barker, esq, September 25/13.

canvass for funds during the First World War, and petitioned the same individual with “If the war has not hit you too hard we shall be glad if you can see your way to subscribe to our lecture fund. We are again making a big attempt to spread the gospel of free thought in the open-air.”⁶⁹

Membership as well may not be the most defining element of the movement (and therefore the decline of the National Secular Society numbers not as catastrophic to the movement as some suggest) – as in the traditional heyday of secularism, many more thousands went to see Bradlaugh or others speak than would become paid members of a society.⁷⁰ With this combination of lectures and publications, the possible reach of these groups was far wider than their pure organisation numbers would necessarily reveal. However, the ability to quantify such reach may be difficult.

The problem with so many strands of secularist activities is that it is often difficult to conceptualise the movement as a whole and the historical narrative about it has suffered for this reason. It is easy for the movement to be overshadowed as a whole by a charismatic leader such as Charles Bradlaugh. However, the longevity of the various secular groups post-Bradlaugh is a testament to the fact that they did not rely solely on his leadership. The fact that the ethical societies and the Rationalist Press Association were started and flourished after Bradlaugh has never been reconciled with the existing historiography (other than for some denying they are part of the secular movement at all).

When looking at broad trends, such as the history of secularism, it is

⁶⁹ Hull History Centre, DP/152/3, Letter from J W Gott to Mr Barker.

⁷⁰ MacLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe*, 165.

difficult to understand why some historians have focused on one group amongst a host of organisations. The equivalent, in religious terms, would be picking on Methodism (or another denomination) to represent all of Christianity in the nineteenth century. To move the argument forward, it must be recognised that advancing secularism was a goal for all these groups and just like their counterparts in the religious arena, they had different shades of opinions and unbelief which evolved over time. Additionally, a significant number of leaders of these different organisations were also members of the other related groups.

These will be highlighted throughout this thesis but what I argue is that all the various types of organised unbelief (or opposition to religion's domination in public life) were secular groups and they were all part of the movement that emerged in the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth century with relatively little interruption. Their contribution to the broader secularist movement has not been investigated or contextualised sufficiently within the broader historiography.

'Secularism', 'secular', and secularist

The terms 'secular', 'secularist' and 'secularism' have multiple definitions from lay preachers to an adherent of secularism.⁷¹ Secularism, therefore, is the most pertinent word to define. The definition that will be used in this thesis is that of George Jacob Holyoake, who was the first person to define and use the term: "The doctrine that morality should be based solely on

⁷¹ J A Simpson and E S C Weiner eds, *Oxford English Dictionary: volume XIV Rob - Sequyle*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 848.

regard to the well-being of mankind in the present life, to the exclusion of all considerations drawn from belief in God or in a future state.”⁷² However, what must be noted in this definition is that while it states the belief that morality should not be based on any theistic morals, it is not strictly anti-theist. There is no denigration of God or of religion; and this is where problems set in within the historiography. As Holyoake’s influence was somewhat eclipsed by Bradlaugh’s in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the brash and highly anti-theist image has dominated the literature that exists.

What is forgotten is the consensus building of Holyoake in the mid nineteenth century, although this may be due to Holyoake’s criticism from all sides when trying to engage in dialogue between the theists and atheists. As Joseph McCabe wrote in *Life and Letters of George Jacob Holyoake*:

“Atheists recalled phrases he had used in the *Oracle*, and frowned when they now heard of his taking tea with Brooke Herford or the Dean of Oriel. Chartists and Socialists looked back over their copies of his flamboyant *Cause of the People*, and felt that to share the hospitality of a Lady Walmsley or Lady Beaumont was apostasy.”⁷³

He went on to state: “Most of his ideals were repugnant to some or other body of his neighbours. One ideal – that of the outspoken criticism of religious beliefs – was repugnant to the vast majority in the country...”⁷⁴

However, even religious contemporaries recognised that it was not a solely atheist idea as Rev W N Molesworth wrote about Holyoake’s definition of secularism: “It does not necessarily clash with other religions; it does not

⁷² Simpson, and Weiner eds, *Oxford English Dictionary: volume XIV Rob – Sequyle*, 848.

⁷³ Joseph McCabe, *Life and Letters of George Jacob Holyoake* (London: Watts & Co., 1906), 199.

⁷⁴ McCabe, *Life and Letters of George Jacob Holyoake*, 200.

deny the existence of God or even the truth of Christianity, but it does not profess to believe in either the one or the other.”⁷⁵

While there is no doubt that many groups and individuals were anti-theist in their actions and rhetoric, equally there were those who worked with religious groups for a common aim. There were also religious groups (mainly non-conformists) who had every interest in campaigning for a secularist state so they could freely practice their religion. This is why it is important to define secularism as related to, but not exactly the same as, atheism or freethought.

This is highlighted in Michael Rectenwald’s work, who employs the same use of secular as not just an absence of religion but as “a part of the secular-religious binary.”⁷⁶ The secular involved contested space but also provided context to examine what was secular.⁷⁷ The power of the dominant religious groups meant equal persecution of those with no faith as those with a sufficiently different faith:

“Throughout much of the Victorian era Nonconformists experienced the Church of England as a genuinely repressive institution in areas such as free expression, taxation, education and burial privileges. The Nonconformist drive for political and civic equality constituted an effort to achieve fundamental religious liberty and equality through secular means which included attempts to remove the direct influence of the state Church from various areas of daily social life.”⁷⁸

An interest in a secular state was of the greatest interest to non-conformists, just as it was to those who were irreligious, as either way they were at the mercy of the state to legislate on their freedoms and privileges and restrict them based on a common religious doctrine. Holyoake was equally

⁷⁵ McCabe, *Life and Letters of George Jacob Holyoake*, 210.

⁷⁶ Rectenwald, *Nineteenth-Century British Secularism*, 5.

⁷⁷ Rectenwald, *Nineteenth-Century British Secularism*, 5.

⁷⁸ Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority*, 31.

interested in working with those people who were potential victims of the state repression based on their non-conformity with the state. It may yet turn out that the anti-theism of Bradlaugh will be seen as more of the exception rather than the rule when it comes to the secular movement.

The secularisation thesis focusses on the loss of religious belief and practice. As mentioned with the criticisms of the secularisation thesis above, it would seem that the activities of secularist activists and the secular movement are missing from that debate. While it may not be a key part of the what drove secularisation in society, the history of secularism could highlight those opportunities where secularists and their campaigns created the permission structure to push against religious norms. For example, as will be seen in chapter 5, secularists had to argue against religious objections to birth control through national commissions as well as parliament. This changed the image of contraception from an activity that could get a campaigner charged with obscenity in the nineteenth century, to a service that local health services could provide to their residents by the early twentieth century.

The term 'secular' can have multiple meanings, depending on type of study and place in time. The main study of the British secular movement (after Bradlaugh) has been Budd's broad sociological examination of the period; this study was not particularly rigorous in articulating a consistent definition for the movement. The use of the term 'secular' within secularist organisations was used inconsistently to begin with inside the movement. The term would take on a particular meaning, which depended on the focus of secular agitation at the time, alongside other terms like freethinker or

rationalist. Though on the surface all these terms seem broadly different, because of their indiscriminate use across the history of the movement, they can all be seen as part of a wider secular framework.

One major obstacle in the analysis of secularisation and the secular movement is leaving out those groups and organisations that are religious in practice but secular in activism within the political and legal sphere. These groups are also interested in a secular society as it would allow them to practice their religion in greater peace than in a sectarian country with an established religion supported by government. However, there is some confusion within the literature, which possibly stems from the influence of religion when it comes to the definition:

“For them, by and large, Secularism intends not the freedom of religion which it claims, but freedom *from* religion; that is, they say, “freedom from God,” and how can anybody be from God as they imagine God? In sum, Secularism is displayed as religion’s all-time enemy, ever to be contained and conquered”.⁷⁹

Secular, secularist and secularism do not equate with atheist and atheism; rather, they are a way to view the civil and legal spheres and the rights of groups and individuals. While there is considerable crossover between secularism and non-religion, it is not the complete story. The overtly atheist agitation of Bradlaugh, or anti-clerical sentiments in general that permeate the movement, again could be clouding the issue. Additionally, the history has been narrowly focused on the prosecutions for blasphemy of many secularist agitators, which adds an anti-Biblical and atheist emphasis to the history. The religious versus atheist angle is also prevalent as the main

⁷⁹ Horace M. Kallen, “Secularism as the Common Religion of a Free Society,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 4 (1965): 145.

organisation bringing court cases against the irreligious was the Society to Enforce His Majesty's Proclamation for the Suppression of Vice, rather than the Crown.⁸⁰ However, blasphemy charges can also be viewed through a lens of social control. As Toohey points out, "prosecutions were selective - not every instance was published....the crown used the crime, as it did sedition, as part of its arsenal against radicals and subversives, particularly in the working and artisan classes."⁸¹

As mentioned, what becomes apparent when investigating the history of the UK secular movement is the inconsistency of the language used to describe secularist activities. When the movement moved on from Chartism and Owenism, a profusion of identities emerged that were inherently secular in nature. However, these are often looked at as individual strands that are uniquely separate, rather than the same themes within a dynamic and ever shifting movement with similar goals, from the reduction of interference and control of an official church to the more broad goal of freedom of thought and belief.

The problem that becomes apparent when clear definitions for the myriad of terms are not set out is that it makes for some odd use of language in the historiography. This is most notable in *Varieties of Unbelief* where Budd prefers the word 'humanism' as the catch-all term for secularist agitation - though humanism was not the most appropriate word until the middle of the twentieth century. There was no national humanist organisation until the creation of the British Humanist Association in 1967 –

⁸⁰ Timothy J Toohey, "Blasphemy in Nineteenth-Century England: the Pooley Case and Its Background," *Victorian Studies* 30 (1987): 319.

⁸¹ Toohey, "Blasphemy in Nineteenth-Century England: the Pooley Case and Its Background," 318.

the secular landscape was still dominated by rationalist, secularist and ethical groups. Humanism was a philosophical concept but not an organising principle until the 1950s.⁸² The movement itself was divided on the meaning of humanism as well, as seen with the World Union of Freethinkers conference in 1946 which tackled “The Challenges of Humanism”. One speaker A. E. Heath was even of the opinion that “a philosophy of rationalist humanism” still had to be written.⁸³ From the outset of Budd’s work then, there is already a confusion in terms. However, it is at the heart of the problem with Budd’s work, as she employs an ahistorical term to include some secularists groups and exclude others from her analysis. For example, while Budd includes the ethical societies in her discussion, they are not considered part of the secular movement itself. Instead of classifying them as another way of identifying with a secularist worldview, she describes the ethical societies as an organisation that would “rob the secular movement of members, particularly the more middle-class, educated and less hostile to religion.”⁸⁴

There is also the added issue of the ‘history’ of secularism being under the domain of other disciplines:

“Historians, however, have in the past very largely conceded the study of secularisation to sociologists and theologians, and despite the evident historical competence which many of these scholars have brought to their work, the historical dimension of the subject remains one of the last explored.”⁸⁵

Budd’s work is a sociological look at the secular movement and many of the

⁸² Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, 92.

⁸³A E Heath, “Groundwork for a Humanist Philosophy,” *The Challenge of Humanism: Report of a Public Conference in London*, World Union of Freethinkers, April 30th – May 5th, 1946.

⁸⁴ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 72.

⁸⁵ A Gilbert, *The Making of a Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularization of Modern Society* (London: Longman, 1980), xiii.

books on secularisation are also looked at from this perspective. What is also apparent is the vast interest in secularisation from a religious perspective. The historical dimension, even though it plays such a significant role in the development of nineteenth and twentieth century society, has been rather neglected by professional historians. It has been the relative domain of a handful of scholars for the past forty years. However, in the twentieth century the phenomenon of a secular way of life has come to dominate the social, legal and political landscape. The study of secularism should be of more interest to all social historians to explain the shift from a society dominated by religious belief to one which is inherently non-religious. At the core of this study should be those campaigners who were at the forefront for arguing for a more secular society. Even with a gradual societal shift towards the more non-religious, the language and the secular space could be defined by these groups, being the ones with the greatest interest in the progress of a secularist worldview; as well as being the groups that had actively thought about secularist goals in the previous century.

Ethicism and the ethical movement

Ethicism and the ethical movement mostly relate to the latter part of the nineteenth century when the ethical societies were formed. The ethical movement and its organisation was formed at the end of the nineteenth century, much later than much of the nineteenth century secular agitation. The National Secular Society and other secularist organisations had been the mainstay of radicals, republicans and secularists from the 1860s onward but then ethical societies became widespread after 1880. The

ethical societies had broader interests than that of anti-theism and atheism. Schwartz has a similar stance, stating that the societies “worked closely with the Labour churches and Positivist societies, tapping into a less aggressive, less overtly anti-Christian freethinking identity.”¹⁰⁷ These organisations were focused on the improvement of society and also social and welfare issues. They were to form the basis of the humanist movement in the twentieth century and broadly were the groups that formed the British Humanist Association in 1967. However, there are notable exceptions such as the South Place Ethical Society (in 2012 the society changed its name to the Conway Hall Ethical Society) who have remained independent to this day.

The South Place Ethical Society began as the South Place Ethical Chapel but had evolved into a secular organisation by the 1880s. It, unlike some of the other secular organisations, was not anti-theist. Rather as their Object once stated: “The Object of the Society is the cultivation of a rational religious sentiment, the study of ethical principles, and the promotion of human welfare, in harmony with advancing knowledge.”¹⁰⁸ The society had particular secular aims, for while it would learn from religious moral instruction, it would only take what was useful. In the first issue of the South Place Magazine, the editor wrote:

“What we have to do as the inheritors of the natural religion taught by the sages of old, when faced with the superstitious faiths and dogmas of supernatural theology, is not to assail them by ridicule or antagonism, but to sympathetically study them, weigh them and measure them, and the parasitic growth of error will fall away, leaving behind for our reward the true spiritual experiences accumulated by thoughtful religious men and women through the ages.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism*, 10.

¹⁰⁸ *South Place Monthly Record*, 1920, 1.

¹⁰⁹ *South Place Magazine*, May 1895, 18.

This is in contrast to the strictly anti-theist sentiment of Bradlaugh and magazines like *The Freethinker*. Nevertheless, it had not completely removed the superior tone, as the reference to ‘parasitic’ would have no doubt raised the rancour of the devoutly religious.

However, it would be a mistake to equate ethicists with deists or spiritualists in any way. Even though they started life as the South Place Ethical Chapel, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Sunday morning ‘services’ had turned into ethical lectures and the ‘minister had become an ‘appointed lecturer’. Ethicists believed that while an individual, in order to achieve a moral life, did not have to have “neither acceptance nor rejection of belief in any deity, personal or impersonal, or a life after death”, that belief would nonetheless have to be “humanistic and naturalistic”¹¹⁰. The scientific method was promoted as a tool a measure of what was moral and ethical.¹¹¹

J M Robertson also attempted to disambiguate the meaning: “Nothing, however, is more natural than that men who have thought themselves out of a supernaturalist creed should wish to conserve the name which has connoted not merely their cosmic ideas but their ethical leanings and aspirations.”¹¹² He directly connected this to the history of South Place:

“Thus when, half a century ago, the congregation of South Place, consisting of men who had shed the old faith but retained the old sense of religion as the sum of one’s serious feelings about life, declared themselves organized for the cultivation, first of a ‘rational religious sentiment’, they were perfectly straightforward and honestly reasonable.”¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Horace James Bridges, *The Ethical Movement: Its Principles and Aims* (London: Union of Ethical Societies: 1911), 3

¹¹¹ Bridges, *The Ethical Movement: Its Principles and Aims*, 2.

¹¹² J M Robertson, *Spoken Essays* (London: Watts & Co., 1925), 193.

¹¹³ Robertson, *Spoken Essays*, 193.

The ethical movement was the precursor of the British Humanist Association (now Humanists UK). The conflation of the ethical societies with modern humanism, however, has led to a confusion of the place of the ethical movement within the overall secular movement. Or in the case of Budd, the outright rejection of ethicism and rationalism being part of the secular movement: “The secular movement is part of the general philosophy of humanism, but its characteristic cluster of emphases can be distinguished from the cultural traditions of rationalism and ethicism.”¹¹⁴ This position fits into the decline story quite well – as otherwise that narrative would have to contend with the growth of ethical societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While not having the wider national appeal that the National Secular Society could claim, there were still 74 ethical societies set up between 1886 and 1927.¹¹⁵ When looking at the longer history of different secularist groups beyond the nineteenth century, Budd and others have downplayed the continued development of organisations other than the National Secular Society. The ethical societies evolved into a different organisation and had a different campaigning approach than the National Secular Society. So the exclusion of the ethical societies from the history of secularism in *Varieties of Unbelief* or other works does not make sense when compared with the continued development and history of ethicism, rationalism and humanism itself. The division is artificial if unbelief and all the terms used to describe it evolved over time, reflecting the outside pressures from society and internal developments within the movement. It also forces secularist activism into something that would make sense for the National

¹¹⁴ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 81.

¹¹⁵ Campbell, *Towards a Sociology of Irreligion*, 83.

Secular Society, but not the changes within the wider history of secularism or humanism.

Humanism builds on the foundations provided by the nineteenth century ethical societies. It also has the deeper association of the humanism of the fifteenth century: for example, the increasing focus on humankind rather than religion, or the narrow scholasticism of the medieval period, although, clearly the early form of humanism was still closely intertwined with religious belief. Frederick James Gould reflected on the more modern version of humanism in his autobiography, *Life Story of a Humanist* in 1921.¹¹⁶ However, the most common usage came into being with the creation of the British Humanist Association in 1967. Even though there was an active interest in humanist thought, there was no formal body representing humanism to that point. Humanist philosophy, as Harold Blackham stated, “usually assumes that everything would be all right if only everyone were blessedly free from superstitious illusions about this world and the next.”¹¹⁷ Or, less flippantly, the ability for anyone to live a moral and ethical life without religion.

Modern humanism is defined along the same historical secularist lines, such as a reliance on reason and the scientific method and a rejection of dogma.¹¹⁸ However, the definition also focusses on dignity, human rights, environmentalism, happiness and personal fulfillment – reflecting wider cultural changes in the latter half of the twentieth century.¹¹⁹ By

¹¹⁶ Frederick James Gould, *Life Story of a Humanist* (London, 1923), 92.

¹¹⁷ Harold Blackham, *The Humanist Himself* (London: The Ethical Union, 1961), 1.

¹¹⁸ Humanists International. *Amsterdam Declaration*, <https://humanists.international/what-is-humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>, accessed 25 May 2019.

¹¹⁹ *Amsterdam Declaration*, <https://humanists.international/what-is-humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>, accessed 25 May 2019.

understanding this continued evolution of secularist thought, greater continuity and wider activities by secularists could replace the narrow, almost doctrinal differences in definitions and the perception of decline in the secularist movement in the twentieth century.

The problem with *Varieties of Unbelief*

The main work on the secularist organisations as a whole is Susan Budd's *Varieties of Unbelief*. This analysis is often referenced by those who investigate post-Bradlaugh secularist activities and organisations. It therefore aligns the history with several key presumptions, which when scrutinised against the campaigns and activities of twentieth century secularists, are not justified. As she states:

“What I have tried to do in this account of the movements which have attempted to destroy Christianity or to replace it by reason or by religions of socialism or ethics, is not to write their history nor locate them in terms of the sociological fields of enquiry to which they are tangentially related. Rather I have looked at their history in terms of several repeated patterns of events which have seemed to me to be significant in explaining the paradox that the ideas which these movements represent are for the most part very dominant in our society, yet the organisations themselves are small and lacking in social influence.”¹²⁶

There are several elements to unpick in this small paragraph: first the allegation that secular organisations wanted to destroy religion. It is obvious that many of the groups had anti-religious views but many wanted a secular civil space but were not out to destroy belief, as shown by the aims of the South Place Ethical Society. Second, her study of the movement is not to examine the history as such but to explain an aspect of sociology. Third, she

¹²⁶ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 2.

dismisses right away anything that is not strictly out to destroy religion, thus disregarding the wider elements of peace activism, social justice and ethical themes that permeate much of secularist history post-Bradlaugh. In this way, the organisations and movement are bound to fail in her analysis as they have not reflected the changes that permeated the secular movement after this initial republican and anti-theistic phase as characterised by Bradlaugh's leadership.

What is also problematic with Budd's arguments is that the societies may have been smaller but some members were no less influential on a larger scale. The scope of L T Hobhouse, J.A Hobson and Henry Snell's political and journalistic careers are interesting not only because of their influence but with whom they came into contact. Setting up the *Progressive Review*, Hobson and Robertson were associated with some of the most influential people involved in liberalism including future Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. Another member, Sophia Dobson Collet, was acquainted with and supported the newspaper magnate W T Stead.¹²⁷ When it comes to peace activism and women's suffrage, the long career of Henry Noel Brailsford and his connections also undermine Budd's assertion that secularists were not influential.

Budd also uses the word 'humanists' collectively to mean all secularists despite that "humanists themselves usually reserve the term for the British Humanist Association and its members."¹²⁸ This seems rather problematic as most of the organisations from the 1880s on do not refer to themselves as humanist (with some quite hostile to the term). Budd focuses

¹²⁷ Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism*, 58.

¹²⁸ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 8.

mainly on anti-religious secularists, rather than those religious groups that would agitate for secularisation or the more social justice oriented activities of some of the more non-religious secularists. She then faults non-religious secularists for underestimating “its role both as a vehicle of revolt and of social reformism”.¹²⁹ While Budd was concerned with unbelief, it is notable that she recognises the influence of religion on social progression yet equates non-belief with specific anti-theism rather than as partners in the gradual secularisation of society. I think this is one of the major stumbling blocks in the history of secularism given the prevalence of Budd being cited in the literature.

The other problem with Budd is her narrow view of the interests of secularists, that of “a secular state, neo-Malthusianism and republicanism”.¹³⁰ While this may have been the general motto for the *National Reformer*, that was just one publication. As will be seen in the investigation of actual groups and their production of secular literature, the interests were far wider than Budd gives them credit for, which may be why she saw their accomplishments in wider society as rather muted. For example, *The Ethical World*, which was edited by Stanton Coit referenced in the second issue what their aims were:

“Our programme? It was prefigured throughout the whole of our first number. Each article struck the keynote of some of our melodies. On “The Industrial War” began our chant of social justice; on “The Decline of Assassination” of Liberty; on “Conformity” Non-compromise; that “On a Passage in Newman’s Writings” our song of Science; on “Hamlet,” of character; on “Watson’s Poems,” of Art; on “Self-Control,” of Education.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 6.

¹³⁰ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 11.

¹³¹ *The Ethical World*, January 8, 1898, 697.

This again is just one publication out of many possible publications to investigate. The attention paid to the *National Reformer* is much greater than that of any of the other long running (and sometimes longer running) periodicals with the same secularist interests. The bias towards all that is Bradlaugh extends towards the organisations and publications he was involved within the existing historiography.

There are contradictions when it comes to the topic of Neo-Malthusianism that Budd acknowledges as well. For example, she admits that even Bradlaugh's attempts at a Malthusian League fell through.¹³² It is this narrowness of focus to the exclusion of the wider movement that is my most significant critique of Budd. The concerns around contraception and marriage were complex in the nineteenth century – elements of blasphemy, obscenity, a general need for contraceptive advice, Victorian attitudes towards marriage, and prostitution. To tie that all up with Bradlaugh's more puritan views does a disservice to those engaged in wider social issues. Even Budd herself acknowledges the many issues surrounding this as demonstrated by the Knowlton Pamphlet.¹³³ Budd's argument was heavily predicated on the actions and interests of Bradlaugh, but the evidence shows secular activism in this area had greater depth and campaigns continued long after Bradlaugh.

I think the most significant problem with Budd's account of the early movement is precisely the conflation of all secularism with the whims and

¹³² Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 55. However, it would not fail as an idea altogether, later forming as a reaction to the obscenity trial of Bradlaugh and Besant. The Malthusian League would remain a secularist organisation and would argue for the wide adoption of birth control, discussed in Chapter 5.

¹³³ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 58.

campaigns of Charles Bradlaugh. In this context, any movement post-Bradlaugh would inevitably show signs of decline, as his interests were superseded by the secularists who campaigned after him. The focus on Bradlaugh's activities also tends to downplay any opposition - even though he was almost forced out of his presidency of the National Secular Society. There are also tensions with other prominent Secularists like Harriet Law who "refused to become a member of the National Secular Society, despite being elected to (and turning down) the position of Vice President at a number of annual conferences."¹³⁴ Within the pages of secular journals, there is enough criticism of Bradlaugh in favour of Holyoake as well.

Conflict within the movement

1877 saw the formation of the British Secular Union after a particularly difficult National Secular Society conference, where even the subject of having a president was debated.¹³⁵ Holyoake supported the move for an independent organisation (from Bradlaugh), despite accepting the renomination for vice-president of the National Secular Society.¹³⁶ Kate Watts, wife of Charles Watts, also voiced opposition to Bradlaugh and Besant's publication of the Knowlton Pamphlet.¹³⁷ They were joined by G W Foote, Harriet Law and Josiah Grimson (a leader in the Leicester Secular Society).¹³⁸ The organisation also had its own journal, the *Secular Review*.

¹³⁴ Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism*, 52.

¹³⁵ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 18. Bradlaugh only managed to hold onto his position as president in a closed door session.

¹³⁶ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 18.

¹³⁷ Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism*, 55.

¹³⁸ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 18.

The British Secular Union's founders were unable to deal with the domineering nature of Bradlaugh within the National Secular Society, so established a new organisation that was specifically "independent of Bradlaugh."¹³⁹ Understanding where the lines were drawn among secularists is another area where more investigation could reveal different campaigning approaches within the movement (and potentially where Bradlaugh was not an effective leader).

Edward Royle in *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular freethought in Britain, 1866-1915* dedicates a section to its 'decline and fall.' Royle recounts Bradlaugh's belief, which interpreted decline as the fall in numbers of the National Secular Society but also factors like new recreational activities and somewhat tellingly quotes Bradlaugh's opinion of "the changed times."¹⁴⁰ This again shares the same flaw as Budd's argument. Rather than acknowledging that the movement would take a different direction after Bradlaugh's death, it only sees the absence of his interests. For example, it was already widely acknowledged that some secularists were also interested in socialism, which Bradlaugh explicitly rejected.¹⁴¹ However, with his absence, the opposition to socialist ideas within the movement dissipated.

Socialism was not a topic that ethicists shied away from – which is why the decline of 'secularism' should not be equated with the decline of the National Secular Society numbers. It is not hard to find instances of discussions of socialism if you venture outside the *National Reformer*. *South*

¹³⁹ Schwartz, 52.

¹⁴⁰ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 37.

¹⁴¹ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 37.

Place Magazine in January 1901 had such an opportunity, as captured by an article by Clarence H Seyler entitled “Socialism versus Malthusianism”.

There had been a discussion in the society in November 1900 about how overpopulation was not the cause of poverty but rather “bad distribution”.¹⁴²

It was no secret that two of Bradlaugh’s closest allies, Annie Besant and Edward Aveling, were convinced by the merits of socialism (though in Besant’s case her interest in secularism waned after becoming a Theosophist). However, it is hard to believe that they had stopped being secularists. Individuals can have a profusion of groups that they belong to and so the participation in both these areas is possible by any one individual. Another possible avenue of investigation is to examine where secularism and socialism overlapped, with secularists potentially providing some context to a wider movement.

Other issues within the historiography

There is a lack of interest in twentieth century secularist history by historians, and as a result, the main publications were commissioned by secularist organisations. However, often the scholarship of these works has much to be desired. Often, the authors do not make any attempt to draw wider conclusions about the period and the place of secularism within social history. Most often, they are anniversaries that prompt essays or monographs – little more than a timeline of events. This is the case with *100 Years of Freethought*, which was put together because of the centenary of

¹⁴² “Socialism vs Malthusianism,” *South Place Ethical Society Magazine*, January 1901, 55.

the National Secular Society.¹⁴⁶ The author clearly defines the purpose of the book: “This is a social document. It is not a history; the subject is too vast, my research and time too limited.”¹⁴⁷ Larger issues were either ignored or lost because of time constraints or because of a lack of interest to place these groups’ history in proper historical context.

Much of the same can be said again for another anniversary tome, *The Blasphemy Depot*, which celebrates the centenary anniversary of the Rationalist Press Association. The author does make the point that “the RPA has the added disadvantage of beginning its story when most studies of the nineteenth century freethought are coming to an end”.¹⁴⁸ While the information gathered in the book is comprehensive, there is no room for scope outside the immediate chronological view of the Rationalist Press Association – it is singular in recounting the last one hundred years of the Rationalist Press Association’s history but has no interest in showing its place within the wider social history narrative.

These books are of a similar pattern from what had come before from the beginning of the modern secular movement. It can be seen in one of the early twentieth century works, *Pioneers of Johnson’s court*, which is a page by page chronology of influential people and events within the ethical movement. For example, the author Frederick J Gould wrote: “The Agnostic Annual for 1897 led off with an article on “From Rome to Rationalism; or, Why I left the Church” by Joseph McCabe (lately Father Anthony, F.S.O.), and thus marked the first stage of a strenuous anti-theological pilgrimage in

¹⁴⁶ Tribe, *100 Years of Freethought*, 7.

¹⁴⁷ Tribe, *100 Years of Freethought*, 8.

¹⁴⁸ Cooke, *The Blasphemy Depot*, 5.

many lands over many seas.”¹⁴⁹ But again, Gould had no interest in the wider social place of the secular movement (despite claims of being an historian). However, a book like this highlights the lack of attention paid to many of the actual members of organised secularism. Most of the books published on prominent members are contemporaneous with their subjects and were accounts of great works and deeds, rather than relation with the wider social history. There is also a great deal of primary source material which is rarely acknowledged in the existing historiography as many of the individuals involved in these organisations wrote their own autobiographies like Frederick James Gould, Joseph McCabe and Chapman Cohen. However, there is less attention paid to these individuals and their influence on the secular organisations they were involved in or within greater society.

One glimpse at the possible of interactions between the traditional secular milieu and wider social world is found in the article “‘Bibliolatry’ and ‘Bible-Smashing’: G W Foote, George Meredith, and the Heretic Trope of the Book.” The friendship and offer of help by Meredith to Foote is an interesting crossover between militant secularist and more mainstream (though literary) society.¹⁵⁰ When Meredith was older and considered the “Sage of Box Hill” he would put his name “at [the] disposal” of Foote as Editor of *The Freethinker*.¹⁵¹ Marsh points out that this “was an act of some bravery, an offer more generous even than his cash contributions and the free copies of his books he sent.”¹⁵² This will be more widely examined in chapter four. It

¹⁴⁹ Gould, *Pioneers of Johnson’s Court*, 6.

¹⁵⁰ Joss Lutz Marsh, “‘Bibliolatry’ and ‘Bible-Smashing’”: G. W. Foote, George Meredith, and the Heretic Trope of the Book,” *Victorian Studies* 34 (1991): 325.

¹⁵¹ Marsh, “‘Bibliolatry’ and ‘Bible-Smashing’”, 325.

¹⁵² Marsh, “‘Bibliolatry’ and ‘Bible-Smashing’”, 325.

could be discovered that there was far more cross-fertilisation between secularists and more popular culture once more individuals from the movement are investigated.

An unfinished historiography

The history of the secular movement has not been completely written. There are those that recognise this fact like David Nash, Laura Schwartz and Frank Turner but aligned against this idea is the established historiography of Edward Royle and Susan Budd. However, as seen above, this history is riddled with contradictions, undermined by arbitrary definitions of the major terms of the movement, and hampered by a lack of inclusion of clear secularist groups like the ethical societies and the Rationalist Press Association. What is left to fill in the gaps are anniversary tomes from the ethical societies and the Rationalist Press Association. The wider social history has also been left unexamined, with only the chronological events of the secularist organisations themselves left to fill in the gaps, which often lack the larger contextualisation of that history. The history of the secular movement in the late nineteenth and twentieth century remains unexplored, it has not had a sophisticated examination of the main actors and organisations, the periodicals that were written or the campaigns that were launched during that period. From outside the movement, there are individuals actively engaged with the most important social movements of the time, notably liberalism, peace activism and women's suffrage – partly driven by their secularist worldview.

Even if the history of the secularist movement, as defined by the

nineteenth century organisations and individuals that started it, went into decline at the turn of the twentieth century, that still needs an explanation. How did the various secularist organisations, supported by the Rationalist Press Association, have a major publishing arm that produced hundreds of books and articles on topics focussing on rationalism, atheism, secularism, peace, social work, war and everything in between continue in a declining secular movement? At the very least, the contradictions and lack of rigorous definitions of what the movement contains need to be addressed. There is no doubt that the secularisation of society occurred throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries – but it is unfortunate that those groups that most defined the term at the start of this trend have been left out of the history of the development of this process.

Chapter 2: Political influence: policy making and political theory

Charles Bradlaugh's success and the very dramatic battle with Parliament over his right to represent Northampton with multiple by-elections is something easily mythologised. The success of pushing through the Oaths Act – an important piece of legislation for non-believers and religious nonconformists alike – made the process easier for the secularists who would participate in politics after 1890. No matter how important this legislation was for the secularist movement, it was not the only success the movement would have in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bradlaugh's early political struggle to take his seat in Parliament even overshadows some of his other work in parliament, for example his very serious approach to being the 'MP for India'.¹ Through the historiography of the academic literature and from the popular and hagiographical writings of secularist societies, he has too often become the benchmark for secularist agitation.

However, the problem therein lies: how do you compare those who came after? How do you define a successful secularist campaigner in the twentieth century? Who, if there are no comparisons with the actions of Bradlaugh, can be considered as engaging with political activism to the same degree as Bradlaugh? Perhaps the better question is how would they negotiate and represent the interests of secularists if they were also inside the political parties in power, rather than an outsider and independent

¹ Nash, "Charles Bradlaugh, India and the Many Chameleon Destinations of Republicanism," 113.

radical?

The standard set in the historiography for successful secularist agitation reflects the campaigning styles of the nineteenth century. The anti-clerical and anti-biblical rhetoric, clashes and court cases over blasphemy, as well as lecture tours and establishing secularist journals, were employed by different secularists at different times. However, this same measure cannot be used for those who changed campaign tactics, or who advocated a more inclusive secularist worldview, rather than strict atheist positions. What other measures can be used to assess a successful secularist campaigner? For example, could participation and cooperation in political life, rather than outsider agitation, be a better marker of success in the twentieth century? For example, the National Secular Society changed its tactics and organisational structure to become a pressure group, potentially reflecting wider shifts in twentieth century political engagement with civil society. With more investigation, the links between the history of secularism and broader secularisation could be found. For example, were secularists in the twentieth century picking up upon wider secularisation themes and using them to inform their campaigns or did secularists help shape the debates emerging at the time?

Bradlaugh's election to Parliament was a watershed moment. But it seems to diminish his impact if all his struggles meant that those after had to fight the same battles. Rather his tenure in Parliament should be seen as a stepping-stone towards greater accomplishments for those of non-religious or differing religious backgrounds that came after him. Additionally, it puts the entire weight of the secular movement upon Bradlaugh's shoulders (and the

organisations and publications he was associated with); and this seems to be the direction that Budd took in *The Varieties of Unbelief*. Another important element to examine is the effectiveness of the styles of campaign after 1880. There are going to be obvious differences in approach when the types of battles that needed winning in Bradlaugh's time were now won. What is emphasised in the decline literature is that there were no more mass rallies; but why would there be? It would be very strange if secularists carried on in the same campaign mode when those campaigns had achieved what they set out to do. There has not been an exploration of secularist agitation into wider social and political movements of the twentieth century, such as internationalist ideas and peace or women's rights. These were new or reinvigorated areas of activism brought about by the changes in domestic and international politics.

However, though Bradlaugh was the dominant voice of secularists, there were others before and after him that took different approaches. Holyoake, as mentioned, had a broader approach to secularism, which encompassed those who were religious but still believed that a secular state would afford them the greatest freedoms. Furthermore, the British Secular Union disagreed with Bradlaugh's aggressive approach and were distinctly separate in their activism, with even their own publication, *The Secular Review*. The appeal of Bradlaugh was also very metropolitan, whereas the British Secular Union had wider regional appeal (including the Leicester Secular Society with the oldest secular hall in the country).² Also, even though the secularist movement had a wide political spectrum, often only

² Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom*, 38.

Bradlaugh's criticism of socialism has been highlighted. Perhaps secularist history has been waylaid by that emphasis, leaving socialist history to include left-leaning secularists in that historiography.

So what happened next for atheists or secularists in Parliament after Bradlaugh? Was life easier for those who came after and what did they do after they were elected? Were they any less influential when it came to politics and the advancement of a secular worldview? Where did they draw their secularist worldview from? What issues did this new generation of secularists get involved in? I will argue that they had wider successes outside the narrow band of secularist organisations. For example, with blasphemy prosecutions continuing to decline (though secularists would still occasionally be prosecuted), campaigning efforts could shift to the financial security of secularist organisations as well as reducing religious influence in politics and public life.

What is often missing from the history of Bradlaugh, or at least briefly glossed over, was his intransigent nature. He was a powerful orator who persuaded secularist and republican audiences of his message. Conversely, his absolute conviction and power struggle within the secularist movement, and beyond, could equally put him in opposition with those who could have been allies. The history of the secularist movement has often been defined by its abrasive nature and crude opposition to authority, but when the nature of secularist activism changes, the historiography defaults to seeing a decline. However, if secularists were more accepted, precisely because of the progress made by nineteenth century secularists in the courts and Parliament, their approaches to campaigns and causes would of course be

dramatically different.

Even those who were around in Bradlaugh's glory days were victims of his image, such as the editor of *The Freethinker*, G W Foote. Arguably, Foote had an equally powerful impact upon the law as Bradlaugh, although this was through his high court challenge to allow individuals to leave legacies to specifically atheist or secularist organisations, without them being overturned on the grounds that they were "constituted for illegal purposes, namely the subversion of Christianity."³ It was a very long struggle, with the decision challenged all the way to the House of Lords in 1917, two years after Foote's death. The ultimate judgment was a major secularist victory with Judge Sumner stating: "But Christianity is not part of the law of England in the sense that a denial of the truth of Christianity constitutes a legal offence. That would be giving to the common law Courts a wider jurisdiction than even the Ecclesiastical Courts professed to exercise."⁴ Cooke in the history of the Rationalist Press Association admits that the implications of this ruling have not been "explored as thoroughly as they might."⁵ Many secularist organisations benefited from this ruling, including the South Place Ethical Society who would receive legacies to build their new hall in 1929. The case will be examined in detail later in this chapter.

Foote, I argue, was not the only person to have successfully challenged issues that Bradlaugh or other secularists in the nineteenth century were unable to overcome. Twentieth century secularists had perhaps greater impact than Bradlaugh. No doubt they all relied on the progress made

³ Cooke, *The Blasphemy Depot*, 27.

⁴ Humanist Reference Library and Archives, 406 HL/PO/JO/10/10/599, *Bowman and others, appellants; and Secular Society Limited, Respondents*.

⁵ Cooke, *The Blasphemy Depot*, 27.

in the nineteenth century by Bradlaugh (and others) to have the validity of their non-belief (or differing belief) recognised by the state. However, there was continued progress towards secular aims and contributions that were made beyond him. The interests of secularists after Bradlaugh expanded beyond the scope of secular societies, and their secular ideals led them to have a more significant impact on society as a whole. For example, both Hobson and Brailsford were influential voices in the Labour Party, and their ideas directly informed social and economic policies at the time.

There are four individuals that can be marked out as having an important impact on the political landscape in the UK at the turn of the twentieth century: John Atkinson Hobson, Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse, Baron Henry Snell and John Mackinnon Robertson. All four of these individuals held an explicit secular worldview (either expressed in their writing or as members of secular organisations) and also helped to shape their relevant political parties' policies in significant ways. Within their positions in the Liberal and Labour parties, and the influence they had on policy, they were able to present and defend secularist ideas. Their policies, actions and motivations as political agents can be seen as extensions of their philosophical grounding in rationalism and secularism. The Labour Party had radical elements within a fairly divided party in the beginning of the twentieth century which opened up space for secularist ideas.⁶ The Liberal Party, as will be shown, was also greatly influenced by secularists, including the formulation of some of their core ideology. There are additional political agitators who worked in other areas such as peace, internationalism and

⁶ Paul Bridgen, *The Labour Party and the Politics of War and Peace, 1900-1924* (Suffolk: The Royal Historical Society Press, 2009), 3.

suffrage that will be examined in later chapters such as Henry Noel Brailsford and Hypatia Bradlaugh-Bonner.

This chapter is organised into four main sections. First, there is an examination of the secularist impact by the National Secular Society post-Bradlaugh. This is to demonstrate that there were still important battles to be won by secularist organisations after Bradlaugh. However, it will then focus on those individuals largely outside the normal secularist historiography. To demonstrate that secularist ideals were important to individual motivations, each secularist will be examined in turn to highlight his contributions. Second, their respective positions in their spheres of influence will be examined, for example their political writing, party activism and tenures as Members of Parliament. Another aspect of politics, internationalism, will be examined in the next chapter. While closely linked to politics, and certainly political, its relationship to the peace movement is an important consideration that needs to be examined separately. Internationalism, which is not always recognised as a secular cause *per se*, is important to the secularist enterprise.

What is difficult when investigating secularists is that they are often not defined as such within their historiographies. For example, they will be readily identified as socialists, sociologists or journalists, but a large part of their (secular) motivations are downplayed or absent altogether. The references to being irreligious are often covered by a casual sentence about no longer attending chapel as a young student. However, when their writing or associations are investigated, their secularist credentials are easily identified. They are either associated with individuals and organisations that are traditionally seen as secularist (for example the South Place Ethical Society

or the Rationalist Press Association) or their arguments are inherently secularist (such as advocacy of freedom of thought or belief). The secularists in this chapter had benefitted from the progress made in the nineteenth century. However, they have also taken a longer view and gradualist approach to their activism, comparative to the Webbs and Fabian Society. Rather than a decline in the secularist movement, these secularists can demonstrate what a different secularist approach can accomplish.

Bowman versus National Secular Society

As noted earlier, one illustrative example of how campaigning could take a gradual approach but still have an important and national impact on secularist interests was the long-term view taken by the National Secular Society under its president G W Foote. After Charles Bradlaugh resigned as President of the National Secular Society, Foote was elected to carry on the leadership of the organisation, a tenure that coincides with the supposed 'decline' in the secularist movement.⁷ Foote successfully proposed at the 1888 conference that the reasons for decline be investigated, with a promise to report back to the National Secular Society Branches within three months.⁸ Regardless, during his tenure as president of the National Secular Society, Foote had the foresight to secure the long term survival of all secular organisations by resolving the longstanding legal issue of financial legacies.

Secularist publications were never on a very secure footing, as can be seen by the frequent folding of many secularist journals (only to pop up again

⁷ Royle cites the year on year decline in new recruits from the peak in 1883 and 1884 to the low ebb by 1889. Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 36.

⁸ "Annual Conference of the National Secular Society," *National Reformer*, May 27, 1888, 344

in another guise not long after). However, throughout the nineteenth century, those who were atheists, secularist or infidels of any stripe could often have their wills overturned, if they left money or other benefits to secularist organisations. One prominent example includes Bradlaugh, who was left £20,000 in one will but only received £2,500.⁹ The central point of contention was that these organisations argued against the teaching of the established Church. Due to the constitutional entanglement of the British State and the Anglican Church, through case law accrued since the Reformation, blasphemy evolved into a crime against the state. Thus, legacies were turned over on the grounds they would be used for blasphemous purposes - or so went the legal argument.

Foote shares many similarities with previous secularists, yet due to his position at the end of the century, his accomplishments were undervalued. For example, in 1882 only a year into publishing his new journal *The Freethinker*, Foote was served a summons for blasphemous libel. The Christmas Issue featured 18 illustrations which satirised the miracles of Jesus (though the charge was against the written articles, rather than the illustrations).¹⁰ The most “obscene” was the misinterpretation of “Jehovah showing his ‘back parts’ to Moses.”¹¹ In his defence he tried to press home the point that “you cannot make a distinction between men on the grounds of taste” and recounted more respectable ‘freethinkers’ in mockery of miracles.¹² However, despite the report from the secularist press that relayed

⁹ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 186.

¹⁰ H Cutner, “The Three Trials of George William Foote,” *The Freethinker*, March 22, 1931, 179

¹¹ Cutner, “The Three Trials of George William Foote,” 179.

¹² Cutner, “The Three Trials of George William Foote,” 180.

the details of the case being presided over by what seemed to be a very biased judge - Judge North - the jury was hung and the case required a retrial.¹³ The evidence that Judge North was indeed somewhat biased was that he refused to grant Foote bail. Foote commented on the trial and conduct of the judge and stated that “there may have been some bad criminals in Newgate, but I would have embraced the worst of them than have touched the hand of Judge North.”¹⁴ Despite the similarities with other secularists who faced prosecution for blasphemy, Foote’s position at the end of the nineteenth century has meant that his accomplishments are rarely explored in great detail. It is even more peculiar given that of all the freethought publications, the *Freethinker* has survived as a publication to this day (though now, only online).

Though he shares similarities with those that came before him, Foote took a different tactic when approaching the problem of securing legacies from their supporters. He would build his idea partly off the judgement in his own blasphemy case, where Lord Chief Justice Coleridge “had ruled that blasphemy lay in the manner and not just the substance of the matter in question.”¹⁵ Foote took this to mean that the society itself could not be illegal, “provided it were legally dissociated from the manner in which the propagandist work was undertaken.”¹⁶ What this meant in practice was setting up a separate organisation, National Secular Society Limited, a

¹³ Cutner, “The Three Trials of George William Foote,” 180.

¹⁴ Cutner, “The Three Trials of George William Foote,” 180. In the verdict of the second trial, Foote recounts the Judge’s words: “This trial had been to me a very painful one. I regret extremely to find a person of your undoubted intelligence, a man gifted by God with great ability, should have chosen to prostitute his talents to the service of the Devil.” G W Foote, *Prisoner for Blasphemy* (London: Progressive Publishing Co., 1886), 105.

¹⁵ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 187.

¹⁶ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 187.

distinct legal entity from the main campaigning organisation, the National Secular Society. It was a distinct change in tactics: instead of continuously combatting the same laws that prevented them from their desired goals, Foote would use new legal instruments to the society's advantage.

The establishment of the National Secular Society Limited

After his time in prison, in the tradition of many freethinkers serving a sentence for blasphemy, Foote published *Prisoner for Blasphemy*, detailing his trials and time in prison. Foote also formally established the National Secular Society Ltd, registering the society with Companies House. While this could have been seen as routine administrative maintenance to keep ahead of the times, the Articles of Association had several explicit points that underscored the campaigning motive. Overall, the first article sets out the broad aims of the National Secular Society: "To promote, in such ways as may from time to time be determined, the principle that human conduct should be based upon natural knowledge, and not upon supernatural belief, and that human welfare in this world is the proper end of all thought and action."¹⁷ This article in itself is not surprising as it was a reiteration of the secularist basis for the organisation - though during the *Bowman vs Secular Society Ltd* court case, this article formed part of the fundamental case of the Bowman family against the National Secular Society Ltd with arguments set forth by the Bowman prosecution that the article itself was illegal.

¹⁷ Humanist Reference Library, Conway Hall, Box NSS/8/11, House of Lords judgement, *Bowman vs National Secular Society Limited*, No. 6 Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Secular Society, Limited.

Several other articles dealt with the way that the National Secular Society would carry out those aims, such as pursuing publications, education and changing the laws to abolish any “support, patronage, or favour by the State of any particular form or forms of religion.”¹⁸ The separation of religious influence on the state was a very important goal of secularists, so it again is not surprising that this was reconfirmed.

However, the important campaigning article related to the Bowman case was article M: “To have, hold, receive and retain any sums of money paid, given, devised, or bequeathed by any person, and to employ the same for any of the purposes of the society.”¹⁹ It was an important article as the actions by the National Secular Society indicate. Chapman Cohen stated in *A Fight for Right: The Decision of the House of Lords in Re Bowman and Others v. The Secular Society, Limited*, that prior to forming a company, “All were convinced that nothing short of the abolition of the Blasphemy Laws would relieve Freethought from a burdensome financial disability.”²⁰ Prior to the formation of The Secular Society Limited, legacies gifted to secularist organisations had been overturned in the courts. One of the historical reasons for the overturning of a will and attached legacy was by arguing that such a legacy to a freethought or atheist organisation was “proof of an

¹⁸ Box NSS/8/11, No. 6 Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Secular Society, Limited.

¹⁹ Box NSS/8/11, No. 6 Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Secular Society, Limited.

²⁰ Chapman Cohen, *A Fight for Right: the Decision of the House of Lords in Re Bowman and Others v. The Secular Society, Limited* (London: Pioneer Press, 1917), 3. Blasphemy laws were finally abolished in the UK until 2008. In the following year, Ireland introduced a new blasphemy law (covering all religions), demonstrating that freedom of non-belief can be penalised in favour of protecting religious sentiment.

unbalanced mind.”²¹ More relevant for this case was that the proceeds of the legacy would be used for illegal purposes - namely blasphemy.²² However, Cohen entirely credited Foote with “seeing a way out” of this long existent problem.²³ This is an interesting point as many other secularists would see Foote’s tenure as the reason for the decline of the society’s numbers.²⁴ This potentially indicates that the movement itself was not aware of the importance of different types of secular activism.

It would take 15 years for the plan to come to fruition, because as Cohen stated “the position of the society remained unchallenged.”²⁵ The National Secular Society realised that it would take some time for a challenge to be made, as it knew that overturning a legacy would require time and money to bring it before a court. Therefore, it would have to be financially rewarding enough to make the claim.²⁶ That challenge, of course, eventually came in the form of the Bowman family, with the particular quirks of English inheritance law working against them. Importantly, it demonstrates the gradualist approach to this campaign. The National Secular Society had the foresight to write the legacy into the articles, but was patient enough for the case to come to them.

²¹ Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom*, 109.

²² Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom*, 109.

²³ Cohen, *A Fight for Right*, 3.

²⁴ Royle points out that it was Foote’s actions that helped the society avoid an even more rapid decline. Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 36.

²⁵ Cohen, *A Fight for Right*, 4.

²⁶ Cohen, *A Fight for Right*, 5.

The Bowman estate and claim

Charles Bowman's original will left most of his estate to his wife, but provided for some small legacies to his grandchildren and niece. The residue of the estate was then paid to the National Secular Society.²⁷ Not much to challenge at that point in time, as G W Foote pointed out in his affidavit, "Probate of his said will and Codicil was duly granted out of the Principal Probate Registry of this Honourable Court to his widow, the said Elizabeth Bowman, and the Defendants, on the 19th May, 1908."²⁸ It was only with Elizabeth's death, without her making a further will, that the Bowman family disputed the *original* will of Charles Bowman. After pointing out that the grandchildren of Charles Bowman were entitled to the legacies, Foote argued that "the residue of the testator's estate belongs to the Plaintiffs, [the National Secular Society] and should, it is respectfully submitted, be transferred or paid to them."²⁹ Charles Bowman had been a long standing member of the National Secular Society which accounted for the inclusion of the organisation in his will, however why Elizabeth Bowman chose not to make a will is left unanswered.³⁰ However, the grandchildren were motivated enough by the size of the estate to pursue their claim through the courts, carrying their appeals to the House of Lords.

Chapman Cohen pointed out that the National Secular Society could

²⁷ Humanist Reference Library and Archives, Box NSS/8/11, House of Lords judgement, *Bowman vs National Secular Society Limited*, No. 2: Amended Originating Summons dated 25th November, 1914.

²⁸ Humanist Reference Library and Archives, Box NSS/8/11, House of Lords judgement, *Bowman vs National Secular Society Limited*, No. 3 Affidavit of George William Foote, filed 4th December, 1914.

²⁹ Box NSS/8/11, No. 3 Affidavit of George William Foote, filed 4th December, 1914.

³⁰ Cohen, *A Fight for Right*, 5.

have settled on a variety of occasions. At least four overtures were made to the organisation, with the last attempt at settlement presented to the National Secular Society twenty-four hours before the final hearing when they would have to appeal to the House of Lords.³¹ Cohen added that there was a “veiled threat from the solicitor” that there were religiously motivated benefactors who were going to pay the Bowman’s costs if it went to the House of Lords on appeal.³² However, despite the possibility of gaining at least some of the estate (and avoiding costly court fees), merely settling out of court would not gain the change in the law. It also underscores that the intention of the article was to change the law, rather than just to gain financial gains where they could. It would appear that the National Secular Society Ltd took a greater financial risk in order to use the tools of the state to aid their campaign goals.

The financial risks were not inconsiderable, with the “Costs charges and expenses relative to the petition of appeal to the house of Lords by the next of kin against the decision of Mr Justice Joyce” coming to a total of just over £648.³³ However, the costs would have been worth it, as the value of Elizabeth Bowman’s income account equalled £986,77 and the property and capital were worth £7835,32.³⁴ Certainly, some parts of the religious community were not pleased with the outcome of the case. After the final appeal, the *Church Times* reported that the case had “considerable historical

³¹ Cohen, *A Fight for Right*, 5.

³² Cohen, *A Fight for Right*, 5

³³ Humanist Reference Library and Archives, NSS8/11, Secular Society Ltd to Stoneham and Sons.

³⁴ Humanist Reference Library and Archives, NSS8/11, Mrs Elizabeth Bowman, Summary of Capital and Income on 14th January 1919.

interest” and that the judge decided that the “objects of the Society” were not “contrary to morality.”³⁵ The *Church Times* was evidently displeased by the “wave of opinion which has modified the Blasphemy Law, finding a punishable offence no longer in a denial of Christianity” and concluded that “It is more ridiculous than ever to say that Christianity is part of the Common Law of England.”³⁶ Chapman Cohen picked up on another *Church Times* article, this time after the House of Lords’ judgement that:

“It is now for the first time legally recognised that the promotion of Atheism is perfectly legal, and that a trust for the purpose will be enforced by the Courts...Inasmuch as a limited company may be lawfully formed for the promotion of Atheism, Atheists are for practical purposes as much established as the Separatist Churches and the Roman Catholics.”³⁷

The ruling itself was important for secularists as it overturned previous rulings on blasphemy, the same types of rulings that had plagued secularists in the nineteenth century. The Court of Appeal and the subsequent House of Lords ruling meant that the judges had to overrule two previous cases, *Briggs V. Harley* (1850) and *Cowan V Milbourn* (1867).³⁸ The position of one of the judges in the case, Lord Dunedin, would have been straightforward it seems, as he stated: “I have said that I have formed my opinion not without hesitation; but that hesitation is due to one fact only. Had there been no authorities to deal with...I do not think I should have felt much difficulty.”³⁹

Due to the fact that there had been previous judgements he felt it was “no

³⁵ “Summary,” *Church Times*, April 23, 1915, 431.

³⁶ “Summary,” *Church Times*, 431.

³⁷ Cohen, *A Fight for Right*, 7.

³⁸ Humanist Reference Library and Archives, NSS8/11, House of Lords judgements, *Bowman vs National Secular Society*, May 4 1917, Judgement, 8, 11.

³⁹ House of Lords, Judgement, 20.

light matter to overrule such pronouncements.”⁴⁰ However, in all the various levels of the court system, the judges involved ultimately had no overwhelming objections to overrule the previous judgements.

As Lord Dunedin elucidated, if the legacy had been given to a private person, “the executor would not be heard to discuss the probable uses to which the legatee would put the money.”⁴¹ Regardless, the Company Acts (1862), permitted the Secular Society Ltd to acquire property and therefore moved that the appeal by the Bowman family be dismissed.⁴² The judgement went further to comment that the society’s Memorandum “is not illegal for it does not involve blasphemy”, nor was it irreligious, immoral or seditious (though it was anti-Christian).⁴³ But the important comment from the judge was that:

“There is nothing unlawful at common law in reverently doubting or denying doctrines parcel of Christianity...The only safe and, as it seems to me, practical rule is that which I have pointed out and which depends on the sobriety and reverence and seriousness with which the teaching or believing however erroneous are maintained.”⁴⁴

Chapman Cohen highlighted the importance of this comment as previous bequests had been denied to secular or atheist organisations because of attacks on the Christian religion.⁴⁵ The judgment also included the almost perfect line for any secular organisation: “My Lords, with all respect for the great names of the lawyers who have used it, the phrase, ‘Christianity is part

⁴⁰ House of Lords, Judgement, 20.

⁴¹ House of Lords, Judgement, 28.

⁴² House of Lords, Judgement, 28.

⁴³ House of Lords, Judgement, 29.

⁴⁴ House of Lords, Judgement, 44.

⁴⁵ Cohen, *A Fight for Right*, 9.

of the Law of England,' is really not law; it is rhetoric."⁴⁶ Concluding the judgement, the Judge affirmed that the Secular Society Ltd Memorandum "are not now contrary to the law" and dismissed the Bowman family appeal.⁴⁷ The quite comprehensive and thorough analysis of the blasphemy law put in absolute clarity the future financial safety of any secular organisation. As Cohen pointed out, it was not just a ruling that was beneficial for the Secular Society Limited but it made "*legal a bequest to any secular society, whether it be a registered body or not.*"⁴⁸ He was, however, somewhat optimistic when he stated that he felt it was a "long step nearer" the complete abolition of the blasphemy laws.⁴⁹ That would still be some decades off and would also see a global resurgence of blasphemy laws at the start of the twenty-first century (pointing out the continuous need to make an argument for secularism.)

But why was this important? Most trials for blasphemy occurred in the nineteenth century but it did not mean they stopped entirely. Despite the victory, the subsequent editor of *The Truthseeker* J W Gott, was tried for blasphemy in 1921. Though the judgement meant that criticism of religion was not enough to invoke a blasphemy charge, the tone in which one did it meant that secularists still ended up in front of the judge's bench on several occasions.

Justice Salter and Justice Avory in both blasphemy cases involving Gott advised the jury to take into consideration the audience, in that "they must have in their minds, not the educated Christian but the average man of

⁴⁶ House of Lords, Judgement, 58.

⁴⁷ House of Lords, Judgement, 58.

⁴⁸ Cohen, *A Fight for Right*, 9.

⁴⁹ Cohen, *A Fight for Right*, 10.

intelligence.”⁵⁰ However, Gott was found guilty and given a “brutal and vindictive” sentence (as he was already in poor health) of nine months’ hard labour.⁵¹ Cohen made the impassioned plea that the abolition of the blasphemy laws were not just for secularists, but for the “interest of the whole community” and that it was the important principle of “freedom of speech and publication” that could never exist with the threat of the blasphemy laws.⁵² This was the same argument that Bradlaugh had made, arguing that the laws limited the people’s individual liberty.⁵³ Though there would be no ‘great blasphemer’ of the twentieth century, and even with the campaigning efforts of the National Secular Society and their forward looking editor, the threat of blasphemy still remained. Though the prosecutions brought to court by the Society for the Suppression of Vice may have declined in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the fundamental issue was unresolved. No matter what party brought the charge, freedom of speech was still curtailed or threatened if it involved the ridicule of the Christian religion. It would take the continuous pressure applied by secularists to finally abolish the blasphemy laws in the UK in 2008.

What the Bowman case throws into sharp relief was the impact that secularists and secularist organisations could still have in the twentieth century. The move by Foote was calculated to make sure that the financial security of secularist organisations would no longer be in doubt. Any

⁵⁰ Chapman Cohen, *Blasphemy: A Plea for Religious Equality* (London: Pioneer Press, 1922), 21.

⁵¹ Cohen, *Blasphemy: A Plea for Religious Equality*, 21.

⁵² Cohen, *Blasphemy: A Plea for Religious Equality*, 29.

⁵³ Though, unlike Holyoake, Foote, and Gott (among others), Bradlaugh himself never faced a blasphemy charge on his own. David Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 158.

organisation, Christian or not, had the same rights before the law to receive legacies to further their aims. This was not something that the nineteenth century secularists could have relied on (and were frequently thwarted by). Foote and the National Secular Society used the tools of the state at their disposal to further secularist goals. This followed in the same footsteps as Bradlaugh, who proposed legislation so that secularists could have the same right to defend themselves under the law. The case, then, is also a link between the activism of the nineteenth century and that of the twentieth century.

Twentieth century secularists would get involved in many of the important political issues in the early part of the century - and used them to further secularist positions. Not only would they use the instruments of the state in their struggle, but would become active members within the political machinery, either as policy makers, journalists or Members of Parliament. Secularist activism did not end with Bradlaugh, rather the twentieth century secularists built on the foundations laid by those in the nineteenth century, furthering secularist viewpoints and involvement to a degree not possible in the nineteenth century. They adopted successful techniques and re-employed them in a variety of contexts. They also worked to disaggregate religious doctrine from policy making and Parliament. It was thanks to the legacy of Bradlaugh, Holyoake, Gott, Foote, Besant and other secularists that the twentieth century secularists did not have to fight the exact same battles, but could instead further secularist ideals beyond secularist organisations themselves and out into the wider world.

John Atkinson Hobson – Labour policy maker and economist

John Atkinson Hobson (6 July 1859 - 1 April 1940) is most remembered for two things: being a footnote in John Maynard Keynes's *General Theory* and for writing the standard critical text on imperialism. However, his interests and potential influence were diverse, ranging from liberalism to pacifism and internationalism. In this chapter, I will argue that his secular values informed his contributions to economics, the New Liberalism of the early twentieth century and his policy work for the Labour Party. This will be a feature in all areas of discussion, from politics, peace and women's rights. He was engaged in a broad range of political and social activism throughout his life - all underpinned by his humanist ethos.

Hobson came from Derby and was educated at Lincoln College at Oxford University. Hobson's autobiography was more reflective of his later work and did not focus on the details of his early years. In general, he spent most of the time justifying many of his economic positions. Unlike some other secularist contemporaries like Frederick James Gould or Henry Snell, Hobson did not seem to have had any major religious inclinations or a de-conversion narrative. He stated in his autobiography *Confessions of an Economic Heretic*: "By the time I reached Oxford I found myself a religious heretic and in my second year obtained a remission of the duty to attend chapel."⁵⁴ One biographer credits his "heretical outlook" to his "intellectual disposition," which included a "fearless and ruthless questioning of commonly

⁵⁴ J A Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1938), 20-21.

held beliefs and attitudes.⁵⁵ However, anti-biblical and anti-clerical themes did not dominate his writing to the same extent as they preoccupied G W Foote and Charles Bradlaugh. He instead advocated a more inclusive secularism, in the same method as George Jacob Holyoake.

From his university education onward, in his own autobiography and in the work covering his career, there is mainly only a discussion of economic ideas. It was not an easy or straightforward career. As Freeden states in *Reappraising J. A. Hobson*: “though Hobson was the product of an Oxford education, inclination and circumstances conspired to exclude him from the potential bookishness of an academic world that refused him entry at an early stage of his career.”⁵⁶ However, he was “aided by a private income” that allowed him to succeed as a journalist and intellectual.⁵⁷ Only recently has there been an interest in Hobson’s long-term lectureship at South Place Ethical Society and his internationalist inclinations.⁵⁸ Even though arguably his most successful and recognised book in his lifetime was *Imperialism*, he continued to write on the topic for many years to come. Later writings include *Towards International Government*, which set out his thoughts on internationalism. Much of Hobson’s thought combined both internationalist ideas and his interest in economics – as he looked forward to greater political integration of Europe and the UK, the two areas are not easily separated. Part of the reason he may have been excluded from investigation for so long

⁵⁵ Townsend also states that Hobson embraced “a form of Humanism” perhaps related to his long association with the South Place Ethical Society. Jules Townsend, *J A Hobson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 3. Ruthlessly questioning commonly held beliefs was a common secularist practice.

⁵⁶ Michael Freeden, *Reappraising J. A. Hobson: Humanism and Welfare*, 1.

⁵⁷ W H Richmond, “J. A. Hobson: Economic Heretic,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 37 (1978): 283.

⁵⁸ See John M. Hobson and Colin Tyler, eds., *Selected Writings of John A. Hobson, 1932-1938: The Struggle for the International Mind* (London: Routledge, 2011).

was the mixed quality of his work: “he wrote hundreds of articles in journals and newspapers, and about fifty books in which were distilled all his major ideas. Some of his books have rightly been called pot-boilers, but many represent important and path-breaking contributions to economic and social thought...”⁵⁹ Nevertheless, his thoughts on imperialism were echoed by others from Ramsay MacDonald to Marxist theorist Rudolf Hilferding (with some plagiarism from Vladimir Lenin as well).⁶⁰

His long time publisher Allen & Unwin regularly communicated with Hobson, and detailed in their letters what was selling well or was going to be reprinted. In the early 1920s, almost every letter asked about publishing a new book or reporting on a translation or royalty.⁶¹ Additionally, Hobson was enough of a “prominent Englishman” in 1922 for the publishers to ask him to write an introduction to a book American publishers considered too “pro-hun.”⁶² They also consulted him about other books they were thinking of publishing, such as *Economics of wages and labour* in 1926.⁶³ Despite being an economic heretic, Hobson seemed more than able to sell books to an interested and varied audience.

Hobson is easily identified as a secularist – through his writing, activities, the organisations he was a member of and those who remembered him. Freedden quotes Cecil Delisle Burns that, “humanism is the best word for expressing the attitude of J. A. Hobson.”⁶⁴ As Hobson stated in his

⁵⁹ Richmond, “J. A. Hobson: Economic Heretic,” 283.

⁶⁰ John Cunningham Wood, “J A Hobson and British Imperialism,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 42 (1983): 483.

⁶¹ University of Reading Archive, AUC 3/6, letters to and from J A Hobson, 7 July 1920, 23 Aug, 1921 and 3 April 1922.

⁶² University of Reading Archive, AUC 3/6, letters to and from J A Hobson 27 June 1922.

⁶³ University of Reading Archive, AUC 14/18, Letters to and from J A Hobson, 9 Mach 1926.

⁶⁴ Freedden, *Reappraising J. A. Hobson: Humanism and Welfare*, 1.

autobiography he was “driven to put ethical significance into a variety of current topics and events, many of which belonged to the fields of politics and economics.”⁶⁵ Hobson stated in his autobiography that his relationship with the South Place Ethical Society helped him clarify his positions over the thirty-six years he was a member and lecturer:

“But I had first to make up my own mind, before communicating the result to others. Though such a fragmentary process had its defects, it served on the whole to bring together what was at first sight seemed widely sundered pieces of thought and valuation, and so to give an increasing measure of cohesion to the deeper process of intellectual order needed to carry out the humanization of economic thinking which I had taken as my primary intellectual task.”⁶⁶

Through the lens of humanist economics, Hobson could level fundamental critiques on a variety of issues, in potentially unlikely places, as will be seen with his arguments against those opposing access to birth control in chapter 5.

At the same time as being a lecturer at South Place he was a “regular lecturer of the University Extension Movement, a founder member of and frequent speaker at the *Rainbow Circle*, the editor of the *Ethical World* and co-editor of the *Progressive Review*, an occasional lecturer at the London School of Economics.”⁶⁷ He also mentioned that one of his “earliest and most intimate” friends was J M Robertson who was, at Hobson’s first encounter with him, the editor of the *National Reformer* (the journal founded by Charles Bradlaugh).⁶⁸ Additionally, he became well acquainted with L T Hobhouse through his work at *The Manchester Guardian*. H N Brailsford

⁶⁵ Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic*, 57-58.

⁶⁶ Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic*, 57-58.

⁶⁷ Freedon, *Reappraising J. A. Hobson: Humanism and Welfare*, 6-7.

⁶⁸ Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic*, 49.

would also make connections with Hobson and Hobhouse through the *Manchester Guardian*, as well as other Liberal and Labour publications. Hobhouse and Hobson would form a life-long friendship, which included an abiding interest in Liberal and Labour policies.

It would seem, in Hobson's own words, that his affiliation with South Place Ethical Society helped shape and perhaps influence the rest of his work as a whole. By the time of Hobson's acquaintance with the South Place Ethical Society, it was already a thoroughly secular organisation, having changed its name to Ethical Society under Stanton Coit some years previously. The members of South Place saw him as "more than economist...an ethical teacher with a passion for freedom and righteousness, tempered by an innate sense of humour."⁶⁹ What Hobson advocated was a "theory of economics which set for the principles on which the production and distribution of goods and services could be undertaken that human welfare in the broad sense, and not only the material aspects of it could be maximized."⁷⁰ Or in other words, "humanist economics."⁷¹ This extended to his views on charity, which were also staunchly secularist.

In *Work and Wealth* he identified that "the misdirection of the surplus income into empty or depraved modes of recreation, culture, religion and charity" by the rich was "the largest of all economic wastes."⁷² Additionally, he argued that charity dulled the need for social reform, which was needed to rectify the continued economic imbalance.⁷³ However, he also made a

⁶⁹ Freeden, *Reappraising J. A. Hobson: Humanism and Welfare*, 6-7.

⁷⁰ Richmond, "J. A. Hobson: Economic Heretic," 291.

⁷¹ Richmond, "J. A. Hobson: Economic Heretic," 291.

⁷² J A Hobson, *Work and Wealth: A Human Valuation* (New York: MacMillan, 1914), 157.

⁷³ Hobson, *Work and Wealth*, 298.

secularist argument for redistribution, based on evolution, and chastised socialists for “the denial of the existence of a rational moral society.”⁷⁴ Hobson then connected wealth with religious immorality and hypocrisy: “But even worse than sham intellectualism is the sham morality which tricks itself out in pietistic formulas and charitable practices, so as to evade obedience to the plain laws.”⁷⁵ Like other secularists, he used religious ideas themselves to demonstrate the inconsistency of religious belief. In this case, charity is used to demonstrate piety while still maintaining excess. In *Problems of Poverty* he also made the argument the “poorest classes have neither the time, the energy, or the desire to be clean, thrifty, intellectual, moral, or religious.”⁷⁶ It is a straight forward secularist point, in that it required a tangible improvement in quality of life in order for individuals to have the energy to be moral. Being spiritual or religious was the outcome of existing material comforts, not something innate in human nature or the blessings of a god.

However, he also critiqued the inconsistent application of morality by those with power rather than denigrate the entire religious enterprise - a more secularist argument. Hobson articulated the need for everyone within society to adhere to the same rules and highlighted where religious privilege had been used as a shield for more dubious moral and legal practices for the accumulation of wealth. It is an example where his socialist and economic

⁷⁴ Hobson, *Work and Wealth*, 307. Hobson and Robertson were internal critics of their party policies in certain areas, most notably imperialism. Examining party conflicts via a secularist lens is another area which could provide new perspectives in both Liberal and Labour political history.

⁷⁵ Hobson, *Work and Wealth*, 158.

⁷⁶ J A Hobson, *The Problem of Poverty: An Inquiry into the Industrial Condition of the Poor*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10710/10710-h/10710-h.htm>, accessed 29 April 2018.

arguments align closely with his secularist principles.

Additionally, his relationships with other secularists and secularist organisations would also identify him as a secularist. Hobson has a pivotal role among many of the secularists in this thesis, being acquainted with them all through various political activities throughout his life. And yet, despite the constant references to his ‘humanism’, he does not make an impact on Budd’s analysis in *Varieties of Unbelief*.

In his own words and that of people who knew him, it seems that secularist and ethical thoughts underpinned Hobson’s work. He was engaged for 30 years of his intellectual life with South Place Ethical Society, being surrounded by the history and traditions of the nineteenth century secularists. This was alongside his myriad publications and the other organisations he was involved with (though those did not match the longevity of association with South Place.) He is also considered to be a “major originator of British welfare thought.”⁷⁷ He spent his life publishing and arguing for fairer treatment and an economic system that embraced humanist values. What Hobson demonstrated was that a gradualist secularist approach, distinctly different from Victorian secularists like Bradlaugh, was possible. Hobson used relevant organisations and platforms and argued for a secularist approach to politics, peace and economics. Hobson, as will be shown below, invested his time in several areas, all of which were underpinned by a sense of secular fairness, humanism and an ethical point of view. It would be impossible to separate the humanist drive from all his activism, as in his own words and in the words of those who knew him, it was the motivating

⁷⁷ Freeden, *Reappraising J. A. Hobson: Humanism and Welfare*, 1.

intellectual force in his life.

Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse – Liberal policy theorist and sociologist

Hobhouse was a secularist who had influence when it came to the formulation of early twentieth century liberal thought, as well as the development of the study of sociology. Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse (8 September 1864 – 21 June 1929) was born in Cornwall, the youngest of seven children. His father was a rector and then Archdeacon of Bodmin from 1877 to 1892.⁷⁸ Even before university, Hobhouse's "mind was moving towards unorthodoxy and liberalism."⁷⁹ Like Hobson, he attended Oxford but was a member of Corpus Christi College where he read classics.⁸⁰ After graduation he taught for ten years at Corpus Christi, though he was increasingly involved with the Labour movement, as well as studying science under J S Haldane.⁸¹

Hobhouse also became a journalist for the *Manchester Guardian*. Recruited by C P Scott in 1897, Hobhouse stated that he "was in my right milieu, there as I have never been before or since."⁸² It was Hobhouse's position at the *Manchester Guardian* which would lead Hobson to write one of his most famous books, *Imperialism*. Hobson wrote in his autobiography:

"I happened to have written in the *Contemporary Review* of March 1899 an article on "Imperialism" containing some references to the recent

⁷⁸ J A Hobson and Morris Ginsberg, eds., *L. T. Hobhouse: His Life and Work* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931), 15.

⁷⁹ Hobson and Ginsberg, *L. T. Hobhouse: His Life and Work*, 17.

⁸⁰ Hobson and Ginsberg, *L. T. Hobhouse: His Life and Work*, 23.

⁸¹ Hobson and Ginsberg, *L. T. Hobhouse: His Life and Work*, 27-28.

⁸² L T Hobhouse, *Democracy and Reaction*, ed. P F Clarke (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1972), xiii.

history of South Africa, which came before the eyes of L T Hobhouse, then the chief political leader-writer for the *Manchester Guardian*.”⁸³

Hobhouse then encouraged the *Manchester Guardian*'s editor C P Scott, to send Hobson “out on a voyage of political inquiry to South Africa when the outlook began to be dangerous.”⁸⁴ It was just the beginning of a longtime friendship and collaboration as Hobson stated that Hobhouse became one of his “closest friends and associates in many other projects.”⁸⁵

Hobhouse remained with the *Manchester Guardian* until 1907 when he moved to the London School of Economics. Hobhouse is best known as a sociologist and has the distinction of holding one of the first positions of Professor of Sociology in the UK. In John E Owen's biography of Hobhouse, he is compared with both Durkheim and Weber as “one of the early pioneers who did valuable preliminary ground-work” in the development of sociology.⁸⁶ After his death, there was a quick move to establish the L T Hobhouse memorial lectures, which ran until the 1960s.⁸⁷ He was also influential in terms of liberal thought, writing *Liberalism*, which became the definitive work on the subject.

Even though Hobhouse may not have had the close ties to organised secularism of Hobson, his association with secularist thought can be identified through his relationship with other secularists. However, it is also important to illustrate secularist intentions in Hobhouse's written work. As mentioned earlier, the link with secularist thought is often not well articulated in the historiography if the individuals are not expressly affiliated with an

⁸³ Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic*, 60.

⁸⁴ Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic*, 60.

⁸⁵ Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic*, 60.

⁸⁶ Owen, *L T Hobhouse, Sociologist*, 1.

⁸⁷ London School of Economics archive. Wallas/1/75, Letters to Wallas (various), 1932.

organisation. However, in Hobhouse's case, one can draw out the similarities with other secularists with his education. More importantly, the intent in his work as a sociologist is the main evidence of his secularist inclinations.

In the biography of Hobhouse by Morris Ginsberg and J A Hobson, some of these secularist associations are explained, Hobson stated that Hobhouse's early influences were: "Spencer, the Positivism of Comte...and the social philosophy of Mill and Green."⁸⁸ These are very familiar names as many other secularists would list the same philosophical influences, and Spencer himself was a great favourite among secularists. Hobson goes on to say that Hobhouse shared "with Comte again a kind of religious humanitarianism."⁸⁹ Additionally, and importantly from a secularist perspective, he wrote that:

"Hobhouse seeks to show that the world of conduct, of values, is amenable to rational tests, that there is a good, self-consistent and objective, in the sense of being based on universal principles inherent in the system of purposes taken as a whole."⁹⁰

As a sociologist, Hobhouse viewed religion as a "one form in which human experience is organized" and that "in becoming rational, man became moral, and, indeed, progress has consisted in the realisation of the conditions of full co-operation and in the extension of the rational control of life."⁹¹ It is important to note that according to Hobhouse, it was only when people became rational that morality could appear, whereas most religious groups would argue that morality came from religion.

In Hobson and Ginsberg's biography of Hobhouse, they state that:

⁸⁸ Hobson and Ginsberg, *L. T. Hobhouse: His Life and Work*, 100.

⁸⁹ Hobson and Ginsberg, *L. T. Hobhouse: His Life and Work*, 101.

⁹⁰ Hobson and Ginsberg, *L. T. Hobhouse: His Life and Work*, 179.

⁹¹ Owen, *L T Hobhouse, Sociologist*, 143.

“In ethics and social philosophy his writings constitute perhaps the most important attempt that has been made recently, at any rate in England, to work out the implications and possibilities of the Rationalist point of view.”⁹²

According to Hobhouse’s close associates, then, he was important not just to sociology but also for using that platform to advance the understanding of secularist and rational thought. However, Hobhouse’s secularist position can be found in his academic writing as well, aligning him with the longer tradition of secularist thought.

In *The Rational Good: A Study in the Logic of Practice* (1921), Hobson was one of the people who Hobhouse thanked for making preliminary comments on his manuscript (echoing Hobson’s note of their long term friendship in his autobiography). Given that Hobson was already a well-established secularist (and ‘heretic’, at least in economic circles), it is interesting to note that this sort of affiliation had no detrimental effect upon Hobhouse’s career or standing within the academic community. *The Rational Good* went to long lengths to disentangle morals from religion, which really marks Hobhouse as a secularist. He started by pointing out the contradictions in people’s lives between their religious tenets and the everyday rules they must live by.⁹³ He also pointed out that “the spirit of man” did not develop from “a single centre” and while the resulting confusion could be “ended by the steam roller,” this was not an ideal outcome.⁹⁴ Rather progress was made through “convincing the separate centres that within and below their differences that there is something common by the service of

⁹² Hobson and Ginsberg, *L. T. Hobhouse: His Life and Work*, 99.

⁹³ L T Hobhouse, *The Rational Good: A Study in the Logic of Practice* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1921), 9-10.

⁹⁴ Hobhouse, *The Rational Good*, 129.

which they can best express themselves.”⁹⁵ The rational duty was to carry those common interests as far as they could go, and to keep pushing them.⁹⁶

By the end of his treatise, he advocated that the rational worldview was ethical and in harmony with evolution:

“There is no abysmal conflict between ethics and evolution. The flower of the evolutionary process is the ethical spirit. The rational harmony contemplated here means neither more nor less than the more perfect adjustment and co-ordination of the permanent forces that make for betterment in the movement of the world, and which, slowly gathering vitality as civilisation advances, now mainly require a fuller and more adequate expression to secure them the ultimate control of the movement of social life.”⁹⁷

As stated above, Hobhouse was celebrated as an important and influential figure within sociology. The humanist and rationalist perspective runs through his major works: that is, to subject the supernatural (including religion) to rational tests and treat them like another secular phenomenon. As well, this progress was seen as natural and evolutionary in scale: a much more gradual approach that nineteenth century secularists may have wanted. Rationalists also had to make an argument for the progress, rather than assume it was already won.

Hobhouse is the most difficult to cast as a secularist (in the traditional mould) as he does not have the same secular pedigree as Hobson and others in that he was not a member of a secular organisation. His secularist leanings can be inferred from his long time association with secularists like Hobson and inspiration from secularist favourites. For example, this association was made early in his university career, when he rejected the

⁹⁵ Hobhouse, *The Rational Good*, 129.

⁹⁶ Hobhouse, *The Rational Good*, 130.

⁹⁷ Hobhouse, *The Rational Good*, 161-162.

spiritual reality of T H Green's philosophy, instead Hobhouse drew upon Spencer and Darwin "to formulate a valid philosophy that would do justice both to science and to moral and spiritual values."⁹⁸ It is also identifiable through his later work where he emphasised rationalism, ethicism, morals apart from religion, and also highlighted the problems with religion and modern life. This is where his greater influence lies for the wider secularisation narrative: Hobhouse was writing for mainstream and academic audiences and not the narrow secularist societies. Not only that, but he was recognised as an individual with an important contribution to his field.

In *L. T. Hobhouse: His life and work* Hobson and Morris Ginsberg state:

"The publication in 1906 of his *Morals in Evolution* marked an epoch in the study of sociology. Here Hobhouse revealed at their best the amazing range of his powers. A grasp of anthropological fact, of ethical theory, of the history of religions and institutions - all were combined to lay the foundations of a humanism never more impressively stated."⁹⁹

It was his three major works *The Rational Good* (1921), *The Elements of Social Justice* (1922), *Social Development* (1924) the authors believe Hobhouse proved "that ultimate good consisted in the liberation of human personality."¹⁰⁰ Thus his proto-freedom of thought and belief is a very secular proposition and sets Hobhouse as a secularist, even if not in the traditional way of being a member of a secularist organisation. In most histories of secularism by secularist organisations, Hobhouse would be left out. Interestingly enough, Budd uses his advances in sociology as a counterpoint

⁹⁸ Owen, *L T Hobhouse, Sociologist*, 13.

⁹⁹ Hobson and Ginsberg, *L. T. Hobhouse: His Life and Work*, 47.

¹⁰⁰ Hobson and Ginsberg. *L. T. Hobhouse: His Life and Work*, 99.

to the Malthusian and social Darwinist strains of thought in some secularist circles.¹⁰¹ Even though, like Hobson, he was mostly described as a humanist, the term Budd prefers in *Varieties of Unbelief*, his contributions are not counted as humanist in her argument. Hobhouse also eloquently stated in *Morals and Evolution* the secular position of freedom of choice. He then tied the decision to determine one's own beliefs to the idea of intellectual honesty:

“The change is sometimes represented as merely a consequence of religious skepticism...But there is a deeper principle involved, illustrating the many sided meaning of the idea of Personality. Far from implying an indifference to religion, the principle of religious equality is a recognition of the profound importance of intellectual sincerity, particularly in relation to the deepest problems of life. From the moment that honesty is recognized as duty it becomes increasingly repugnant to penalize the beliefs to which it may lead.”¹⁰²

The entire summary of *Morals in Evolution* is a secular argument that “individual freedom may not be used to the prejudice of another individual” and “leaving expression free the law leaves to each man what is peculiarly his, the right to think for himself and honestly express his convictions whether he is allowed to act by them or not.”¹⁰³ Hobhouse used sociology as a way of arguing for freedom of thought. This is different than disparaging religion as often appeared in *The Freethinker* or in secularist debates and open-air speeches. This was arguing for the positive role of secular thought in human society, that it freed all individuals, religious and non-religious, from a detrimental intellectual or spiritual conformity.

All these books formed part of the basis of his sociological work, which

¹⁰¹ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 155.

¹⁰² L T Hobhouse, *Morals in Evolution: Volume 1* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1906), 369.

¹⁰³ Hobhouse, *Morals in Evolution*, 371.

he was recognised for during his own lifetime. Like Hobson, Hobhouse's interests were wider than secularist organisations or the narrow secularist interests of the nineteenth century. What Hobhouse demonstrates is the more inclusive brand of secularism that Holyoake had articulated. Hobhouse deconstructed religion as simply a sociological phenomenon. He created a sociological framework that placed rational tests at the core. However, at the same time, he argued that any constraints on thought and belief are detrimental to the individual, at a much larger scale than secularists previously. The defense of freedom of thought or belief would benefit not only those who were non-religious but anyone who wanted to break with the religious tradition they were brought up in. I would argue that he was influential as a sociologist, but his sociological contribution helped the secularist argument. His conception of liberalism, also leaned towards personal freedom – a theme within his work but also within secularist thought. Hobhouse and Hobson, more so than the nineteenth century, articulated freedom of thought and belief on a larger scale, applicable to any person, regardless of belief.

Baron Henry Snell – Secularist organiser, Labour MP and Labour Lord

Out of the four political advocates, Baron Henry Snell had the most sensational rise into the nineteenth and early twentieth century political class. Henry Snell (1 April 1865 – 21 April 1944) was born to a family of farm labourers. At age 12 he went to stand for hire at the Michelmas fair and spent

the next years as a farm labourer and then working at a pub.¹⁰⁴ Unlike Hobson, Hobhouse and Robertson, he was relatively religious until an adult. In his biography he went into some detail about his thoughts on superstition and religion. However, it was not an easy de-conversion and was much more personally traumatic than what seems to have happened to some of his contemporaries.

After seeing and hearing an atheist or non-believer give an open-air talk in the marketplace, he was afflicted with “the most acute inward strife and spiritual loneliness”.¹⁰⁵ He denounced some negative religious perceptions of the those who were non-religious, and stated:

“The cheaper kind of religious advocate loves to assert that the doubter enjoys his scepticism, because he is willfully wicked and deceitful of heart. How little these shallow preachers know of the spiritual anxieties and perplexities, the temporary accommodations and renunciations, the hopeful searchings and the reluctant partings, that the sceptic experiences before he finds peace in a new and more satisfactory theory of life.”¹⁰⁶

After seeing Bradlaugh speak in 1881, Snell went on to join the Nottingham Secular Society and started reading works associated with traditional secular literature and organisations, to the point where he was asked to leave the Unitarian Chapel he had attended for some time.¹⁰⁷ He studied many of the familiar names associated with secularism and liberalism such as J H Muirhead, Henry Sidgwick, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Carlyle and Giuseppe Mazzini.¹⁰⁸ He also went to lectures and meetings at South Place Ethical Society and the West London Ethical Society.¹⁰⁹ This mirrors the experience

¹⁰⁴ Snell, *Men, Movements, and Myself*, 12.

¹⁰⁵ Snell, *Men, Movements, and Myself*, 29.

¹⁰⁶ Snell, *Men, Movements, and Myself*, 29-30.

¹⁰⁷ Snell, *Men, Movements, and Myself*, 32.

¹⁰⁸ Snell, *Men, Movements, and Myself*, 76.

¹⁰⁹ Snell, *Men, Movements, and Myself*, 79.

of many of the nineteenth century converts to atheism and secularism – enlightenment through self-teaching. His conversion to secularist organisations was deep, from the Nottingham Secular Society to his lifelong affiliation with the London's Ethical Societies. Additionally, it is reflected in his political life.

The twin preoccupations of Snell's life were politics and secularism; but, as he stated the latter was the more important:

“... although political and Labour questions arrested my attention...my deepest and most abiding interests were in religion and ethics, and to these great subjects the best thought and work of my life have been given. Quite early in my career as a Socialist advocate I saw, as few of my colleagues appeared to see, that the problem of human betterment involved spiritual as well as political and economic development, and that if Socialism was to carry humanity nearer to the realization of the perfect life, it would need to be based on the sure foundations of a greatly improved individual character.”¹¹⁰

Like Hobson and Hobhouse, Snell did not see a separation between secularism and his political work: one underpinned the other. Secularism was the basis for their politics and cultivated the policies they were interested in - such as better education, welfare and freedom from religion. Snell was also involved with the Rationalist Press Association and was given a paid post as a lecturer and organiser within the ethical movement by Stanton Coit. He worked for the Union of Ethical Societies and became Secretary of the Secular Education League.¹¹¹

After his election to Parliament in 1922 his focus was predominantly on his constituents in Woolwich, though he remained an active secularist. For example, as noted in Hansard, while in the Commons and the Lords, he

¹¹⁰ Snell, *Men, Movements, and Myself*, 155.

¹¹¹ Snell, *Men, Movements, and Myself*, 156-176.

would put his name to a bill for the abolition of blasphemy laws.¹¹² As Ernest Thurtle stated in the discussion to the bill, the current law at that time did not “protect the religious feelings of all people but only the religious feelings of some people. It is very partial in its application.”¹¹³ He continued with his argument that almost any other religion could be denigrated “but for attacks of that kind I certainly could not be prosecuted for blasphemy.”¹¹⁴ He made the secular case for all beliefs to be equal in the law, and that laws existed to deal with breaches of the peace or indecent language.¹¹⁵ Snell and his support of such a motion, indicated that he agreed with another secularist MP, Ernest Thurtle. Snell would have also been aware of the history of blasphemy charges against secularists, through his long-standing membership of secularist organisations.

Though Snell did not perhaps have the intellectual weight and influence within the policy formation of the Liberal and Labour parties (compared to Hobson or Hobhouse), he did wield some influence as he later became an MP and eventually a Labour Lord. He was involved in many different committees and organisations such as the joint-treasurer of Empire Parliamentary Association, the Vice-Chairman of the British Council, and Member of Imperial Economic Committee.¹¹⁶ As will be investigated below, Snell had a much easier time when engaged with his peers in the House of Commons than Bradlaugh.

¹¹² Blasphemy Laws Amendment Bill, 4th ser., vol 182, col c1120.

¹¹³ Blasphemy Laws (Amendment) Bill, 4th ser., vol. 234, cols 500-501.

¹¹⁴ Blasphemy Laws (Amendment) Bill, 4th ser., vol. 234, cols 500-501.

¹¹⁵ Blasphemy Laws (Amendment) Bill, 4th ser., vol. 234, cols 500-501.

¹¹⁶ *Who Was Who, 1941-1950* (London: Adam & Charles Black: 1985), 1078.

John Mackinnon Robertson – Secularist and Labour MP

The last political figure to introduce in this section is John Mackinnon Robertson (14 November 1856 - 5 July 1933), who is the person most recognised for his secularist work than his other fields of interests. Unlike Hobson and Hobhouse, Robertson came from a more humble background. However, while Hobson and Hobhouse would feature heavily in Liberal and eventually Labour politics, it was Robertson who would actually become a Member of Parliament. Robertson was born in Brodick on the Isle of Arran. Like Hobhouse, his parents were also religious.¹¹⁷ His family moved to Stirling where Robertson attended school until the age of 15; after this point he worked various jobs as a clerk until he started work as a writer for the *Edinburgh Evening News*.¹¹⁸ He unsuccessfully ran for Parliament in Bradlaugh's old seat in Northampton but eventually was elected in 1906 in Tyneside.¹¹⁹ Some of the biographical details about Robertson come from the book *J. M. Robertson: Liberal Rationalist and Scholar* edited by G A Wells. Even the dictionary of National Biography largely restates what is in this book. There is also the slim volume by Martin Page, published by the South Place Ethical Society. Finally, Odin Dekkers has the most comprehensive analysis of Robertson's literary work in *J M Robertson: Rationalist and Literary Critic*. Dekkers also comments in his work that there was lack of biographical material for his subject: "J M Roberston has not

¹¹⁷ Wells describes Robertson's parents as "extremely religious," though Robertson never indicated any sort of family schism. G A Wells, ed., *J. M. Robertson (1856-1933): Liberal, Rationalist & Scholar* (London: Pemberton, 1987), 12.

¹¹⁸ Wells, *J. M. Robertson (1856-1933): Liberal, Rationalist & Scholar*, 12-13.

¹¹⁹ Martin Page, *Britain's Unknown Genius* (London: South Place Ethical Society, 1984), 13.

made life easy for anyone who chooses to write his biography.”¹²⁰ However, like Hobson, Robertson’s influence seems to have been contemporary, and his general influence in collective memory fades soon after his death. Though he does remain embedded within secularist historiography, his influence has been diminished next to that of Bradlaugh. For example, in *100 Years of Freethought*, Bradlaugh’s various contributions are highlighted throughout whereas Robertson is mostly brought in as a casual commentator on events of the time. Similarly in *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, Royle credits Robertson as “one of the most important of the latter-day Liberals and Secularists” but mainly is dotted throughout the book without any substantial analysis of his contributions to the movement.¹²¹

Like Hobson and Hobhouse, Robertson lost his interest and belief in religion at a relatively young age, and he no longer believed in “the divine” by the time he was a teenager¹²². Robertson also became directly involved with secularist organisations like the Edinburgh Secular Society and the South Place Ethical Society, where he became an appointed lecturer in 1907. He was also a founding member of the Rationalist Peace Society with Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner.¹²³ His secularist and freethought credentials are supplemented by his writing, such as the two volume *A Short History of Freethought*.

Robertson was also a liberal, evidenced by his own words in the *Meaning of Liberalism*, his election to parliament as a Liberal in 1906, as well

¹²⁰ Odin Dekkers, *J M Robertson: Rationalist and Literary Critic* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 1998), 1.

¹²¹ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 108.

¹²² Wells, *J. M. Robertson (1856-1933): Liberal, Rationalist & Scholar*, 13.

¹²³ Wells, *J. M. Robertson (1856-1933): Liberal, Rationalist & Scholar*, 23.

as his inclusion in the political group the Rainbow Circle. Perhaps because his main focus was on issues like women's suffrage, constitutional reform and abolishing the House of Lords, and not the traditional secularist ideas, he has had little notoriety within the secularist organisations for his political activism.¹²⁴ And this is despite him being perhaps only the third openly atheist Member of Parliament after Bradlaugh and Henry Snell. Robertson was a prolific writer both before and after his time in the House of Commons, although he would equally write about his liberal affiliations and also his commitment to secularism. In the two volume series *A Short History of Freethought*, Robertson forensically analysed the early contributions of secular thought, expanding the understanding of freethought beyond the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It was one of Robertson's most successful publications and he continually reviewed it over his lifetime.¹²⁵ As Dekkers states, it was a "remarkable achievement in terms of scholarship and grasp of historical data."¹²⁶ However, it made the argument of the inevitability of secular and rationalist belief over that of religion.¹²⁷ He also looked at all cultures across the world to document global freethought.

Secular influence on Labour and Liberal politics and policy

Hobson, Hobhouse, Snell and Robertson were all secularists – they all became involved with the issues and organisations of secularist activity. They

¹²⁴ Wells, J. M. *Robertson (1856-1933): Liberal, Rationalist & Scholar*, 31.

¹²⁵ Dekkers, J M *Robertson: Rationalist and Literary Critic*, 73.

¹²⁶ Dekkers, J M *Robertson: Rationalist and Literary Critic*, 73.

¹²⁷ Dekkers, J M *Robertson: Rationalist and Literary Critic*, 74. Though, as seen with the secularisation thesis, religious interests can make a resurgence. However, Robertson as an early proponent of what would become the secularisation thesis, perhaps placed too much emphasis on inevitability of religious decline, even when secularists constantly faced the challenges from religious institutions during his lifetime.

were also actively engaged with different political issues over the course of their lives. As argued above, their involvement in politics was shaped by their secularist beliefs. How, then, did their secular and ethical viewpoints shape and influence British economic thought and British politics at the turn of the 20th century?

The first work that brought Hobson into the mainstream, which also, perhaps, relegated him for some time to the fringe of economic theory was his book with A F Mummery called *Physiology of Industry*. The book was unorthodox in an economic sense as it “challenged the prevailing view that capitalism was self-equilibrating system... argued that depressions were inherent because oversaving was inevitable, causing a lack of demand for current output.”¹²⁸ Additionally, it suggested that “*laissez-faire* capitalism was fatally flawed” and criticised the “protestant thrift ethic.”¹²⁹ Hobson’s relegation as a “heretic” of economic theory may have been less because of the content of the *Physiology of Industry* but because “economics was seeking to establish its claims to academic respectability.”¹³⁰ However, Hobson’s humanism was also important in the “revolt against the accepted theory of *laissez-faire* as a security for the welfare of the community regarded as a productive and consumptive whole.”¹³¹ As John Allet put it: “For Hobson economics was properly a branch of ethics. Consequently, he was both fascinated and appalled by the development of economics as a separate

¹²⁸ Townshend, *J A Hobson*, 4.

¹²⁹ Townshend, *J A Hobson*, 4.

¹³⁰ Peter Clarke, “Hobson and Keynes as Economic Heretics,” in *Reappraising J A Hobson: Humanism and Welfare*, Michael Freeden, ed., (London, 1990), 101.

¹³¹ Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic*, 38.

science.”¹³² Hobson would have some vindication with Maynard Keynes’ publication of his *General Theory*. In the several letters exchanged between Keynes and an elderly Hobson, they still had some disagreement over underconsumption, though Keynes recognised Hobson’s contributions to economics. In one of the letters to Hobson, Keynes stated: “But I am shamed how blind I was for many years to your essential contention as to the insufficiency of effective demand.”¹³³

However, while working on economic ideas, Hobson was also at the forefront of liberal thought in Britain. As a member of the Rainbow Circle and co-founder of the *Progressive Review*, Hobson was in the same political circles as Ramsay MacDonald and those who would play part in the 1906-14 Liberal reforms.¹³⁴ Robertson would also be an active member of the Rainbow Circle. The *Progressive Review*, while relatively short-lived was influential at the time, and would include contributions from not only Hobson and the future Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald but also philosopher T H Green, physician Havelock Ellis and poet and writer Edward Carpenter.¹³⁶ Later, Hobson would be a frequent contributor to the *New Statesmen* and *The Nation* as one of a core group of radical writers including Henry Noel Brailsford.

It is interesting, at this point, to contrast Hobson with Bradlaugh. Where Bradlaugh would spend much of his time vexing the establishment, Hobson was, in effect, co-operating with the leaders of the Liberal movement

¹³² John Allett, *New Liberalism: The Political Economy of J A Hobson* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1981), 470.

¹³³ Donald Moggridge, ed., *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes: v xxix* (London, MacMillan: 1979), 211.

¹³⁴ Townsend, *J A Hobson*, 6.

¹³⁶ Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic*, 52-54.

and eventual Labour Prime Minister. Even Robertson in his biography of Bradlaugh wrote: “For the majority of conventional English people of his day, it will already have been gathered by the unbiased reader, Bradlaugh was a kind of ogre.”¹³⁷ Hobson demonstrates that secularists did not have to remain outside of the establishment, but rather could find common cause with those in power and exert influence on those who could shape policy.

However, the secularist association was not just confined to the Rainbow Circle. Hobson would apply his ethical and humanist principles to a range of policy issues in the early twentieth century. He would co-author with Brailsford *The Living Wage*, which advocated a legal minimum wage (decades before one would exist). This was based on a policy paper written from the Labour Party. Hobson was on the Joint Committee on the Living Wage, from which he produced a paper on living allowances and a living wage.¹³⁸ This included:

- “(i) A complete medical services (prevention and treatment) for all children from birth up to the school leaving age.
- (ii) Pre-natal and post-natal Maternity service, together with a money payment for each child for the first two year after birth (or one year if the longer period is impracticable at the outset.)
- (iii) The provision of Nursery Schools for children up to the age of admission to the Elementary Schools
- (iv) The raising of the school-leaving age to 15 (ultimately 16) with maintenance grants (cash allowances) between 15 and 15 (or 16).”¹³⁹

The living wage would be “a system of family allowances financed by direct taxation. A ‘living income; is the ideal: a living wage only one means of

¹³⁷ J M Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh* (London: Watts & Co., 1920), 133.

¹³⁸ London School of Economics archive. Citrine, 3/1/5, Joint Committee on the living wage etc. Interim report on the family allowances, 1.

¹³⁹ Interim report on the family allowances, 1.

realising it, though doubtless the most important.”¹⁴⁰ Hobson argued in the *Problem of Poverty* that even though people might work all their lives they inevitably ended their days depending on charity.¹⁴¹ Additionally, he saw charity as a consequence of “huge, immorally gained, surpluses that the rich possessed.”¹⁴² Historically, secularists also disliked the reliance on charity as so many charitable organisations were religious. Therefore, a better way to reduce poverty was through the better distribution of wealth, and a system such as the minimum wage appealed to Hobson. However, it also meant that workers would not have to conform to any pious and religious conformity to gain access to charity. He was also very critical about the Church’s response to economic reform in the polemic *God and Mammon*. For example, he wrote that the Anglican Church’s attitude was “one of platitudinarianism, loose, suave, noncommittal, on all important proposals of economic reform.”¹⁴³ The minimum wage was a nexus of both Liberal and secularist policy, one that Hobson and Brailsford both believed would benefit society.

This would not be the only time Hobson would serve on a policy committee. Earlier, in 1918 he was “chairman of a party committee on trade policy and also wrote a paper for the Labour Economic Advisory Committee” against imperial preferences.¹⁴⁴ In the Labour Party itself, there was “a good deal of implicit sympathy towards Hobsonian underconsumptionist explanations of depression and unemployment, two phenomena that loomed

¹⁴⁰ Interim report on the family allowances, 1.

¹⁴¹ Hobson, *The Problem of Poverty*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10710/10710-h/10710-h.htm>, accessed 29 April 2018.

¹⁴² Townsend, *J A Hobson*, 62.

¹⁴³ J A Hobson, *God and Mammon: The Relations of Religion and Economics* (Watts & Co: London, 1931). 45.

¹⁴⁴ Michael Freeden, “Hobson’s Evolving Conceptions of Human Nature,” *Reappraising J. A. Hobson: Humanism and Welfare*, ed Michael Freeden (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990) 41.

large in political and economic thinking in Britain in the 1920s.”¹⁴⁵ In 1947, in the seventeenth L T Hobhouse Memorial Lecture, Brailsford stated: “I think I may risk the statement that round this time Hobson was the most respected intellectual influence in the Labour Movement.”¹⁴⁶ Given the period of social and political change at this point in time, this is a significant statement on Hobson’s influence.

L T Hobhouse also was influential when it came to the reformulation of liberalism in the twentieth century and the modernising of the concept. According to James Meadowcraft, Hobhouse “was the most sophisticated intellectual exponent of the ‘New Liberalism’ which emerged in Britain in the closing years of the nineteenth century.”¹⁴⁷ What Hobhouse did was to take the ideas of classical liberalism to “recognize more adequately the claims of community, establish the centrality of basic welfare rights, and legitimate an activist democratic state.”¹⁴⁸ *Liberalism* became the most cited of Hobhouse’s many books and was still considered “the best twentieth-century statement on liberal ideals” in 1962, 50 years after its first edition.¹⁴⁹ This again, highlights that secularists had a huge impact on politics and political thought in the twentieth century.

Snell and Robertson may have not had the influence in terms of theory or policy that either Hobson or Hobhouse had, but they still were able to exert political influence as they were both elected to Parliament with Snell

¹⁴⁵ Freeden, “Hobson’s Evolving Conceptions of Human Nature,” 41.

¹⁴⁶ H N Brailsford, “The Life-Work of J A Hobson,” *L T Hobhouse Memorial Trust Lecture no. 17* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), 13.

¹⁴⁷ James Meadowcraft, *Liberalism and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), ix.

¹⁴⁸ Meadowcraft, *Liberalism and Other Writings*, ix.

¹⁴⁹ L T Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 2.

eventually being appointed to the House of Lords. With Bradlaugh having secured the ability for both these men to affirm or swear according to their conscience, they were not subject to the legalistic machinations that affected Bradlaugh's ability to take his seat in the House of Commons.

Snell was elected as the Labour Member of Parliament for East Woolwich in 1922 and sat as an MP until 19 March 1931.¹⁵⁰ He then became Baron Snell and sat in the Lords from 1931 until his death in 1944.¹⁵¹ With Snell's maiden speech in the House of Commons, the stark difference is readily apparent when compared to Bradlaugh's first days. After Snell put forth his argument for the government to consider the plight of his constituents, the MP for Hampstead George Balfour stated:

“Before addressing to the House a few words on the matter which we are now discussing, I feel that I shall be expressing the feeling of the House if I extend to the hon. Member who has just spoken our congratulations upon his very acceptable speech, delivered in terms which show that he appreciates the sense of the House and the responsibilities attaching to a Member of this Assembly.”¹⁵²

Balfour then proceeded to rebut Snell's claim that the government had a special duty towards workers where the government was the main employer in the area. One can then compare Balfour's courteous response to Snell to the debates that ensued even after Bradlaugh's third election win:

“I rise to Order. I wish to ask you, Sir, whether it is in accordance with the Rules of the House that the succession of coarse and gratuitous insults which the hon. Gentleman has offered down to the present moment, in the course of his speech, to the religion of almost every Member of the House—whether the tissue of coarse and gratuitous insults which the hon. Member has just offered, in a perfectly

¹⁵⁰ <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/people/mr-henry-snell/>, accessed 22 March 2014.

¹⁵¹ <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/people/mr-henry-snell/>, accessed 22 March 2014.

¹⁵² Relief Schemes (Government Assistance), *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th ser., vol. 159, col 1043.

deliberate manner, to the religion of every Member of the House, is to be permitted as being in accordance with the Orders of the House? Is there no Rule to impose decency upon the hon. Member?"¹⁵³

At the point where he delivered his maiden speech, Snell had spent many years within the secularist movement, holding positions within secularist organisations or being partly employed by them. He would have had equal problems with the rest of the Honourable Members' religion and yet he encountered none of the rancour that dogged Bradlaugh throughout his parliamentary career. However, further research is needed to examine the acceptance (or non-acceptance) of differing beliefs and unbelief in parliament. This could resolve the argument about whether Bradlaugh was merely subject to a general antipathy of the time, or if it was his behaviour that led to his initial difficulties in securing his ability to speak in parliament. As well, it could be that there were changes in the demographics of the House of Commons that secured Snell and Robertson more favourable conditions on their arrival (aside from the obvious change in their ability to affirm).

Snell had wide-ranging interests as an MP, but he consistently advocated for the best interests of his constituents. Every year while in Parliament, Snell attempted to advance some measure or relief to alleviate poverty or unemployment in his constituency in Woolwich. As with his maiden speech to parliament, his concerns often revolved around the reduction of people employed by the Woolwich Arsenal. In February 1925, he pleaded

¹⁵³ Parliamentary Oath, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 4th ser., vol. 284, col 457.

that 962 men with 20 years of service should have been given a pension.¹⁵⁴ A month later, he advocated for a pay raise for skilled workers.¹⁵⁵ In 1930 he lobbied for a deputation of workers from Woolwich to meet with the Financial Secretary to the War Office about the reduction of workers employed at Woolwich.¹⁵⁶ Given Woolwich Arsenal was a major employer in his constituency, he was vigilant in holding the government to account and attempted to get explanations for reductions in hours or changes in conditions that could affect the workers' lives. This would be the expected behaviour of someone looking after the economic welfare of their constituents, especially if they were from the Labour Party.

As well as looking after the people of Woolwich, he made public his defence of secular and radical positions. As mentioned above, he was open in his support of abolishing blasphemy laws. However, his advocacy for secularist points of view did not end there. In the debate over the 1928 Prayer Book Measure, Snell made a speech highlighting the need for religious tolerance – including those of non-religious positions. He began by pointing out that "...it is doubtful whether anything new or useful can be said in regard to it, but it may truthfully be stated that the problem has been approached, in the main, from the Anglican attitude on the one side, and the evangelical attitude on the other side."¹⁵⁷ He then contrasts this debate with the rest of the population (potentially pointing out the ridiculousness of a

¹⁵⁴ Woolwich Arsenal (Discharges), *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th ser., vol. 169, col c1586W.

¹⁵⁵ Woolwich Arsenal (Wages), *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th ser., vol. 170, col 1795-6W.

¹⁵⁶ Woolwich Arsenal, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th ser., vol. 235, col 194-5.

¹⁵⁷ Prayer Book Measure, 1928, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th ser., vol. 218, col 1082.

legislative body arguing over theology):

“I venture to enter in this Debate to try to state the position of what may be called the unchurched multitude, who do not belong either to a church or chapel, who are neither erudite nor ignorant, who are neither mystics nor rationalists, but who have a deep reverence for the spiritual heritage of our people who proudly acknowledge the rock whence they were hewn, and look to the Members of this House to-day and to-morrow to preserve for them the religious liberties which their fathers have won for them.”¹⁵⁸

The reference to religious liberties being won could have had a double meaning, given that Snell would have been knowledgeable about liberties won *from* religion.

Later in the speech, he made a plea for the separation of Church and State and perhaps the disestablishment of the Church:

“The Church has to select where she is going to stand. She may be free, but, if she is not free she must be loyal. I want her to be a free Church amongst free Churches. While the work of the State is too important to be interfered with by the Church, I believe also that the work of the Church is immensely too important to be interfered with by the State. Each in its place is best.”¹⁵⁹

While in isolation, this might just be seen as a plea for the Church to be left to its own devices, free of political interference. However, the second part of the argument sets forth a very secularist position:

“The State has nothing to do with the teaching of religion. It can do many wonderful things for our bodies, it can give us a beautiful environment, it can help us to make life beautiful and healthy in a material sense, but it never interferes with a man's soul except to its disadvantage. Religion, as I see it, is a great affair between a man and the universe, and a State religion can never be anything more than a discordant reflection of a man's inner life. It is a thing which is not wholly understood by himself and can never be understood by others.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Prayer Book Measure, 1928, col 1067.

¹⁵⁹ Prayer Book Measure, 1928, col 1067.

¹⁶⁰ Prayer Book Measure, 1928, col 1087.

Aside from advocating tolerance, his positions also confirmed his outlook as firmly secularist – asking for religious considerations to have no impact upon policy. This was emphasised again in his work in the House of Lords. In a discussion on the Divorce Bill in Scotland he stated:

“Whatever our view may be as to marriage, all of us, I think, are deeply impressed by the increasing anxiety that there is as to the spiritual continuance of family life, and one cannot associate all that we know of the best of family life with the great mass of misery that now exists owing to the present legal conditions...I could not personally refrain from voting for any Bill of which the object was to relieve the immense amount of misery that now exists. It is not as though we were asked to leap in the dark.”¹⁶¹

In the second reading of the bill he stated that: “some of those who oppose this measure appear to be willing to let the past decide the issues of the present.”¹⁶² In no uncertain terms, Snell put forth the secularist argument that religion should not influence the decision:

“The noble Viscount, Lord FitzAlan of Derwent, says that this Bill strikes at the root of the doctrine of marriage as a sacrament. Put in the crudest form, the reply to that statement would be that we are to be relieved of our responsibility for our domestic institutions, in our own country in our own time, by the views of marriage that have come down to us from other, and not too intelligent ages.”¹⁶³

While Snell clearly held the same secularist ideas as Bradlaugh, he managed to convey them in a way which fellow MPs found more agreeable, or at least at a time that it was more likely to be accepted. Regardless, on various occasions he would advocate the secularist positions of freedom of thought and belief and separation of church and state.

¹⁶¹ Divorce (Scotland) Bill, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Lords, 5th ser., vol. 104, col 118.

¹⁶² Marriage Bill, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Lords, 5th ser., vol. 105, col 752. A similar criticism was levelled at those blocking the dissemination of birth control knowledge, which will be examined in chapter 5..

¹⁶³ Marriage Bill, col 752.

J M Robertson served 12 years in parliament, representing Tyneside from 1906 to 1918.¹⁶⁴ He was put forward by the Bradlaugh Radical Association to run for Bradlaugh's Northampton seat but he was defeated in the 1892 and 1895 elections.¹⁶⁵ He would not run again until 1906, and instead would write about free trade and his opposition to the Boer War (reporting from South Africa, much like Hobson).¹⁶⁶ Robertson was sent by the pro-Boer paper the *Morning Leader* and argued in his reports that the war only served to undermine the Empire and the "moral code of the British majority alike in the colonies and the mother country."¹⁶⁷ Nash also points out the complex contributions secularists made as critics of the war, in that they had a "fundamental distrust of imperial motives that appeared to flout openly abroad rights that were only grudgingly being accepted at home."¹⁶⁸ They also recognised that the "conquest and the subjugation of infidel peoples" also led to circular reasoning to justify the wars themselves.¹⁶⁹ This was a specific secularist critique, with their worldview being based on enlightenment and rationalist values.¹⁷⁰ This demonstrates that even though Hobson and Robertson were part of wider anti-war and internationalist organisations and campaigns, their secularist principles gave them unique insights into imperial politics. It additionally shows the complexity of secularist campaigning in the twentieth century, how secularist critiques were used to pierce the justifications for empire, expansionist wars and the denigration of other

¹⁶⁴ <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/people/mr-john-robertson-1/>, accessed 22 March 2014.

¹⁶⁵ Wells, *J M Robertson (1856-1933): Liberal, Rationalist & Scholar*, 34-35.

¹⁶⁶ Wells, *J M Robertson (1856-1933): Liberal, Rationalist & Scholar*, 38.

¹⁶⁷ Dekkers, *J M Robertson: Rationalist and Literary Critic*, 32.

¹⁶⁸ Nash, "Taming the God of Battles," 267.

¹⁶⁹ Nash, "Secular and Moral Critiques of the War", 267.

¹⁷⁰ Nash, "Secular and Moral Critiques of the War", 267.

cultures. This is echoed again in the support of birth control by secularists, which would also feature some anti-imperial critiques.

Robertson was also a liberal and would write his own book on the subject *The Meaning of Liberalism* (1925), though it was not as popular as Hobhouse's restatement on the subject. However, in the introduction the book by the Earl of Oxford and Asquith, Robertson is described as:

“one of the most distinguished political and economic thinkers of the day, he has a special claim upon the attention of all serious students of national and international problems. They will find in this book, not dogmatic assertion or *ad captandum* rhetoric, but reasoned demonstration and suggestion conducted in the spirit of intellectual breadth and equity.”¹⁷¹

Robertson's view was that “Liberalism is to recognize the element of ‘right’ which is established by the universal moral law of reciprocity...and to find the feasible means of satisfying the eternal and indestructible aspiration towards ‘liberty, equality, fraternity.’”¹⁷² During his tenure in Parliament he was most active in promoting Free Trade, suffrage, greater freedom for the colonies and constitutional reform.¹⁷³ Within in the Liberal Party itself he was at various points in time the Chairman of the Liberal Publications Department and President of the National Liberal Federation.¹⁷⁴ As mentioned earlier, he was also part of the Rainbow Circle and contributed to the *Progressive Review*. However, he did not always come across as a sympathetic character, as Balfour stated: “he does not make the House generally more sympathetic with his arguments when he thinks that everybody who

¹⁷¹ J M Robertson, *The Meaning of Liberalism* (London: Methuen & Co., 1925), v.

¹⁷² Robertson, *The Meaning of Liberalism*, 38-39.

¹⁷³ Wells, *J M Robertson (1856-1933): Liberal, Rationalist & Scholar*, 40.

¹⁷⁴ Wells, *J M Robertson (1856-1933): Liberal, Rationalist & Scholar*, 52.

disagrees with him is either an ignoramus or a fool.”¹⁷⁵ Robertson was known for his combativeness, in one instance his friend F Maddison wrote in a letter to Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner that Robertson “did not mellow with age.”¹⁷⁶ Hobson attempted to counsel Robertson on his temperament, to which Robertson replied, “You forget that I am only four generations from a painted Pict.”¹⁷⁷ Needless to say, Robertson was probably closer to Bradlaugh in temperament than some of his contemporaries.

Robertson made the active choice to enter politics over a literary career. As he stated in a letter in 1900, he wondered which career would gain him the greatest influence.¹⁷⁸ Though Robertson did not have an entirely easy journey to the House of Commons (including a failed libel case against a local newspaper and ever precarious finances), he did not face the same issues as Bradlaugh had done in order to take his seat. From there, he was able to advocate for secularist causes, where they might arise. From his own words, he believed he could have more influence in politics; and from his long history within the secularist movement, it would be difficult to argue that secularist motivations would be absent from his tenure as a politician.

For example, Robertson’s secularist views can be seen in the debates over the Education Bill in 1906. Robertson pointed out the hypocrisy of members who criticised secular only instruction “and yet they said they had no faith in the children being sent to school for religious teaching unless they

¹⁷⁵ Wells, *J M Robertson (1856-1933): Liberal, Rationalist & Scholar*, 40.

¹⁷⁶ Dekkers, *J M Robertson: Rationalist and Literary Critic*, 48.

¹⁷⁷ Dekkers, *J M Robertson: Rationalist and Literary Critic*, 48.

¹⁷⁸ Dekkers, *J M Robertson: Rationalist and Literary Critic*, 32.

were compelled.”¹⁷⁹ He has a fairly blunt criticism of his fellow members of parliament on the quality of debate over the bill as well: “He thought he knew something about theology, but when he came to this House as a politician he found himself in a Sanhedrim of amateur theologians in which the Bill was discussed less on political than on religious grounds.”¹⁸⁰ While not as explicitly secularist as Snell earlier, Robertson pointed out the ridiculousness of debating theology rather than the political justifications for such opposition. Finally, he states: “Yet the conscience clause had not been taken advantage of for this purpose, and the worst class of parents were, in a variety of ways, under the influence of the Church missions. The opponents of the clause were trying to refuse one kind of political freedom to one of the best classes of parents.”¹⁸¹ This echoes the nineteenth century tendency to discriminate against irreligious belief based on class.

He also raised the issue of a prosecution of blasphemy in 1908. He asked the Secretary of State for the Home department on what grounds and apprehensions the prosecution was based on.¹⁸² Unsurprising, the usual reasons were given for the use of blasphemy charges: that “it was necessary to protect the public against grossly indecent and ribald language.”¹⁸³ Robertson was unable to reply, but it demonstrates his ability as an MP to critique such prosecutions as part of his parliamentary privilege.

All four of these secularists thus participated in political life to a degree

¹⁷⁹ Education (England and Wales) Bill, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 4th ser., vol. 159, col 1475.

¹⁸⁰ Education (England and Wales) Bill, col 1475.

¹⁸¹ Education (England and Wales) Bill, col 1476.

¹⁸² Blasphemy Prosecution, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 4th ser., vol. 183, col 1370.

¹⁸³ Blasphemy Prosecution, col 1371.

that many a generation previously were unable to do. Their influence ranged from being preeminent thinkers in the Labour and Liberal parties to participating in the legislative process. I would contend that even though they were acting politically, at least part of their motivations and guiding principles were secular in nature. Upon occasion, they would explicitly state that their humanism or secularism was a driving motivation. It would be difficult to see how secular principles, which they all ascribed to in print or in discussion, would not form an integral part of their political worldview. Indeed, as seen above, many of the issues of interest to secularists would turn up in the political arena. They were well positioned to inject into the political system their secular worldview. In Roberson's case, he consciously made a choice to go into politics to have a greater influence in society. However, aside from direct involvement in the political parties and in parliament, there may have also been a softer influence – The Rainbow Circle.

The Rainbow Circle - Hobson and Robertson

Hobson and Robertson both belonged to the Rainbow Circle, so named after the Rainbow tavern where the group first met.¹⁸⁴ It contained a mixture of writers, journalists and politicians including Ramsay MacDonald and those who would bring about the early twentieth century Liberal Reforms.¹⁸⁵ With at least three secularist members, including the leading intellectual defining the Liberal movement, there is something to be said for the more informal

¹⁸⁴ Townshend, *J A Hobson*, 5.

¹⁸⁵ Townsend, *J A Hobson*, 6. These were a set of policy reforms passed between 1906 and 1914 by the Liberal Party to address issues of poverty and poor working conditions. One example of such legislation was the Workmen's Compensation Act which was passed in 1906.

methods of political influence. In the press, reporting on the Rainbow Circle's gathering in honour of the Prime Minister, Lord Olivier commented that "the membership of the Society is limited to twenty-five, and, although mainly liberal in tone, it has included men of various opinions...It is no slight distinction for so small a body to have contributed so large a proportion of the membership of a single Government."¹⁸⁶

The first session of the Rainbow Circle was between November 1894 and June 1895 and the first provisional committee included Herbert Burrows, William Clarke, J A Hobson, Murray MacDonald MP, J R MacDonald and Richard Stapley.¹⁸⁷ It is interesting that Hobson was a founding member of the Rainbow Circle, but more importantly it shows that he was within the sphere of influence of all these members to begin with. The founding of the Rainbow Circle was before his work on imperialism and must have been due to either his journalistic endeavors or his economic ideology (as it was after the publication of the *Physiology of Industry*). The latter seems likely given that the first discussion on December 5th 1894 was written and presented by Hobson on the topic of "Economic deficiencies of the Manchester school."¹⁸⁸ In the lecture, Hobson argues that the Manchester School of economics was "created for its own special purposes an economic man, an embodiment of the self motives only. Such a man has no existence and...has an inadequate bearing on human life."¹⁸⁹ Hobson saw that people did not act like independent economic actors, and as such basing your economic system on

¹⁸⁶ London School of Economics archive, Bound minute book, Rainbow Circle 1, 1894-1900, 1.

¹⁸⁷ Bound minute book, Rainbow Circle 1, 1894-1900, 1.

¹⁸⁸ Bound minute book, Rainbow Circle 1, 1894-1900, 3.

¹⁸⁹ Bound minute book, Rainbow Circle 1, 1894-1900, 4.

behaviour that did not exist was unacceptable. As a consequence, he argued for a more humane and moral economic system. In the discussion that followed, the group largely agreed with Hobson and that the Manchester School's "economics were simply expressions of the business experiences of the manufacturers and financiers who followed it and that it had therefore ahistorical justification which does not hold good now under changing social circumstances."¹⁹⁰

Hobson, alongside being a member of the Rainbow Circle's committee, was a frequent lecturer – covering topics such as the state's role over mass unemployment (1897-98) and "The Progressive Party" (1898-99).¹⁹¹ In the seventh session, there were discussions on political philosophers. While Hobson covered Machiavelli, Robertson picked an ethical society favourite – Auguste Comte.¹⁹² In the eighth session, the same theme prevailed with Hobson covering Marx and Robertson picking a secularist favourite – Thomas Paine.¹⁹³ A lot seems to have changed from *The Age of Reason* being a book that you could get prosecuted for publishing to the ideas of Paine being discussed by Members of Parliament and other political agents.

The discussions also tackled issues important to secularists. Another talk, this time given by Ramsay MacDonald, was on the 'State and Education'.¹⁹⁴ Education had long been a theme of Frederick James Gould in *The Literary Guide* and his publications through Watts & Company. The core

¹⁹⁰ Bound minute book, Rainbow Circle 1, 1894-1900, 4.

¹⁹¹ Bound minute book, Rainbow Circle 1, 1894-1900, 48, 66.

¹⁹² Bound minute book, Rainbow Circle 1, 1894-1900, 7th Session.

¹⁹³ Bound minute book, Rainbow Circle 1, 1894-1900, 8th Session.

¹⁹⁴ Bound minute book, Rainbow Circle 1, 1894-1900, 2nd session, 32.

question that Macdonald raised was: “what are the rights of the parent regarding the kind of education to be given to his child?”¹⁹⁵ The argument that was put forth was a very secular one indeed:

“The parent has no ‘right’ to impose, or have imposed, his dogmas on his child. The need of the time in Education is to protect the child from the parent. So far as the development of character is concerned the voluntary schools are pernicious in the extreme, and the introduction of the Bible as a text book is particularly bad as a moral influence.”¹⁹⁶

The paper’s topic did not seem to be very controversial in the group, with only a line stating that the debate mainly focused on the rights of parents and the Bible in school.¹⁹⁷ Even if the Rainbow Circle was already sympathetic to these arguments, it would be difficult to find a better political arena for secularists like Robertson and Hobson to voice theirs. Given the sympathies of the Rainbow Circle lying with liberal ideas and including Members of Parliament, civil servants and a future Prime Minister, they were well placed to further secularist aims.

The Progressive Review, the journal started by the Rainbow Circle to discuss liberal ideas, also had secularist themes present. Most of the articles are unattributed. In the introduction, it emphasised reason in that “it seeks to give coherent form and rational purpose to a progressive policy.”¹⁹⁸ As well, it paid tribute to previous radical thought, “The leaven of free thought in politics, that educational work which History will rank as the greatest positive achievement of the older Radicalism, has necessarily wrought as a solvent or

¹⁹⁵ Bound minute book, Rainbow Circle 1, 1894-1900, 2nd session, 32.

¹⁹⁶ Bound minute book, Rainbow Circle 1, 1894-1900, 2nd session, 32.

¹⁹⁷ Bound minute book, Rainbow Circle 1, 1894-1900, 2nd session, 33.

¹⁹⁸ “Introductory,” *The Progressive Review* v 1, (1886): 8. Later on it states that the reason for leaving them nameless was their editorial preference but several articles by those recognised in the circles of progressive thought would also be included.

separate influence in intellectual life.”¹⁹⁹ With this being the introduction to the first edition of *The Progressive Review*, it is easy to see why Hobson and Robertson may have been invited to help form the Rainbow Circle. The positive view of radicalism, which forty years previously would have been politically dangerous was now heralded as a force for change and good.

The Progressive Review took its mission seriously and forthrightly stated that it thought it was relevant and potentially influential:

“Since the doubt may rise whether a Review can make any really serviceable contribution to the much need rally of progressive forces, it may be well to remind readers of the important part which review literature has played as a formative influence of English politics in the nineteenth century. When the Whigs stood without a leader and without a purpose...the *Edinburgh Review* was founded...Twenty years later a band of Utilitarian Radicals, renouncing the inefficiency of Whig opportunism...sought in the *Westminster Review* an organ for the expression of their ideas. With a similar object the *Fortnightly Review* was established by a later school of Radicals.”²⁰⁰

It emphasised again the idea of being rational, of applying scientific and reasoned arguments to the two main areas of *The Progressive Review's* interests: namely, social questions and internationalism.²⁰¹ It ended the introduction with another call to reason: “we appeal to unite in bringing the capacities of ‘common sense’ and sober judgment to bear upon political and social institutions, intellectual creeds, and dogmas, without fear or favour, owning no other authorities than reason and a sense of the common good.”²⁰² This again reads like the definitions of freethought and rationalism from the secular organisations in organs like *The Freethinker*. It does not have the forward and rough attacks on religion that the earlier secularist and

¹⁹⁹ “Introductory,” 1.

²⁰⁰ “Introductory,” 5.

²⁰¹ “Introductory,” 6-7.

²⁰² “Introductory,” 8-9.

freethought periodicals had, but it still carried the same message of relying on reason and science.

One of the articles that Robertson is credited with in *The Progressive Review* would have made Bradlaugh proud: “The Arrest of English Republicanism.” Given that republicanism was at its height and was somewhat synonymous with Bradlaugh, it is fascinating that this was now a topic that the foremost liberal thinkers would see fit to print. What is more interesting is that Robertson himself mentioned Bradlaugh as well, as he was delegated to deliver a message of support to Spanish republicans after at conference in 1873.²⁰³ After a description of the reasons that the republican movement declined, Robertson has some harsh criticism for the monarchy, wondering if the combined militarism would lead to an active militarist king.²⁰⁴ He ends with a warning:

“So that the appeal for a republican movement is not merely the assertion of a worthy as against a grossly unworthy political ideal: it is the warning, while yet there is still time, that the further maintenance of the unworthy ideal may bring us to pass in which it shall give its own colour to those sides of our life which we had supposed to have passed from its sway.”²⁰⁵

This is not the only incident of more radical and republican tendencies in *The Progressive Review*. There is another article about the disestablishment of the House of Lords – this time un-credited – so it is possible that it could also have been written by Robertson. Throughout his parliamentary career, Robertson advocated for the abolition of the House of Lords, underscoring his republican position.²⁰⁶ For example, in a debate

²⁰³ J M Robertson, “The Arrest of English Republicanism,” *The Progressive Review*, 220.

²⁰⁴ J M Robertson, “The Arrest of English Republicanism,” 228.

²⁰⁵ J M Robertson, “The Arrest of English Republicanism,” 228.

²⁰⁶ Wells, *J. M. Robertson (1856-1933): Liberal, Rationalist & Scholar*, 31.

about the House of Lords in 1907, Robertson stated: “The institution of a Second Chamber in most cases is a pure superstition, based upon the practice of our Legislature, where its survival is purely fortuitous. It is practically a device to thwart democracy.”²⁰⁷ The article in the *Progressive Review* had a similarly stark attack on the House of Lords: “Whatever be the name or professions of the party of progress in the immediate future, that party can do nothing of any importance until it has prepared with a scheme for cancelling the opposition of the House of Lords.”²⁰⁸ It also stated that the House of Commons needed urgent reform but that “even with reform in the commons, the House of Lords still blocks the way, a barrier to progress and an insult to the modern ideas of equality...”²⁰⁹ While almost becoming the successor to Bradlaugh’s constituency in 1892, Robertson it seems was the natural successor to Bradlaugh – though possibly more successful in ingratiating himself with the political elite.

Conclusion

The twentieth century secularists like Foote, Hobson, Hobhouse, Snell and Robertson all built upon the legacy and victories of secularist campaigns in the nineteenth century. They used reason and logic to dismember religious arguments about divorce or education in the House of Commons. They took advantage of the same state institutions, previously used by their opponents to prosecute earlier secularists, to win a battle in the courts that their

²⁰⁷ House of Lords, 1907, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons 5th ser., vol 176, col 1234.

²⁰⁸ “Ending the House of Lords,” *The Progressive Review* 1 (1897): 97.

²⁰⁹ “Ending the House of Lords,” 97.

nineteenth century counterparts considered unwinnable. They drew upon moral and ethical economic frameworks to form policies, such as the National Minimum Wage. They sought and secured positions that would provide them a platform to influence the country. Finally, they were part of a small liberal elite, and were in a privileged position to advocate secularist positions to the highest ranks of power. They were no doubt secularists, though they may not have fitted the exact mould of what was a secularist in the eyes of the *National Reformer* in the nineteenth century. A secularist worldview for these men would deliver not just a more ethical economic world, but also a liberal one, where anyone would be able to be true to their own beliefs and not have to conform to what was tolerated.

Another facet of the political involvement of the secularists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was their interest in events beyond the UK. To a certain extent, secularists were always interested in international events and also the plight of secularists around the world. This will be looked at in more detail in conjunction with secularist involvement in the peace movement. What separates many of the secularists from other peace activists is that they did not become disillusioned at the outbreak of the First World War – they continued to strive for peace and internationalist ideas in the inter-war period and beyond. Hobson, already noted as a critic of imperialism, went much further with his thoughts on internationalism, especially with *Towards International Government*. Robertson and Hobhouse were also broadly anti-imperialist but possibly not as radical as Hobson. In the internationalist sphere, Hobson would be joined by another secularist, who shared his political views, Henry Noel Brailsford. They would use

secularist arguments to campaign for international cooperation and organisation.

Chapter 3: Secularist internationalism, peace and anti-imperialism

There were several different ways that secularists were involved in internationalist organisations and campaigns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of their involvement reflected earlier secularist activity, for example the organisation of internationalist freethought, which incorporated the different secular societies that had formed in the nineteenth century. While more outwardly facing, international freethought maintained the very inwardly focused traditions of the older secularist organisation, examining many of the same freethought issues as in the nineteenth century. This is hardly surprising, given it was these organisations themselves for the most part (rather than individuals) who sent representatives to the international freethought congresses.

However, even this more insular perpetuation of secularist organisation reflects the fact that organised secularism as a whole did not have such a precipitous decline as reflected in the historiography. As will be seen, the persistence of the freethought congresses through two world wars and beyond, indicate national and international support for secularist ideas. The creation of new and the continued existence of old secularist organisations into the twentieth century thus once again undermines the oft repeated refrain of decline. Additionally, while ultimately limited in scope, the International Freethought Union and numerous congresses showed no less commitment to freethought ideas than their predecessors. They demonstrated a dedication to secularist principles like freedom of speech and freedom of thought in the face of the fascist threat in Europe. The history of

secularism is often one of censorship (in the UK this was generally through blasphemy and obscenity laws) and the encroachment on freethought ideals was apparent to these organisations early on.

However, outside the secular organisations, as with Liberal and Labour politics, there was a group of secularists advocating the greater transparency of government for the benefit of the electorate when it came to international affairs. They overlap heavily with the Liberal and Labour policy makers and MPs seen previously, such as J A Hobson and J M Robertson. However, there are additional and influential individuals, most notably Henry Noel Brailsford but also Fenner Brockway and perhaps even Norman Angell. These secularists were unconvinced by the justifications for imperialism within national politics, or the entanglement of religion in justifying imperial wars. Additionally, they were able to articulate a vision for an internationalised world, underpinned by multilateral institutions, greater communication and scientific consensus to counter the escalation of nationalist and often imperialist interests. Even though national and international events were ultimately out of their control, through various methods they exerted influence on the national conversation about internationalism. However, as with domestic politics, there was often a secularist argument to made for internationalism.

I will make the argument that it was the organisation around internationalism, rather than solely peace issues, that was the main contribution of these secularists in the twentieth century. Their expertise was in demand within the UK, as well as internationally as political theorists and journalists. Additionally, their specific internationalist visions supported

secularist ideals, such as freedom of thought and belief. Finally, it was their ability to articulate the natural economic outcome of imperialism which afforded them significant support for their ideas within internationalist organisations and within the Labour Party and affiliated associations. While the other peace and internationalist freethought organisations also had a part to play, they reflect the narrow interest that defined nineteenth century secularist activism. Both the International Freethought Association and the Rationalist Peace Society made minor contributions to the activism in this area; but I would argue it was the efforts of Brailsford, Hobson and others that made a larger impact and were more influential in articulating a vision of how internationalism could work in practice and in politics.

Internationalism and peace

The organised peace movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were just one type of internationalism that pervaded professions, technologies and movements across the world. While nationalism flourished at this time, so did internationalism, creating organisations that cut across national boundaries and concentrated on issues that single nations could not solve by themselves.¹ The rush for the creation of these international associations was so frenzied that an international organisation for cataloguing international organisations was founded in the capital of internationalism, Brussels. Internationalist groups were generally formed of “intellectuals, humanitarians, socialists and pacifists” who would organise

¹ David Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 1.

events or make up the membership of these groups.² Brailsford, Hobson and other secularists would very much fit this mould. As with national politics, activists were not always interested in just one form of activism: secularism and Labour policy could (and did) live comfortably side by side with journalists and policy formulators like Hobson and Brailsford. This same argument can be extended to secularist activism in the international sphere. As Laqua states, “internationalism could be appropriated by different groups and movements.”³ I argue that certain secularists did ‘appropriate’ internationalism and made the case for international institutions, as these new organisations allowed greater freedoms than would be present in a national context. This then can contribute to a “broader definition of internationalism” from a specifically secularist perspective.⁴ Specifically, secularists would enshrine the need for a secularist approach to internationalist politics. Pacifists and the peace movement was just one strand of international organisational activity, and even if it faltered or certain groups became less effective because of the cataclysm of the Great War, the internationalist project itself did not necessarily falter with it.

Instead, some internationalists (like Brailsford and Hobson) understood and predicted a possible conflagration between states based on vested capitalist self-interest. These internationalists understood the complexity that contributed to continued conflict between nations. Therefore the First World War served to underscore their perspective of the world and international politics, as they believed internationalist institutions would curb

² Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 1.

³ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 4.

⁴ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 4.

the excesses of capitalism and imperialism. As a result, before and after the First World War, these individuals would spend their intellectual energy and organisational capacity on supporting supranational institutions, such as the League of Nations or other international methods of arbitration and settlement.

This political internationalist outlook examined both the current reality of the world and how it should ideally be run, alongside the idea that people are “part of a broader community than that of the nation or the state.”⁵ This is somewhat evident in the international freethought movement, supporting workers and freethinkers across Europe against the encroachment of fascism (as will be argued below). One can also see the even earlier internationalist awareness of secularists in the lead up to the First World War. Interest in political events on the continent were often topics of discourse among British freethought advocates, who often cited Giuseppe Garibaldi and Giuseppe Mazzini as inspiration.

Mazzini inspired the formation of the People’s International League, which included founding member William Johnson Fox (from the South Place Chapel and predecessor of Moncure Conway).⁶ The League’s purpose was to “aid the people of this country in forming a correct judgement of the national questions now agitating Europe.”⁷ There was also the more popular Friends of Italy which included G J Holyoake as a supporter.⁸ Garibaldi was supported by the increase in all forms of print media, with depictions of the

⁵ Fred Halliday, “Three Concepts of Internationalism,” *International Affairs* 64 (1988): 187.

⁶ Gregory Claeys, “Mazzini, Kossuth, and British Radicalism, 1848-1854,” *Journal of British Studies*. 28 (1989), 229.

⁷ Claeys, “Mazzini, Kossuth, and British Radicalism, 1848-1854,” 230.

⁸ Claeys, “Mazzini, Kossuth, and British Radicalism, 1848-1854,” 230.

“garibaldini” and the fighting in Italy published in magazines like *The Illustrated London News*.⁹ Additionally, his aborted visit in 1864 “brought together a group of radicals...who in 1865 founded the Reform League.”¹⁰ Secularist leaders like Holyoake helped raise funds to send volunteers to fight in Italy for Garibaldi.¹¹ Secularists also readily identified with “Garibaldi, the atheist” aligned against the Pope and the “Holy Alliance of Catholic Powers.”¹² There were also links with American freethought advocates like Robert Green Ingersoll, and of course Thomas Paine’s work during the American Revolution and after.

Internationalism as a concept

Internationalism as a political construct is much younger than nationalism. Jeremy Bentham coined the term ‘international’ in reaction to previous philosophical and political arguments that people had to rely on “faith, Christianity and God” and against William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*.¹³ Bentham first introduced ‘international’ in his *Introduction to principles of Morals and Legislation* to make the “distinction between law within a state and laws between states, and another distinction between legal disputes affecting individuals.”¹⁴ The first English language usage of ‘internationalism’ was in 1877 in relation to the First International and international Marxist agitation.¹⁵

⁹ Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 130

¹⁰ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 4.

¹¹ Austin Holyoake also recruited volunteers for the expedition and Bradlaugh “lectured in support of Italian liberation.” Royle, *Radical Politics 1790-1900*, 68.

¹² Royle, *Radical Politics 1790-1900*, 68.

¹³ Mark Mazower, *Governing the World* (London: Penguin, 2012), 19.

¹⁴ Mazower, *Governing the World*, 20.

¹⁵ Halliday, “Three Concepts of Internationalism,” 189.

Halliday describes three possible concepts of internationalism. The first is the idea that the world is broadly becoming more international. This is the internationalism forced through by technology and the need to set standards across the world.¹⁶ Hobson echoed this sentiment in an essay on “The Ethics of Internationalism” where he credits technology with the “the practical enlargement of the world.”¹⁷ While travel is also mentioned, according to Hobson, it was “not the chief instruction and the chief enlarger of the world” but rather the more important part of internationalism was the spread of news “through the press and the telegraph service.”¹⁸ In a quaint turn of phrase, that echoes today’s interconnectedness with mobile phones and the internet, Hobson stated: “Everyone, to-day, as we say familiarly, lives at the end of a telegraph line.”¹⁹ However, the disjointedness of how international events were covered by the press, Hobson stated were too haphazard or sensationalized and therefore not rational enough to be “effectively scientific or effectively humanitarian.”²⁰ Hobson also used the expansion of international commerce and technology as a reason why his vision of international government was more possible than it had been in the past.²¹

The second concept of internationalism is in response to the first internationalism, in that individual states but also organisations and people “collaborate more than was previously the case.”²² This was very clearly

¹⁶ Halliday, “Three Concepts of Internationalism,” 188.

¹⁷ J A Hobson, “The Ethics of Internationalism,” *The Journal of Ethics* 17 (1906): 16.

¹⁸ Hobson, “The Ethics of Internationalism,” 17.

¹⁹ Hobson, “The Ethics of Internationalism,” 17.

²⁰ Hobson, “The Ethics of Internationalism,” 18.

²¹ J A Hobson, *Towards International Government* (George Allen & Unwin, 1915), 194-195.

²² Halliday, “Three Concepts of Internationalism,” 188.

demonstrated by the international organisation of freethought. The final concept is that internationalism is inherently a good thing as it promotes greater peace and understanding among all the people of the world.²³ This chapter focuses mostly on the second of these two internationalisms, with secularists involved in greater advocacy of internationalist cooperation within the political sphere, though they obviously believed that greater cooperation would benefit humanity.

Internationalism, though now perhaps the preserve of what seems like overly bureaucratic and established organisations like the United Nations (UN) and the European Union, was a very radical concept in the nineteenth century. Part of its radical nature stemmed from the international realignment after the Napoleonic Wars and the political consensus of the Concert of Europe. The Concert of Europe was comprised of the great powers of Europe, formed essentially to prevent a single concentrated power like Napoleon from rising again.²⁴ While in principle, the Concert of Europe (and the statesmen that met to keep the peace) was internationalist in itself, it had a “deeply conservative sense of mission” and “prioritized order of equality, stability and justice.”²⁵ One particular English illustration of maintaining order was the ruthless suppression of any revolutionary sentiments, which after the Peterloo Massacre meant equating any agitation for reform with “treasonable conspiracy.”²⁶ The Peterloo Massacre had deep resonance within the secularist movement. Richard Carlile, the secularist publisher who was arrested a number of times for printing *The Age of Reason*, had a first-hand

²³ Halliday, “Three Concepts of Internationalism,” 188.

²⁴ Mazower, *Governing the World*, xii.

²⁵ Mazower, *Governing the World*, 5.

²⁶ Mazower, *Governing the World*, 6.

view of the massacre, being one of the scheduled speakers. However, the Concert of Europe and its conservative view of internationalism was challenged by the advent of new technologies and the increasing ease of communication and transport across the continent. Many of the late nineteenth century internationalist organisations would centre on the need to describe international standards in order to conduct business and trade, while others would challenge the Concert of Europe directly.

Although the concepts of internationalism and peace have a shared history and somewhat similar campaign goals, the emergence of the nineteenth century peace movement began slightly earlier. The peace movement was evangelical in nature and optimistic after the defeat of Napoleon.²⁷ While internationalist, the peace movement was faced with a series of challenges to the idea that peace was inevitable, including the Crimean War and the American Civil War, even before the shocks of both World Wars. While the peace movement continued after both world wars, the shattering of the Concert of Europe and the First World War led to a shift in “Christian manliness” and a “more chastened internationalism.”²⁸ While notions of masculinity changed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the beginnings of the liberation of women and their entry into spaces that used to be the preserve of men, had an on impact men’s relationship with the concepts of peace and internationalism.²⁹ Women were involved in peace advocacy in the interwar years, with regional and international peace

²⁷ Mazower, *Governing the World*, 30.

²⁸ Mazower, *Governing the World*, 38.

²⁹ David Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral: Muscular Christianity and the Origins of Primal Manliness”, ed Donald E Hall *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1994), 27.

associations spanning across the Commonwealth.³⁰ This growth of women into a previous male sphere, created the “desire to locate some new, indelible mark of masculinity that could differentiate men from women...”³¹ Charles Kingsley, for example, considered the “conditions of peace” as denying the natural masculine tendencies.³² Kingsley also helped “create a masculinist image of an imperial English nation concerned with formal territorial expansion...”³³ This would be at odds with the anti-imperial tendencies of J A Hobson, J M Robertson and H N Brailsford. The Boer War itself was also a formative event for the “development of anti-militarist and peace politics,” especially among secularist circles.³⁴ The imperialist tendencies did not sit well with secularists as “imperial motives...appeared to flout open abroad rights that were only grudgingly being accepted at home.”³⁵ Additionally, the conflation of elements of muscular Christianity and imperialism further demonstrated that it was religion “underpinning imperial and military adventure.”³⁶ Brailsford, Robertson and Hobson all had the experience of viewing and writing about imperial pursuits through their journalistic endeavors. They also had a unique vantage point in being able to critique Christian cultural hegemony as secularists and the means to publish that viewpoint as journalists and writers. As critics of both Christianity and

³⁰ Marie Sandell, “Regional versus International: Women’s Activism and Organisational Spaces in the Inter-war Period” *The International History Review* 33 (2011): 607.

³¹ Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 27.

³² Rosen, “The Volcano and the Cathedral,” 33.

³³ C J W L Wee, “Christian Manliness and National Identity: The Problematic Construction of a Racially “Pure” Nation”, ed Donald E Hall *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1994), 27.

³⁴ Nash, “Taming the God of Battles,” 267.

³⁵ Nash, “Taming the God of Battles,” 267.

³⁶ Nash, “Taming the God of Battles,” 273.

imperialism, they were able to comment disapprovingly on the entire British imperial enterprise in a way that many contemporaries could not.

Instead of being knocked back by the Great War, political internationalists were even more intent on strengthening and creating international political organisations. These internationalist institutions could then be a force that could stop such an event happening again. In the end, of course, they were unable to stop the Second World War, but their legacies of political internationalism would continue in the formation of international institutions from the League of Nations to the United Nations and the European Union. Julian Huxley, as will be argued below, was very conscious about bringing a Humanist angle to UNESCO's mission when appointed as the new organisation's director. Secularists and other internationalists had years to build the case for fundamental rights and freedoms, so that by the time the UN was established, the drafters of the charter of rights and freedoms had a huge catalogue of secularist concepts and arguments to draw upon.

In the UK, secularists like Brailsford, Hobson and Robertson were involved in organisations advocating internationalist solutions to solve global problems. Additionally they were involved in pressure groups to make international issues more accessible and transparent to the people of the UK. In the case of Brailsford and Hobson, they were respected for their knowledge of international issues, appointed to commissions, and asked to write on international issues for popular audiences. For those secularists, "internationalism was part of a wider commitment to progress and reform"

which coexisted alongside their other secularist and political activism.³⁷

Though they would still bring these issues to secularists audiences: one only has to look at the list of Conway Memorial Lecturers that appeared at South Place Ethical Society under Hobson's appointed lectureship. For example, in 1911 the lecture delivered by Henry Nevinson examined various internationalist concepts such as the then newly established International Court of Arbitration. Additionally, in 1913 Norman Angell delivered "War and the Essential Realities," where he defended pacifism as a rational concept. However, most of their efforts were outward facing from secularist organisations themselves.

The new internationalist organisations

The peace movement received a battering over the course of a century. The first peace society in the UK was the Society for Abolishing War, established in 1816, and was a reaction against the Napoleonic wars.³⁸ Within the same year, the longer lasting Peace Society was established by Quakers and other Christian groups.³⁹ The founders of early peace movements would include veterans of other campaigns such as prison reform, temperance and anti-slavery.⁴⁰ However, the peace movement, born from the end of the Napoleonic War, would see rebellions and wars within the Empire (such as the Lower and Upper Canada Rebellions in 1837 to 1838), wars of independence (such as the War of Independence of Brazil from 1822-1824), the American Civil War, the Boer War and finally the First World War. There

³⁷ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 11.

³⁸ Paul Laity, *The British Peace Movement 1870-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 13.

³⁹ Laity, *The British Peace Movement 1870-1914*, 13.

⁴⁰ A C F Beales, *The History of Peace* (London: Bell & Sons Ltd., 1931), 45.

were wars, rebellions and territorial disputes in every decade from when the peace movement began.

Laity makes a distinction between pacific-ism and pacifism itself. Pacific-ism is the idea that reforms can be accomplished without war or military intervention, though those reforms may then have to be protected with military actions.⁴¹ Pacifism is the more recognised concept which “rejects unconditionally the use of military force.”⁴² Britain, more so than continental Europe, had a greater number of individuals who were strictly pacifists - however the vast majority of those in the peace movement were pacific-ists.⁴³ Martin Ceadal makes the same distinction: “pacificism meant no more than being in favour of peace and arbitration and opposed to militarism and settling disputes by war” whereas pacifism was the “doctrine of non-resistance.”⁴⁴ It was the pacificists that sided with intervention in the First World War.⁴⁵ Laity includes Hobson in his categorisation as an “influential pacific-ist”.⁴⁶ While this may be the case, I think he has greater attachment to internationalism than peace. In “The Ethics of Internationalism” he makes this very clear:

“Now it is equally obvious that every great public issue which confronts us in life is international; it is impossible to race down those issues which are presented to use as great social issues, political or economic, and find any solution which is satisfactory that does not present the elements of internationality.”⁴⁷

Hobson worked with internationalist organisations and advocated a more

⁴¹ Laity, *The British Peace Movement 1870-1914*, 7.

⁴² Laity, *The British Peace Movement 1870-1914*, 7.

⁴³ Laity, *The British Peace Movement 1870-1914*, 7.

⁴⁴ Martin Ceadal, *Pacifism in Britain 1914 -1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 3-4.

⁴⁵ Laity, *The British Peace Movement 1870-1914*, 7.

⁴⁶ Laity, *The British Peace Movement 1870-1914*, 10.

⁴⁷ Hobson, “The Ethics of Internationalism,” 19.

rational foreign policy (through the Union of Democratic Control) and against the sabre rattling and rhetoric (such as in *Psychology of Jingoism*). He clearly recognised that there needed to be international solutions to many of the world's problems and articulated them in his internationalist publications. While he is pacific-ist in the sense that he would advocate defending liberal ideals, he was more activist in attempting to create a more international and cooperative world, which adds another dimension of activism than the definition of pacific-ist that Laity sets out.

At the outset of the First World War, the pacific-ists and pacifists were split. At the time, there was no consensus on what a pacifist was, with the word 'pacifism' featuring in arguments for different and contradictory things. As J M Robertson stated at the annual meeting of the Rationalist Peace Society: "We as rationalists have no common cause with those who are non-resisters. It is a misfortune that the peace movement should be associated with non-resisters who are not pacifists in the true sense."⁴⁸ Though, he would be perhaps at odds with Henry Snell, who went to minister to the ethical dissenters from South Place, imprisoned over conscientious objection.⁴⁹ The argument over terminology was finally resolved with conscription, and the description of the No-Conscription Fellowship as pacifist.⁵⁰

While the peace movement persevered, at the outset of the First World War it faced several high profile changes within the dominant peace

⁴⁸ Laity, *The British Peace Movement 1870-1914*, 231.

⁴⁹ Snell recounted in his autobiography that "several young men belonging to the ethical societies were detained as 'conscientious objectors' to military service." Snell, *Men, Movements and Myself*, 197.

⁵⁰ Laity, *The British Peace Movement 1870-1914*, 232.

organisations. For example, the Peace Society's leadership slowly withered with the outbreak of the First World War. Successive leaders, such as J A Pease, the Peace Society president, resigned as they supported the government's position on the war.⁵¹ As Carl Health, one of the General Secretaries of the National Peace Council, stated in his autobiography: "Men who had been the loudest and most vehement at peace congresses and on peace platforms had swung right round, and some of these were central personalities on the National Peace Council and in the various peace organizations."⁵² Other peace societies were also unsure of how to deal with the war and so in the absence of these previously influential organisations, internationalist groups like the Union of Democratic Control and the League of Nations Society took their place.⁵³ As Beale states, the outbreak of the war was "so overwhelming...that from the very first moment the problem of the Peace Movement was not of influence but of survival."⁵⁴ It was these internationalist organisations (with secularists like J M Robertson, H N Brailsford and J A Hobson as members) that would take over as the major influences and would take a distinctly international turn.

Internationalist freethought

As defined by Halliday, one of the types of internationalism referred to the wider world becoming more international through technology and professional organisation. Before exploring the influence of secularists within

⁵¹ Laity, *The British Peace Movement 1870-1914*, 226.

⁵² Laity, *The British Peace Movement 1870-1914*, 232-233.

⁵³ Laity, *The British Peace Movement 1870-1914*, 232.

⁵⁴ Beales, *The History of Peace*, 279.

political internationalism, the international freethought organisation should be explored.

The main group for international freethought was the International Freethought Federation (or *Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Libre Pensée*). The International Freethought Federation was founded in 1880, and like the ethical societies, bucked the historiographical narrative of secularism in decline, continuing with freethought conferences into the mid-twentieth century. It was jointly founded by Freethought organisations from Belgium, Dutch Secularist Societies and from the UK, the National Secular Society.⁵⁵ The group changed the name to World Union of Freethinkers in 1936.

The International Freethought Federation had individual members as well as groups who affiliated themselves with the concepts of freethought and rationalism.⁵⁶ It held international congresses to discuss the various issues that affected their international community: as noted earlier, the 1938 Congress was interested in the concept of humanism itself. The diversity of members led to a wide range of interests, including the support of “the primacy of science over belief” but also the anticlericalism that freethought has long been associated with.⁵⁷ In the 1904 Congress, Ferdinand Buisson defined freethought (and thus international freethought) “as a ‘method’ characterised by the rejection of dogma.”⁵⁸ One of the attendees, J B Wilson, the president of the National Liberal Party, kicked off in anti-clerical terms, denouncing the relationship between the state and the power of the

⁵⁵ International Institute for Social History. Programme from the World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, London, 1938.

⁵⁶ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 81.

⁵⁷ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 81.

⁵⁸ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 81.

church: “The Christian religion became the sacred mantel to cover the intrigues, the extortions, the selfishness and the concubinage of the imperial dens of infamy...King and priest made each other’s positions of power secure.”⁵⁹ Given the history of freethought, it is not hard to imagine that there would easily be as many viewpoints on what freethought meant as there were organisations attending the congresses. In the 1938 Congress in London, the definition of a Freethinker was “one who rejects unverifiable authority in matters of religious opinion, accepts reason as the ultimate test and regards it as the right and duty of every individual to think things out for himself.”⁶⁰ Most interestingly, it did not confine itself to atheism as it stated that “many freethinkers are Deists.”⁶¹ Though the emphasis on reason and rejection of authority in religious opinion would no doubt limit the number of overtly religious groups joining. As well, alongside other freethought organisations, there was the belief that spreading rational ideas was essential for the enfranchisement of humanity from religious doctrines.⁶² The rejection of religious privilege of knowledge, the reliance on self-knowledge and rationalism seemed not to be confined to just the UK.

Conferences had varied content, although unsurprisingly much of it was the mainstay of British secularist and freethought groups. The 1905 Paris programme included ethics without God, freethought and art, and the disestablishment of the church.⁶³ However, it also recognised the usefulness

⁵⁹ J B Wilson, *A Trip to Rome* (James E Hughes: Lexington, 1904), 142.

⁶⁰ Programme from the World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, London 1938.

⁶¹ Programme from the World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, London 1938.

⁶² International Institute for Social History. *Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Libre Pensée, Constitution.*

⁶³ International Institute for Social History, World Union of Freethinkers. Programme from the World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, Paris, 1904.

of internationalist approaches, with discussions on how to best organise across international boundaries. One panel was to investigate “practical solidarity between freethinkers of all countries” and that no freethinkers “should be forsaken or left isolated.”⁶⁴ Also the pervasiveness of the peace societies was apparent, with a whole track of the conference dedicated to freethought and peace.⁶⁵ Freedom of thought would make appearances in multiple congresses. In 1925, one of the main discussions was on “La liberté de conscience juridiquement reconnue et garantie par l’Etat.”⁶⁶ In 1927, with the experiences of soldiers in the First World War and pacifists the congress discussed “La reconnaissance de l’objections de conscience (armée, justice, etc.)”⁶⁷ While the First World War clearly had an impact post-war on the Union, the international political climate in the 1930s would be even more dramatic.

In theory, the World Union of Freethinkers was apolitical. It would not affiliate with any political organisations but it made the statement that “Free Thought and Free Enquiry require Free Speech, Free Press and Free Assembly” and that it would exist outside politics except where politics infringed on those issues.⁶⁸ More forcefully, the Union was opposed to war as “War is the negation of any sort of Freedom.”⁶⁹ However, with the ardent emphasis on free speech, free press and free assembly, the International

⁶⁴ Programme from the World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, Paris, 1904.

⁶⁵ This included talks on peace societies, international arbitration, disarmament and the promotion of peace in schools. Programme from the World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, Paris, 1904.

⁶⁶ International Institute for Social History, World Union of Freethinkers. Programme from the World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, Paris, 1925.

⁶⁷ International Institute for Social History, World Union of Freethinkers. Programme from the World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, Anvers, 1927.

⁶⁸ Programme from the World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, London 1938.

⁶⁹ Programme from the World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, London 1938.

Freethought organisations would find themselves in opposition to the general fascist agitation leading up to the Second World War.

The struggle to be apolitical in such an atmosphere led to various alliances and proclamations. The call to the International Congress of Barcelona in 1934 was addressed as follows:

“To all the National Federations affiliated to the Union, to the Grand Orients and Masonic Lodges, to the mixed Lodges of Human Right, to the extreme political associations, to rationalist, philosophic and scientific societies based on Free Thought, to all the Freethinkers of the World.”⁷⁰

The congress deliberately urged a more expansive definition of freethought to include any organisation that would stand up to fascism in Europe. This was directly mentioned as well, with the organisation in search of a progressive alliance against “fascism” and “political pirates.”⁷¹ By 1938, the strength of anti-fascist and totalitarian ideology was explicit: “The Totalitarian dictator state cannot brook freedom of opinion. Specifically, the Fascist and Nazi States have suppressed all Freethought organisations within their frontiers. The World Union is, therefore, the enemy of totalitarianism.”⁷² It was perhaps impossible for the World Union to remain neutral when their member organisations were being suppressed. Furthermore, in one of the last congresses before the war, messages of support were sent by international secularists, rationalists and freethinkers, highlighting the importance of the movement. Marjorie Bowen, the British novelist, wrote: “never was there a moment when freedom of thought was more valuable” and that it was the

⁷⁰ International Institute for Social History, World Union of Freethinkers, Congress, 1934, “International Congress of Barcelona, Invitation.”

⁷¹ “International Congress of Barcelona, Invitation.”

⁷² World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, London 1938.

“struggle for liberty of conscience that alone brings peace.”⁷³ Julian Huxley highlighted the freethought struggle against religion but closed with: “to-day they are in addition faced with a new and perhaps graver task, of counteracting the regimentation of thought in political, national and social affairs.”⁷⁴ Despite being spread across the world, the Union consistently expressed solidarity throughout the 1920s and 1930s and continued to carry the freethought banner of freedom of expression and belief.

It is also worth noting that the history of many freethought organisations was often related as one long battle against a suppressive state and justice system. Whether blasphemy or obscenity, secularists had seen sustained pressure on their beliefs in the nineteenth and twentieth century by the state (or agents using the state to act for them). As such, they were readily able to identify the same coercive measures internationally. For them, it may have not been something new, but a more threatening variation of the tactics that they had experienced as a movement. Additionally, it could have been seen as a threat to the hard won freedoms gained by secularists over time.

These international freethought groups would support each other across national boundaries with the increasing threat of fascism and therefore the increased threat to members’ freedoms. The 1925 International Freethought Congress was banned in Rome, but more important was the resolution that it “expressed solidarity with the struggle against fascism” in

⁷³ World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, London 1938, Messages to the International Congress, Majorie Bowen.

⁷⁴ World Union of Freethinkers, International Congress, London 1938, Messages to the International Congress, Julian Huxley.

Berlin in 1931.⁷⁵ There was also a merger with the communist freethinkers in 1936, which resulted in the name change to the World Union of Freethinkers, which confirmed the anti-fascist stance of the organization and added to its beliefs in the cause of workers' emancipation.⁷⁶ Fascism was equated to another ideology of which freethinkers campaigned against: religion:

“The Catholics promise heaven to those chosen by God; the Nazis promise the Third Reich to the chosen ones, who are of pure race. The Catholics are burdened with original sin, and the Nazis are burdened with the hereditary sins of a non-Aryan grandmother. The Catholics pray to their Saviour, and the inhabitants of the German Empire pray to their dictator.”⁷⁷

At this point it is not known whether they campaigned in other ways, such as raising funds or sponsoring passage for those in immediate danger.

The congresses caused no small amount of concern amongst grass roots religious groups. Before the 1938 congress in London, the Home Office was contacted with letters about the “godless congress” which to their horror was being held “in the heart of the empire.”⁷⁸ The 1936 amalgamation with the communist freethinkers was also commented in a report by MI5 to the Home Office.⁷⁹ In the end, the MI5 report felt that the fear raised by religious groups was overblown and was “generally sympathetic to the decorum and attitude of the British end of freethought,” who demanded political neutrality from the union.⁸⁰ As will be seen in the subsequent chapter on women, religious groups were still aggressively anti-secularist around certain issues.

⁷⁵ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 103.

⁷⁶ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 103-4.

⁷⁷ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 104.

⁷⁸ The triple entente of Britishness, Imperialism and Christianity were all echoed in the letters to the Home Office. David Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain: 1789 to the Present* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 219-220.

⁷⁹ Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain*, 222.

⁸⁰ Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain*, 222.

Fundamentally, even if there was progress towards a more secular society, it still required the efforts of campaign groups to defend those inroads.

Additionally, there was an attempt by Captain Archibald Maule Ramsay to introduce legislation to limit the ability for blasphemy committed by foreigners. The main impetus behind the bill was Ramsay's anti-semitism; but it also "attacked existing religious liberties with a savagery that aimed at undoing the relative tide of tolerance created within the last two generations."⁸¹ However, the Home Office "immediately recognised the legal and civil liberties nightmare that the Bill represented" and asked the whips to block its progress.⁸² This potentially demonstrates that the calls of support against fascism were not just in support of those freethinkers on the continent.

International freethought also echoed the importance of publications like the *Thinker's Library*, with the congress in 1885 demanding the translation of important scientific books to "liberate the minds from dogma" and included not just Darwin but also Marx and Auguste Comte.⁸³ The importance of sociology alongside the material sciences was perhaps no surprise as two Belgian sociologists, Hector Denis and Guillaume De Greef, were both presidents of the International Freethought Federation.⁸⁴ Education and the wide publication of authors that could help people break the bonds of religion had featured in periodicals since Holyoake.

⁸¹ Ramsay was MP for Peebles and was the "nominal leader" of the Christian Defence Union. He was also the leader of the Nordic League "a swastika-bedecked organisation dedicated to the destruction of the 'so-called Jewish menace.'" Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain*, 223, 229.

⁸² Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain*, 229

⁸³ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 91.

⁸⁴ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 91.

Freethought at this point in time also crossed over with socialism and the agitation for women's rights and suffrage. International freethought congresses would see the attendance of not just Annie Besant but also Isabelle Gatti de Gamond and Ida Altmann, who were Belgian and German feminists respectively.⁸⁵ One German freethought periodical concluded after one international congress that: "the era of emancipated women being as a 'laughing matter' had finally been overcome."⁸⁶ In addition, the President of the International Freethought Federation Hector Denis was also the Honorary President of the International Feminist Congress in 1912.⁸⁷ By this point the suffrage movement was gaining considerable ground within the UK and elsewhere, but it is important to note that the Freethought organisations were generally on the forefront of this support. The secularist case and support for suffrage as well as other issues that affected women will be examined in the next chapter.

The congresses gave freethinkers an international forum to discuss the issues of the day. While fascism became an increasing concern in the 1930s, many of the topics still covered those areas familiar to the UK secular movement. The 1905 Congress in Paris discussed "La morale sans Dieu" and "La Séparation des églises et de l'état; ses conditions; ses conséquences."⁸⁸ However, the internationalist peace element was also present in the 1905 Congress, with a major agenda discussion on freethought and pacifism. This agenda item looked at "La Libre Pensée et les

⁸⁵ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 125.

⁸⁶ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 125.

⁸⁷ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 125.

⁸⁸ International Institute for Social History. Supplément au "Bulletin du Congrès de Paris".

Sociétés pacifists” but also their relationship towards international arbitration and disarmament.⁸⁹ Traditional secularist concerns and the problems facing internationalist organisations with the rise of fascism in Europe, coexisted together for much of the early twentieth century. However, this was not to last.

In the last congress before the war in 1938 at Conway Hall, the usual organisations and secularists made appearances, such as the National Secular Society, The Rationalist Press Association, Joseph McCabe, Chapman Cohen - and included a trip to pay respects at Bradlaugh’s grave⁹⁰ (though this trip was also marred by fascists who vandalised the grave and replaced Bradlaugh’s bust with a chamber pot).⁹¹ McCabe was a panelist in a discussion about the “Present Religious Reaction and the Menace of the Vatican” and J B S Haldane spoke on “Science and the Churches”.⁹² There was also an array of other secularist supporters like Stanton Coit, H N Brailsford, J A Hobson, Bertrand Russell, George Bernard Shaw and H G Wells.⁹³ For a congress so close to the outbreak of war, it was a distinguished line up – though perhaps greying.

Though peace does still make an appearance in the agenda, from 1938 onwards the congresses became increasingly aligned with internal secularist issues. In the 1946 Congress (once again at Conway Hall - possibly indicating the lack of freethought groups or lack of money to support

⁸⁹ Supplément au “Bulletin du Congrès de Paris”.

⁹⁰ International Institute for Social History. World Union of Freethinkers International Congress, London, September 13, 1938.

⁹¹ Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain*, 235.

⁹² World Union of Freethinkers International Congress, September 13, 1938.

⁹³ World Union of Freethinkers International Congress, September 13, 1938.

such a conference in other international capitals), there was a protest organised by Chapman Cohen against “the Religious Policy of the B.B.C.,” though overall the conference focused on the “Challenge of Humanism.”⁹⁴ The remaining topics were all secularist hobby horses: rationalism, materialism, man, nature, civilization and religion.⁹⁵ For example, Frederick James Gould wrote *A Concise History of Religion* in 1897 which he describes as a “bird’s-eye view of the main results of modern criticism of early Christianity and its literature” and that “religion forms part of sociology.”⁹⁶ In *Materialism Restated* by Chapman Cohen, first published in 1927, the author argues that “the world we know is a world of experience. By that I mean that all our knowledge of the world is derived from experience by the individual, remotely by the accumulated experience of the generations that have gone before us.”⁹⁷ The term rationalism has already been explored in the historiography but the Rationalist Press Association catalogue in 1937 documents 17 separate publications from 1897 to 1935 on rationalism as a topic.⁹⁸ It seemed secularist organisations knew what their audience wanted or reformulated well known positions as science and knowledge progressed.

The 1949 Congress in Rome had an image of Giordano Bruno on the conference agenda, burned at the stake by the Catholic inquisition, surrounded by flames, holding a book with “Veritas” written on the cover.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ As mentioned earlier, there was pushback from the conference on whether Humanism was the right word for the movement or if had even been properly defined. International Institute for Social History. World Union of Freethinkers, “The Challenge of Humanism”.

⁹⁵ World Union of Freethinkers, “The Challenge of Humanism.”

⁹⁶ F J Gould, *A Concise History of Religion viii* (London, Watts & Co: 1897), 3.

⁹⁷ Chapman Cohen *Materialism Restated* (London: Pioneer Press, 1943), 71.

⁹⁸ *Catalogue of the Library of the Rationalist Press Association* (London: Watts & Co., 1937), 44-45.

⁹⁹ International Institute for Social History. Union Mondaile Des Libres Penseurs, XXIX Congresso.

The relatively brief agenda includes the discussion of Freethought and Humanism with some discussion of religions, churches and international relations, as well as ‘the scholastic problem.’¹⁰⁰ The scholastic problem further elaborated by one of the congress resolutions that: “the aim of freethinkers in all countries to work and press for the emancipation of all schools from all theological or political doctrine and convention...”¹⁰¹ This was already a well-established position, with the formation of the Secular Education League (created on the initiative of the Union of Ethical Societies in 1907).¹⁰² The usual suspects of Henry Snell, Ramsay MacDonald, J M Robertson and J A Hobson among others were part of the organisation.¹⁰³ The view of the Secular Education League was that the state “remain neutral concerning matters outside its legitimate activities.”¹⁰⁴ (Though the case for secular education predated the League and continues today in the guise of Humanist UK’s campaign against faith schools and religious selection for state schools). The continuous campaign for over a hundred years (and longer) on some secular issues attest to the need of constant campaigning to overturn the embedded religious norms in the UK. To say that the movement declined in the nineteenth century seems very short sighted in this regard.

Of course, conferences would have naturally had different content in the post-war period than when they faced the threat of fascism in the period leading up to the Second World War. However, the return to traditional (and more uniquely) secularist interests potentially points at the loss of figures like

¹⁰⁰ International Institute for Social History. World Union of Freethinkers, 29th Congress, Programme.

¹⁰¹ World Union of Freethinkers, 29th Congress, Programme.

¹⁰² Snell, *Men, Movements, and Myself*, 176.

¹⁰³ Snell, *Men, Movements, and Myself*, 176.

¹⁰⁴ *The Case for Secular Education* (London: Watts & Co., 1928), 46.

Hobson and Brailsford who, as will be shown, were active within international and peace movements outside the congresses. Or even Julian Huxley, who was recruited to head up the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). With even more powerful and wide ranging international organisations such as the United Nations, it shows a retreat inwards from the previously more outwardly focused World Union. Curiously, despite the continued threats against Freethought in the Soviet Union and in Franco's Spain, they did not seem to be as threatening to international freethought as fascism was to the World Union in the 1930s.

Peace activism in the Union of Ethical Societies and The Rationalist Peace Society

The Union of Ethical Societies and the Rational Peace Society were represented at the international freethought congresses, but they were also active political campaigners for the Peace Movement in the UK. The Union of Ethical Societies was international in outlook in the lead up to the First World War. In the 1914/15 Annual Report, the committee agreed a 'Manifesto on War'. The Manifesto would echo a lot of the internationalist sentiments at the time (especially those of J A Hobson which will be explored below). They included the establishment of an international court and police force, the reduction of armaments and the restrictions on the production and sale of weapons.¹⁰⁵ It also mentioned its work with the National Peace Council in asking for a "proposal for securing and maintaining the peace of the

¹⁰⁵ Humanist Reference Library and Archives, *Twentieth Annual Report of the Union of Ethical Societies 1914/15*, 3.

world.”¹⁰⁶ The Union of Ethical Societies also was part of a network to relay information to interned Austrians and Germans.¹⁰⁷ However, the 1915/16 and 1916/17 Annual Reports reflected the impact of the war on the Union of Ethical Societies. The reports acknowledged that they had paused recruitment and were mainly focused on the basics of keeping the organisation operational.¹⁰⁸ In the last Annual Report before the end of the war, the Union recorded that the Secretary had been to Wandsworth prison to minister to the conscientious objectors imprisoned.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, the *Message of Man* by Stanton Coit had been approved as a “devotional book” and was given to each person they visited.¹¹⁰ While not on such a grand scale as the International Freethought conferences, the Ethical Societies were still engaging in the wider international issues of the day.

Hypatia Bradlaugh-Bonner was perhaps the most ambitious when it came to peace activism by establishing the Rationalist Peace Society. In general, Bradlaugh-Bonner was active in many political movements throughout her life, not just within secularist organisations. She was a member of the Clapham Common Liberal Association, as well as being a speaker for the Liberal Party.¹¹¹ One of her main concerns was the reform of the prison system, which brought her into the Humanitarian League, serving

¹⁰⁶ *Twentieth Annual Report of the Union of Ethical Societies 1914/15*, 3.

¹⁰⁷ *Twentieth Annual Report of the Union of Ethical Societies 1914/15*, 3.

¹⁰⁸ Humanist Reference Library and Archives, *Twenty-First Annual Report of the Union of Ethical Societies 1915/16*, 1. Humanist Reference Library and Archives, *Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Union of Ethical Societies 1916/17*, 1. However, the society was managing to send parcels to soldiers on the front.

¹⁰⁹ Humanist Reference Library and Archives, *Twenty-Third Annual Report of the Union of Ethical Societies*, 11 May 1918, 2.

¹¹⁰ *Twenty-Third Annual Report of the Union of Ethical Societies*, 11 May 1918, 2.

¹¹¹ Arthur Bradlaugh-Bonner and Charles Bradlaugh-Bonner, *Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner: The Story of Her Life* (London: Watts & Co., 1942), 66.

on its council and arguing against capital punishment through lectures.¹¹²

She was, of course, still a strong advocate, lecturer and writer for secularist organisations. In her later years she would be made a Justice of the Peace for London.¹¹³

Her interest in peace activism started with getting involved with (and again, serving on the council) of the International Arbitration and Peace Association.¹¹⁴ She would also write for the Increased Armaments Protest Committee. In “The Reign of Peace” she undercuts the argument that Victoria’s reign was peaceful, first listing every war that was fought in the empire when she came to the throne.¹¹⁵ While outlining the increase in cost of war, she also made the point that it was difficult for normal people to hold the government to account, given that it was nearly impossible to get accurate information on the costs spent maintaining the empire.¹¹⁶ This echoed some of the demands for transparency made by the Union of Democratic Control.

However, despite the International Arbitration and Peace Association avowing to include non-religious points of view (and even including women on the council), Bradlaugh-Bonner was the principal organiser behind the creation of the Rationalist Peace Society. It still had the aim of international arbitration but would argue from “avowedly Rationalist lines, without reference to religious factions of any kind.”¹¹⁷ This was perhaps

¹¹² Bradlaugh-Bonner, *Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner: The Story of Her Life*, 66.

¹¹³ Bradlaugh-Bonner, *Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner: The Story of Her Life*, 66.

¹¹⁴ Bradlaugh-Bonner, *Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner: The Story of Her Life*, 67.

¹¹⁵ National Archives, Hypatia Bradlaugh-Bonner, “The Record ‘Reign of Peace,’” 2. Interestingly this was a reprint from an article in *The Reformer*.

¹¹⁶ Bradlaugh-Bonner, “The Record ‘Reign of Peace,’” 3.

¹¹⁷ Bradlaugh-Bonner, *Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner: The Story of Her Life*, 67.

demonstrated when the Rationalist Peace Association withdrew from the National Peace Council after it was proposed that the war be declared “righteous.”¹¹⁸ One of the reasons Bradlaugh-Bonner wrote for the establishment of the Rationalist Peace Society was that other peace organisations were largely equated within religion and were taking credit for the positions advocated by secularists.¹¹⁹ However, the Rationalist Press Society would not last much longer than the end of the First World War.

Secularist thought and internationalism beyond organised secularism: J A Hobson

The secularist internationalist movement was different to the peace activism and the freethought internationalism that preceded it. It was firmly within Halliday’s political internationalism, working towards greater collaboration between nations and individuals but also moving away from the secretive and undemocratic means of forging alliances and carrying out the diplomatic work of international cooperation and trade. Like Cobden, the ‘international man’, Hobson and those like him would see free and international trade as a method of “facilitating communication among men and bringing peace to the world.”¹²⁰ Hobson states in *Towards International Government* “Cobden was not mistaken in regarding Free Trade as a great peacemaker.”¹²¹ In “The Ethics of Internationalism” Hobson goes further. In relation to trade and the flow of labour and capital, Hobson believed that governments could “impede

¹¹⁸ Martin Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 197.

¹¹⁹ *Essays Towards Peace* (London: Watts & Co., 1913), 7.

¹²⁰ Mazower, *Governing the World*, 39.

¹²¹ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 137.

the particular flow, you may alter a little the directions, you may block certain channels, but you cannot effectively, to any considerable degree, control these great world forces.”¹²² However, he did make the concession that Cobden and those like him “failed to take account of...the continued power of certain classes of interests within the nation, as distinguished from the national interests conceived as a whole.”¹²³ The main issue Hobson was referring to was, of course, imperial power, always a target for the populist economist. Ultimately, Hobson believed that the “hard-shelled nationalism” of only competing self-interest was as “false in the same way and to the same degree of the hard-shell individualism of the older times.”¹²⁴ He saw the First World War as an ‘acid test’ for many of the beliefs he held about peace, anti-imperialism and democracy.¹²⁵ However, his views on internationalism were far more daring than most of his contemporaries.

Hobson saw the rise of internationalist institutions as something that transcended nationality, and it would be the domestic political institutions that would have to catch up with them.¹²⁶ It was this attitude, of greater international cooperation, that would pervade secularist internationalist thought. Hobson was important as one of the “half-dozen most influential political thinkers in turn-of-the century Britain” and would be a key formulator of policy.¹²⁷ Like his wide ranging involvement in domestic issues and organisations, Hobson was just as promiscuous when it came to peace and

¹²² Hobson, “The Ethics of Internationalism,” 21.

¹²³ Hobson, “The Ethics of Internationalism,” 21.

¹²⁴ Hobson, “The Ethics of Internationalism,” 27.

¹²⁵ Michael Schneider, *J A Hobson* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1996), 11.

¹²⁶ Hobson, “The Ethics of Internationalism,” 27.

¹²⁷ Michael Freedon, “J A Hobson as a Political Theorist,” in *J A Hobson After Fifty Years: Freethinker of the Social Sciences*, ed., John Pheby (St Martin’s Press: London, 1994), 19.

internationalism.

Hobson was one of the original signatories on the document that formed the British Neutrality Committee (later the Bryce Committee).¹²⁸ He was also in attendance for the first meeting of what would become the Union of Democratic Control and would serve on the committee for 25 years.¹²⁹ As such, he was very active within the Union of Democratic Control and League of Nations Union, which will be shown below. However, he was also active in the National Peace Council and the League for Peace and Freedom.¹³⁰ But he was also involved in reconstruction, arguing against reparations in the Treaty of Versailles and was a member of the Whitley Committee in the Ministry of Reconstruction.¹³¹ Hobson it seemed was involved in an array of organisations, in influential positions to advocate the secularist internationalist case. Others that would subscribe to similar beliefs and agitate for internationalist aims were H N Brailsford, J M Robertson and Hypatia-Bradlaugh Bonner, as will be outlined below.

Hobson and Towards International Government

The best articulation of Hobson's views is in *Towards International Government*, which sets out a vision for a system of international checks and balances to prevent further wars. The reasons why a different approach to international relations was needed was set out in the preface. Hobson imagined that after the First World War concluded, the same conditions of an

¹²⁸ The first report from the Bryce Committee argued for the creation of a body like the League of Nations. Schneider, *J A Hobson*, 11.

¹²⁹ Schneider, *J A Hobson*, 11.

¹³⁰ Townsend, *J A Hobson*, 6.

¹³¹ Townsend, *J A Hobson*, 6,7.

“armed peace” would lead to another “inevitable” war.¹³² How, Hobson asked, could the world (or at least Europe in this respect) move towards “a real European partnership based on the recognition of equal rights and established and enforced by common will?”¹³³ The method he proposed would be a rearticulation of some of the issues raised by the Union of Democratic Control and other organisations interested in international arbitration but would go much farther. Crucially, one of the issues that underpinned the success of his argument was a key secularist principle.

While arbitration in principle was a good idea, Hobson asked where the enforcement of the outcomes proscribed by the established arbitration courts would come from. “Public opinion and a common sense of justice are found inadequate safeguards,” he stated, which meant that there needed to be central and executive centre to allow for economic pressure, or in a last resort, “an international force.”¹³⁴ Even more forward looking, Hobson did not want to wait for tensions to flare up before the international system had a time to react. “It’s not safe for the League of Nations to wait until difficulties ripen into quarrels,” which meant a requirement to have a branch of the League of Nations to investigate and have “some wider power of inquiry and settlement.”¹³⁵ Hobson’s strategy was a triple lock of having powers of investigation early on when tensions arose, arbitration when conciliation and investigation failed, and an international force for when countries did not abide by the decisions or were hostile to members of the League. His

¹³² Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 5.

¹³³ Equal rights and autonomy would be a key issue for Hobson. Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 5.

¹³⁴ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 6.

¹³⁵ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 6.

intention was not to adopt his scheme wholesale but to “get the largest number of thoughtful people to form clear, general ideas of better international relations” and most importantly to have those thoughtful people “desire their attainment.”¹³⁶ Hobson did not want his internationalist idea to get bogged down in too many details but was rather interested in articulating principles that would underpin an international system.

With some prescience, Hobson believed that without a better idea to combat the status quo, the continent would be “plunged into another war more terrible, more bloody, and more costly than this.”¹³⁷ As well, he did not think that suppressing German military power with yet more military power would make Europe any safer as Germany itself had “no such monopoly of the spirit of aggression.”¹³⁸ What was needed instead was a reduction in armaments across all European powers. “Splendid isolation” he stated was no longer possible and peace was only possible when the costs of war against one’s neighbour was too costly to entertain.¹³⁹ What Hobson was interested in was not just limiting the costs of international quarrels with arbitration but rather eliminating the possibility for war or threat of war against its member states.

When it came to arbitration, the first of the powers that the League of Nations should possess, Hobson listed the various issues that might come

¹³⁶ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 7.

¹³⁷ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 8.

¹³⁸ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 13. This is another secularist belief, in that no one nation or type of people had radically different characteristics from another. As Hobson stated in the critique of how jingoistic beliefs arrive through consensus in the press: “Such an amount of consentaneity seemed to attest a case of overwhelming strength.” J A Hobson, *The Psychology of Jingoism* (London: John Richards, 1901), 108.
or for centuries.

¹³⁹ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 23.

under their purview. This includes disputes over existing international agreements, disputes that could be solved by the application of international law, and finally “dispute on questions of fact.”¹⁴⁰ He also included in the scope of arbitration issues of “vital interests”, “honour,” and “independence” which had been traditionally excluded from international treaties.¹⁴¹ As he stated “if arbitration is to be made an effective method for securing peace, all issues in their nature arbitrable must be brought within its scope, irrespective of their importance or the feeling that attaches to them.”¹⁴² This is perhaps a very rational (and secularist) argument to make: that nothing was beyond the state’s ability to arbitrate and come to an amicable agreement on. This general ability to arbitrate on international matters, no matter the issue, was essential to Hobson. It was only the “standardization of arbitral justice” that would lead to “complete impartiality.”¹⁴³ Extending that concept outwards, it would give no preference for religion or ethnicity for settling international issues. Just as secularists argued that personal characteristics of the individual should not matter when in front of a court of law within the UK, Hobson argued that the same should apply for the international system.

Union of Democratic Control issues would occasionally slip through the cracks in Hobson’s work, though given his affiliation with the organisation, this is not surprising. In the chapter on conciliation, he makes the argument for broadening the base of those who could lead the conciliation to “broad-minded men of large personal experience and the people and the popular

¹⁴⁰ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 34-35.

¹⁴¹ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 35.

¹⁴² Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 37.

¹⁴³ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 40.

activities of their country...accustomed in large, free intercourse to test and assimilate new facts and ...practice arts of mediation and arrangement.”¹⁴⁴ The main reason for this, of course, was that the upper echelon of society (“aristocrats” in Hobson’s words), formed the core of diplomatic corps and were “false-friendly, circumlocutory, and non-committal, full of duplicity and secret reserves.”¹⁴⁵ The traditional “secret class diplomacy” was also linked to militarism and business interests, which of course undermined the cause of peace.¹⁴⁶ Or when discussing the continued trade in armaments, he stated that “The ‘Great Powers’ should have allowed these private profiteering cosmopolitan monsters thus to prey upon their very vitals is the culminating modern instance of capitalist control of politics.”¹⁴⁷ These issues are all echoed in literature produced by the Union of Democratic Control (some of it by Hobson himself).

The main issue to settle with the formation of the League of Nations was what to do for an international executive. After arguing against such a body being formed out of the court of arbitration or a congress of foreign ministers, Hobson states that what was needed was an independent international executive. He admits that “this, of course, involves an action requiring great faith and courage.”¹⁴⁸ The permanent basis of such a League naturally, to Hobson at least, after rejecting all the other options that failed in the past, leads the reader to the idea of an international government.

¹⁴⁴ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 65.

¹⁴⁵ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 68.

¹⁴⁶ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 69.

¹⁴⁷ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 183.

¹⁴⁸ Hobson believed that without a permanent body the problems of congresses called in moments of crisis would continue and nations would not reap the benefits of a vigilant and active international body. Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 109.

The first point that Hobson had to make for the need of an international government was that of change. Borders, technology, health, immigration, the economy and a host of other issues would not stay fixed, so assuming that international laws would remain fixed was unthinkable.¹⁴⁹ As well, the outputs from arbitration and conciliation would require the growth and maintenance of international law - which would require a “legislative as well as executive power.”¹⁵⁰ Hobson then tried to grapple with the issue of strict national borders, nationalism and the changing populations within them. What, if anything, could the International Government do when faced with issues of nationalism - as he stated that no nation would join if the International Government could arbitrarily change their borders based on population fluctuations.¹⁵¹ The solution for Hobson was international and secularist: countries who join could not bar members of their country from citizenship based on “racial, geographical, linguistic, religious affinities, and by the feeling of community based on them.”¹⁵² Going further, he stated that peace between nations can never be secured without autonomy of the people within their own borders.¹⁵³ It is easy to see where this sentiment came from, if viewed from a secularist perspective. The history of the secular movement in the UK up to that point, had many examples of state suppression based on religion (or in this case, non-religious viewpoints). The whole history could be seen as a microcosm of wider state interference with the autonomy of individuals, from the enforcement of blasphemy charges

¹⁴⁹ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 113.

¹⁵⁰ The whole body would use “reason and justice” rather than existing law as the basis of new legislation. Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 114.

¹⁵¹ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 124.

¹⁵² Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 124.

¹⁵³ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 125.

through to the use of religious tests in order to participate in parliamentary life. Peace and the success of the League were dependent on national harmony, and the flexing of international borders to deal with sectarian issues would not provide the stability a League of Nations would require.

He concluded in his chapter on the “International mind” that the current conditions for his proposal were now, more than ever, attainable. This was due to the increased interconnectivity between states based on technology and commerce - the explosion of international associations that started in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵⁴ He also stressed that for such a system to work, Germany would have to be allowed to join (after sufficient economic and other reparations have been made as the losers of the war).¹⁵⁵ The international system would only work if it was truly international, with all the difficulties of working out historical (and recent) antagonisms.

Though Hobson’s plan for international government was not a full blueprint for securing peace, he recognised that several core features were needed. Thus, he dismissed special categories of issues that could not be arbitrated (such as honour) but with the requirement to have an impartial approach to all issues. Combined with the need for citizens to have autonomy of thought, belief, and language would mean that the issue of national problems flaring up due to sectarian conflicts would be reduced. It was probably a utopian idea, but from an international perspective it would be essential to avoid international tensions. It was an international secularist perspective that would not only guarantee peace internationally but allow for great peace within national borders as well. The same expansive and radical

¹⁵⁴ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 194-195.

¹⁵⁵ Hobson, *Towards International Government*, 174.

and secularist views would be shared by Henry Noel Brailsford.

H N Brailsford – Labour activist, journalist and internationalist

Henry Noel Brailsford (25 December 1873 - 23 March 1958) was born in Yorkshire to E J Brailsford, a Wesleyan clergyman. Despite being raised a non-conformist Methodist, he lost “his belief in eternal salvation”.¹⁵⁶ His biographer F M Leventhal states that he took that Methodist “missionary zeal” and applied it to socialism – though I will argue that it was also secularism that influenced his work – especially in an international context.¹⁵⁷ His obituary in the *Manchester Guardian* noted that while in school in Scotland, he acquired the characteristics of “persistence, definite opinion and a sense of democratic equality.”¹⁵⁸ Brailsford, like Hobson, was recognised for his contributions to political thought. Kingsley Martin, who was his editor for 20 years, said that Brailsford was “the finest British journalist of his time.”¹⁵⁹ He would publish for a variety of British newspapers and magazines, such as the *Manchester Guardian*, *The Tribune*, *The Daily News*, *The Nation* and *Labour Leader*. From early on, he reported on politics and international issues, starting with Crete in 1897 and Macedonia in 1898 (which he would maintain a keen interest in throughout his career).¹⁶⁰ Michael Foot also acknowledged his journalistic abilities by stating he was “the most eloquent and incisive

¹⁵⁶ F M Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter: H. N. Brailsford and His World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 2.

¹⁵⁷ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 24.

¹⁵⁸ “Henry Noel Brailsford: A Leading Progressive Writer,” *Manchester Guardian*, March 24, 1958, 3.

¹⁵⁹ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 1.

¹⁶⁰ “Henry Noel Brailsford: A Leading Progressive Writer,” 3

Socialist journalist of the age.”¹⁶¹ Brailsford’s goal, while always thinking in a dissenting mould, was to “influence policy-makers and the public” alike.¹⁶² However, like Hobson, he was mainly influential during his lifetime.

His secularist credentials stem from his long time affiliation with J A Hobson, both within Labour politics and journalism. In addition, he was an honorary member of the Rationalist Press Association¹⁶³ and the president of the Ethical Union between 1945 and 1946.¹⁶⁴ In his writing he frequently poked fun at religion and its dogmas. In “Ghosts of Westminster” he humorously ‘walks’ with various religious figures from the past, all debating the Book of Common Prayer. One of the characters he talks with was a “shockingly naked aborigine” who states “Our Prayer Book was originally a cannibal ritual. We grew out of that in time.”¹⁶⁵ Brailsford goes on to conclude after this that “From the beginning of time, it seemed to me, mankind has been revising the Prayer Book, but all the efforts of reformers have not wholly erased the last traces of the original cannibal rite.”¹⁶⁶ Brailsford in this example, employed the familiar secularist trick of comparative religion to point out the problems with Christianity. In *The New Republic* he equated the debates about the Prayer Book as living “in a richly furnished museum”.¹⁶⁷ This story indicating that Brailsford found religion and its influence in contemporary life a bit tired. As well as in another article about Voltaire, he

¹⁶¹ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 1.

¹⁶² Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 2.

¹⁶³ International Institute for Social History, World Union of Freethinkers, Rationalist Press Association 60th Annual Report.

¹⁶⁴ People’s History Museum, HNB/5/118, Letter from Ethical Union to H N Brailsford.

¹⁶⁵ H N Brailsford, “Ghosts at Westminster,” *The New Leader* June 22, 1928, 8.

¹⁶⁶ Brailsford, “Ghosts of Westminster”, 8.

¹⁶⁷ H N Brailsford, “Church and Parliament in England,” *The New Republic*, Aug 1, 1928, 268.

praised the author by saying “Again, though here, too, there were brave pioneers before him, he was the first intellect on the front rank who dared to combat the whole mythology of supernatural religion.”¹⁶⁸ Brailsford admired Voltaire because “he rejected nationalism and the authority of monarchy and church, encompassing all of humanity – or at least enlightened humanity – in his cosmopolitan aspirations.”¹⁶⁹ Brailsford, while not dropping any pretences about his thoughts about religion, did so more with wit than scorn.

In an amusing series of exchanges between Brailsford and the author G K Chesterton, Brailsford states: “He snatched me up, a decent, tolerant rationalist, he flattered me, he danced with me, and then he flung me down among general Calvinists and hard-shell Baptists, and mediaeval inquisitors;” but Brailsford asserted that “The fellow with whom Mr. Chesterton danced was some insubstantial creation...”¹⁷⁰ The exchanges continued: “It is inspiring to see Mr Chesterton swaggering among suns and stars, and shouting to an indifferent universe his faith in the all importance of man...Man is none the less a mere detail in the cosmic progress, and all the egoism of humanity will not avail to restore the anthropo-centric theory”.¹⁷¹ The exchange goes on for some time, but through his own words, Brailsford identifies as a rationalist and materialist – not least in his insistence that humanity’s place in the universe was inconsequential to the universe itself.

Other than Voltaire, he also praised Bertrand Russell on a BBC Radio programme. He believed that the mathematician and philosopher’s

¹⁶⁸ People’s History Museum, H3/31/7, H N Brailsford, “He made us ready for freedom.”

¹⁶⁹ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 240.

¹⁷⁰ People’s History Museum, HNB/53/3ii, H N Brailsford, “On a recent sermon.”

¹⁷¹ People’s History Museum, HNB/53/3ii, H N Brailsford, “What Shall I eat,” Aug 12, 1907.

“outstanding virtue” was courage.¹⁷² The courage was for several different reasons. The first was that “he dares to say exactly what he means” and “he leaves you for example in no sort of doubt as to his reasons for rejecting traditional religion.”¹⁷³ In a more internationalist element, he also praises Russell for the courage to change his mind from his pacifism prior to the Second World War to advocating the defeat of Nazi Germany.¹⁷⁴ This is one of the marks of secularist internationalists: though they may have rejected the need for British intervention in the First World War (as Brailsford certainly did), they saw a major difference with the Germany of the Second World War.

Brailsford's personal actions reflected his outer humanitarian ideals as well. In the same ongoing argument with Chesterton, Brailsford advocates his vegetarianism. The reason was not moral or religious but rather because “he could not endure the suffering of animals.”¹⁷⁵ Brailsford stated: “To eat a rabbit when a few ounces of haricot beans will yield the same nourishment is a vandalism comparable to the Turkish trick of building powder magazines with the marbles of the Parthenon.”¹⁷⁶ Throughout his career, Brailsford wrote from a secularist perspective, identify as a rationalist and occasionally be involved with secularist organisations. Therefore, it would be difficult to not ascribe some secularist and rationalist intent to his activism.

It is also through his activism that Brailsford falls into the same political

¹⁷² People's History Museum, HNB/53/3ii, H N Brailsford, “Famous contemporaries No. 5: Bertrand Russell,” 3.

¹⁷³ Brailsford, “Famous contemporaries No. 5: Bertrand Russell,” 3.

¹⁷⁴ Brailsford, “Famous contemporaries No. 5: Bertrand Russell,” page 3.

¹⁷⁵ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 45.

¹⁷⁶ Brailsford, “What shall I eat.”

sphere as Hobson and Hobhouse. He came into contact with C P Scott (the same editor that links both Hobson and Hobhouse) through the South Africa Conciliation Committee in 1900.¹⁷⁷ He was also a member of the Macedonian Relief Committee, which would get him into trouble when passports he procured ended up in the hands of Russians.¹⁷⁸ Where Brailsford came into contact with both Hobson and Hobhouse was as a foreign affairs writer with the *Tribune*.¹⁷⁹ Hobhouse was the editor of the new paper with Hobson on the writing staff.¹⁸⁰ During this time, Brailsford is heavily involved in the Suffragette movement – being a major force behind the Conciliation Bill (which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter). After the failure of that bill, Brailsford once more was back to international activism.

Brailsford, though he worked his entire life covering international events as a writer and journalist, has been relatively neglected. Aside from his biographer, there is relatively little scholarship on the impact of his work. Peter Lamb argues that he deserves more attention in “Henry Noel Brailsford’s Radical International Relations Theory”. Not only is Brailsford neglected but until the 1970s, all radical thought was “marginalised in IR [international relations].”¹⁸¹ The reason for this is that Brailsford and other individuals from the Labour Party did not fall into the traditional split of international relations categories of “realist” and “idealist”.¹⁸² Finally,

¹⁷⁷ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 44.

¹⁷⁸ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 53.

¹⁷⁹ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 57.

¹⁸⁰ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 57.

¹⁸¹ Peter Lamb, “Henry Noel Brailsford’s Radical International Relations Theory,” *International Relations* 25(2011): 480.

¹⁸² Lamb, “Henry Noel Brailsford’s Radical International Relations Theory,” 480.

Brailsford interdisciplinary approach which, “combined politics, economics, history and philosophy” went out of fashion for forty years.¹⁸³ Even though Brailsford has been neglected in subsequent historiography, Lamb argues that, “in his own time Brailsford’s efforts at such an exposition were widely read and appreciated.”¹⁸⁴ As Fenner Brockway put it, Brailsford was “authoritative in so many spheres.”¹⁸⁵ So alongside Hobson as an astute Labour and economic theorist, Brailsford can also be counted upon as influential in the field of international relations and internationalism.

In 1913 Brailsford was chosen by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to investigate the causes of the two, at that time, recent Balkan Wars. The choice of Brailsford was most likely because of his “unequalled knowledge of Balkan affairs”.¹⁸⁶ What was impressive about Brailsford’s analysis was how it encompassed the framework of Hobson’s *Imperialism* but was “more daring, offering a penetrating exploration of the relationship between imperial expansion and European instability.”¹⁸⁷ His argument stated that the capitals of Western nations “sought outlets” in other parts of the world and cried wolf to “Invoke the power of the state for its protection” when things went wrong.¹⁸⁸ Hobson, while involved in Labour and Liberal politics, also shared internationalist sentiments. As a member of several internationalist organisations, he would speak, write and campaign for a more federalised Europe, though this “smacked of utopian illusion” to

¹⁸³ Lamb, “Henry Noel Brailsford’s Radical International Relations Theory,” 494.

¹⁸⁴ Lamb, “Henry Noel Brailsford’s Radical International Relations Theory,” 494.

¹⁸⁵ Fenner Brockway, *98 not out* (London: Quartet Books, 1986), 35.

¹⁸⁶ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 105.

¹⁸⁷ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 111.

¹⁸⁸ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 109.

some other internationalists at the time.¹⁸⁹

Hobson and Brailsford would combine their forces with Leonard Woolf and Dickenson to form the League of Nations Society, which aimed to popularise the concept of the League of Nations. This is where we find very close collaboration and also far advanced internationalist ideas by both secularists. As well, Brailsford would be named to the General Committee of the Union of Democratic Control in 1914.¹⁹⁰ Norman Angell, one of the founders of the Union of Democratic Control, also credited Brailsford for popularising his book *Europe's Optical Illusion*. In his autobiography, Angell stated that he sent the book to many journalists but it was the two-page review by Brailsford (which Angell then again shared), which led to his book becoming so popular.¹⁹¹ Angell himself seems amenable to radicals and secularists, recalling his attitude as a teenager as a “young heretic” and crediting some of this to the writings of “Voltaire, Tom Paine, Mill, Kingsley, Morris, Carlyle, Huxley, Spencer, Bradlaugh, J M Robertson, Ingersoll and Walt Whitman.”¹⁹² Again, all of these figures were well known and read in secularist circles. He also supported the Rationalist Peace Society.¹⁹³ With more research, Angell might also be considered a secularist or at least in sympathy with the non-religious when it came to his worldview.

Brailsford and Hobson's involvement in the Union of Democratic Control

“A definite Organisation, provisionally known as ‘The Union of Democratic

¹⁸⁹ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 133.

¹⁹⁰ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 130.

¹⁹¹ Norman Angell, *After All* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, Inc., 1951), 148.

¹⁹² Angell, *After All*, 8.

¹⁹³ Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, 181.

Control' [UDC] is now in process of formation" declared and signed by Ramsay MacDonald, Charles Trevelyan, Norman Angell and E D Morel in 1914, signalled the beginning of a new force in the peace movement in the UK.¹⁹⁴ The UDC was critical of the government's foreign policy, though it would become more mainstream, having its positions adopted by the Labour Party. The founders were non-interventionist, were against secret diplomacy and believed a "class-based foreign policy" led the country to war against its best interests.¹⁹⁵ However, the exact views of the UDC and its members and leaders were not always consistent.¹⁹⁶ Bridgen defines four groups within the organisation: "The UDC radicals, the Gladstonian liberals, the democratic socialists and the ILP Pacifists".¹⁹⁷ L T Hobhouse (also a member of the UDC) was a Gladstonian Liberal, believing that unless Germany was stopped "German militarism will sweep us away, and peace, Liberalism, and international freedom are abolished in Europe."¹⁹⁸ Brailsford sat among the democratic socialists, whereas Hobson did not fit in particularly well with any of the groups.¹⁹⁹ Brailsford and Hobson were also alone within the UDC for wanting a "much bolder type of international organization: they wanted a federation on the grounds that it alone would have the legislative authority to tackle war's economic and colonial causes."²⁰⁰ This reflects what was discussed earlier, with Hobson's position on a strong organisation in *Towards*

¹⁹⁴ London School of Economics, Union of Democratic Control archives, M473, Letter, September 1914.

¹⁹⁵ Laity, *The British Peace Movement*, 226.

¹⁹⁶ Bridgen, *The Labour Party and the Politics of War and Peace*, 71. Bridgen also downplays the importance of the UDC within Labour politics.

¹⁹⁷ Bridgen, *The Labour Party and the Politics of War and Peace*, 71.

¹⁹⁸ Bridgen, *The Labour Party and the Politics of War and Peace*, 74.

¹⁹⁹ Bridgen, *The Labour Party and the Politics of War and Peace*, 79, 71.

²⁰⁰ Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, 200.

International Government.

In 1916, names for the General Committee of the UDC were being suggested and included the founders but also Brailsford, Hobson and Bertrand Russell.²⁰¹ Brailsford's advice was also heeded when he said that "the women will resent it being suggested that they should form separate organisations" and so the General Committee was also looking for women to join the organising group.²⁰² This position was echoed by Helena Swannick in a letter to E D Morel stating: "So if you segregate us into Men's Peace Societies (educating men) and women's Peace Societies (educating women) you tend to drive us further and further apart...Frankly the prospect doesn't attract me."²⁰³ Swannick was important within the peace movement for setting up Women's International League in 1915.²⁰⁴ In the end, there was no segregation of women and men in the Union of Democratic Control.

Brailsford's first publication for the Union of Democratic Control (and the organisation's fourth overall) was an account of the events leading up to the start of the First World War called *Origins of the Great War*. He stated in the beginning: "For Englishmen, this war is primarily a struggle between Germany and France. For the Germans it is emphatically a Russo-German War."²⁰⁵ He then outlines the entire problem within the Balkans, postulating that the war was "the postponed sequel of the Balkan war of 1912" – which

²⁰¹ London School of Economics, Union of Democratic Control collection, September 1916, M473, letter to C P Scott from CP Trevelyan

²⁰² September 1916, M473, letter to C P Scott from CP Trevelyan

²⁰³ London School of Economics, Union of Democratic Control collection, September, letter to Morel from H M Swannick.

²⁰⁴ Laity, *The British Peace Movement*, 233.

²⁰⁵ H N Brailsford, *The Origins of the Great War* (London: The Union of Democratic Control), 1.

he was so familiar with due to his work with the Carnegie Endowment.²⁰⁶ It is due to this analysis that Brailsford condemned the involvement of the UK in the war: "I can only marvel at the illusions, and curse the fatality which have made us belligerents in this struggle."²⁰⁷ In an incredibly prescient conclusion, he stated that only the German people can change "German Militarism" and that if the allies "Crush that people, load it with indemnities, lop it of its provinces, encircle it with triumphant allies...it will rally behind...a national struggle to recover its standing, its integrity, its power of free movement."²⁰⁸ As is fitting with the Union of Democratic Control, it ends with a call to return to a state of neutrality, so the country does not get involved in a predicted Second World War.²⁰⁹

Hobson would also write for the Union of Democratic Control, as well as becoming the president of the organisation. When founding member, Ramsay MacDonald became Prime Minister, it was Hobson who wrote to him to press the point of the aims of the UDC. Hobson first congratulated MacDonald for the aims already so far secured but then reiterated the demands of the UDC. First the ability for parliament to debate all treaties before ratification and "the assurance that no national commitments or obligations not having the character of a formal Treaty, will be secretly entered into."²¹⁰ Hobson stated that it was "the first step" towards "effective democratic control" which the Union (with MacDonald's help) "had laboured

²⁰⁶ Brailsford, *The Origins of the Great War*, 3.

²⁰⁷ Brailsford, *The Origins of the Great War*, 13-14.

²⁰⁸ Brailsford, *The Origins of the Great War*, 15.

²⁰⁹ Brailsford, *The Origins of the Great War*, 15

²¹⁰ National Archives, PRO 30/69/232, Letter from J A Hobson to J Ramsay MacDonald (Prime Minister), 22 May 1924

for ten years to bring about.”²¹¹ Hobson pressed the issue further, to convey to the international community that the government is committed to a new kind of politics. However, MacDonald pushed back on throwing the government’s weight behind the motion submitted by E D Morel because of the consequences if they lost the vote.²¹² The rebuff did not seem to do their relationship any harm as Ramsay would make “very friendly enquiries” about Hobson in 1934 to the publishers Allen & Unwin.²¹³

Hobson also wrote for the Union of Democratic Control, most notably the pamphlet “A League of Nations”, number 15 in the series of publications. In this pamphlet and in the more expansive book *Towards International Government*, Hobson’s liberal internationalism becomes evident. His contribution, according to David Long, is also important as he “provides the theoretical basis of the transformation of international theory away from the ‘negative liberty’ and ‘... towards welfare needs as the criterion for international political action and institutions.”²¹⁴ In “A League of Nations”, Hobson echoed Brailsford’s sentiments that “the terms of a ‘victorious’ peace may sow the fatal seeds of future conflict.”²¹⁵ Addressing the critics (as the war was in progress), Hobson replied that the “rudiments of political

²¹¹ PRO 30/69/232, Letter from J A Hobson to J Ramsay MacDonald (Prime Minister), 22 May 1924

²¹² National Archives, PRO 30/69/232, Letter to Hobson from J R MacDonald, 27 May 1924. “The motion being that, in the opinion of this House, no diplomatic arrangement or understanding with a foreign State, involving, directly or indirectly, national obligations, shall be concluded without the consent of Parliament, and no preparations for co-operation in war between the naval, military or air staffs, and the naval, military of air staffs of a foreign State shall be lawful without Parliamentary sanction and this resolution shall be communicated to all States with which we are in diplomatic relations and the League of Nations.”

²¹³ Reading University Archives, AUC 41/10/1, Letters from and to J A Hobson from Allen & Unwin, 12 October 1934.

²¹⁴ David Long, “Three Modes of Internationalism in the Work of J. A. Hobson,” in *J A Hobson After Fifty Years: Freethinker of the Social Sciences*, ed John Pheby (St Martin’s Press: London, 1994), 182.

²¹⁵ J A Hobson, *A League of Nations* (London: Union of Democratic Control, 1915), 2.

internationalism, judicial, legislative, even administrative, already exist, weak, fragmentary, circumscribed in area, no doubt, but genuine beginnings of government, and powerful testimony to the instinctive drive towards pacific cooperation between nations.”²¹⁶ He also restated the position of the Union of Democratic Control to have treaties open to parliamentary debate but also to “opening of our Foreign Office and our Diplomatic Service to all personally qualified persons, irrespective of their social or pecuniary status”.²¹⁷ He also broadly outlines the need for international governance and cooperation with real repercussions when peace is breached.

Hobson also wanted this institution to have the capability to enforce its decisions. An international government or governing body would help direct sanctions “to deter states from engaging in aggressive war.”²¹⁸ He also proposed this central body have its own armed force to ensure compliance of both the international government and an international court.²¹⁹ This armed force would directly interfere with states where they broke with international decisions.²²⁰ It was these international reforms that were most important to Hobson before and during the First World War.²²¹ Potentially overreaching, Hobson wanted to see the “progressive institutionalisation of international relations.”²²² At the time, before the First World War and during the inter-war period, even Liberal governments did not seem capable of rational international relations.

²¹⁶ Hobson, *A League of Nations*, 4.

²¹⁷ Hobson, *A League of Nations*, 29.

²¹⁸ Long, “Three Modes of Internationalism in the Work of J. A. Hobson,” 174.

²¹⁹ Long, “Three Modes of Internationalism in the Work of J. A. Hobson,” 175.

²²⁰ Long, “Three Modes of Internationalism in the Work of J. A. Hobson,” 174. Additionally, Hobson made the argument that individual states could not engage in warfare.

²²¹ Long, “Three Modes of Internationalism in the Work of J. A. Hobson,” 175.

²²² Long, “Three Modes of Internationalism in the Work of J. A. Hobson,” 175.

Hobson and Brailsford were both important, if radical, voices within the Union of Democratic Control. Both their experience within the Labour policy, international events and the understanding of the reasons underlying the First World War gave them influence within the Union of Democratic Control. The UDC in turn had an important role to play, critiquing the current limited construction of foreign policy. The UDC became mainstream, in that their positions were picked up by one of their own becoming Prime Minister but also by the Labour Party by 1917 and by the mainstream afterwards.²²³ Even after the end of the First World War, “the UDC was Britain’s most significant peace association.”²²⁴ As Long states: “Hobson is an important figure in the development of liberal internationalism” as he “provides the theoretical basis of the transformation of international theory away from the ‘negative liberty’ and ‘constitutionalism’... towards welfare needs as the criterion for international political action and institutions.”²²⁵ Freedden seconds this point and that Hobson “bequeathed more than we care to admit to the way we handle important areas of liberal welfare thought; whether or not we approve of his ideas, his influence there is incontestable.”²²⁶ Additionally, Ceadel describes Hobson as someone who played a “leading role” in the peace movement and Brailsford as “perceptive radical writer on foreign affairs.”²²⁷ They were both important voices in articulating the causes of the war but a potential conflict-free future through the strengthening of international institutions. Unlike pacifists and related organisations – Brailsford and

²²³ Bridgen, *The Labour Party and the Politics of War and Peace*, 66.

²²⁴ Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, 258.

²²⁵ Long, “Three Modes of Internationalism in the Work of J. A. Hobson,” 182.

²²⁶ Freedden, “J A Hobson as a Political Theorist,” 32.

²²⁷ Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, 151, 169.

Hobson saw the war as a natural outcome of the status quo. It was only with strengthening international institutions that they could expect change.

Conclusion: Huxley and UNESCO

To conclude, we can follow the continued evolution of secularist activism in an international mode with the case of Julian Huxley and his directorship of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Even though it was over half a century from the struggles faced by Secularists in the nineteenth century, Huxley still had to face determined opposition to his outright advocacy of secularist principles.

Throughout the beginning of the twentieth century, Julian Huxley had made a name for himself as a populariser of evolution, though he also had a role in popularising eugenics (as will be seen in the next chapter). However, he also became the first director of UNESCO. Partly this was due to his connections through the League of Nations Institute of Intellectual Co-Operation and Gilbert Murray.²²⁸ While not a member of the Institute himself, Huxley along with Joseph Needham would make the plea to the then Minister of Education, R A Butler, that science should be included in the proto-organisation (at the time, the organisation was only going to focus on education and culture).²²⁹ Potentially too successful, science was included in the organisation and Huxley was asked to be its first director.²³⁰ Huxley, of

²²⁸ Julian Huxley, *Memories II* (London: Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1973), 13. Gilbert Murray, of course, was involved with various international organisations as mentioned above.

²²⁹ Huxley, *Memories II*, 13.

²³⁰ In what seems like a very close knit school-boy club, Huxley provides context for his appointment by reminiscing about Sir John Maud (who dealt with UNESCO affairs) "who greeted me with a rather broad joke in Latin (He is one of the few men capable of such esoteric humour!), and then casually asked whether I would like to become full-time secretary of the commission." Huxley, *Memories II*, 14.

course, accepted the position.

One of the things Huxley wanted to do was set out the philosophy for UNESCO to operate under. He did this by retreating to the country and writing the pamphlet, *Unesco, Its Purpose and Its Philosophy*, basing the philosophy on his ideas of scientific humanism.²³¹ The pamphlet outlined that the organisation could not rely on religious (or philosophical systems) but instead on “humanistic ideals of mutual aid, the spread of scientific ideas, and by cultural interchange.”²³² He also believed that UNESCO’s activities should be underpinned by the “fuller realisation of capacities by individuals, cities, nations, and humanity as a whole.”²³³ Huxley purposely adopted a secularist philosophy for how the organisation would operate.

However, his idea did not go entirely according to plan. Huxley was concerned by appointment of “Ernest Barker, the historian” who had previously “quarreled” with Huxley over his “attitude to established religion.”²³⁴ Barker argued that UNESCO should not adopt the pamphlet, as he believed it adopted an “atheist attitude disguised as humanism.”²³⁵ In the end, the document was published but only as Huxley’s views and not as UNESCO as an official body.²³⁶ Huxley also speculated that his term of two years was down to the mistrust of the Executive Board of his “humanist attitude.”²³⁷ Despite whatever mistrust, Huxley was broadly successful in what he wanted to achieve. As well, the two-year tenure of his directorship

²³¹ Huxley, *Memories II*, 15.

²³² Huxley, *Memories II*, 15.

²³³ Huxley, *Memories II*, 35.

²³⁴ Huxley points out that Barker was an “ardent churchman.” Huxley, *Memories II*, 16.

²³⁵ Huxley, *Memories II*, 16.

²³⁶ Huxley, *Memories II*, 16.

²³⁷ Huxley, *Memories II*, 25.

was in the end quite enough. It is interesting to note that while he was ultimately successful, he was unable to obtain official sanction from the Board for the promotion of birth control.²³⁸ As will be argued in the next chapter, contraception was an issue that was difficult for religious bodies to grapple with. Instead, it would be secularists offering the most straightforward and pragmatic views on the subject.

What this brief foray into Huxley's involvement in UNESCO I hope illustrates, is that while secularists and secularist ideas were not anathema to international organisations, they were no means assured or always welcomed. While Huxley was able, as an open secularist and humanist, to promote his world view, it was not enough for UNESCO as a whole to adopt such an outlook. As well, religious individuals and views could still stymie his ideas as director of the organisation. Secularist ideas were not yet the default for organisations operating in the international sphere and would have to continue to be argued for in the second half of the twentieth century.

²³⁸ Huxley, *Memories II*, 35.

Chapter 4: Literary secularists

The historiography of secularism is closely related to the history of secularist organisations themselves. Holyoake, *The Reasoner*, Bradlaugh, the National Secular Society and the *National Reformer* are all cornerstones of that history. However, not all secularists needed to be that closely aligned with those campaigning organisations to contribute to the spread of secularist ideas. They did not necessarily have to be arrested for blasphemy or subscribe to the various periodicals or secularist organisations. Much of the focus of the historiography has also been on the working class (as well as skilled artisans), as they made up a good portion of Bradlaugh's constituency as well as the rolls of secularist organisations. I argue that there were also twentieth century secularists who were writers, middle class and largely divorced from the nineteenth century activism that preceded them.

In the twentieth century, there was still involvement from the secularist working class in secularist activism, as well as the larger influence of the Labour Party. However, perhaps more so than in the nineteenth century, there were active secularists from the middle class who were also university educated. As such, they had one major barrier removed from their activism or had better opportunities to popularise atheist and secularist values in their work and professional life. They were also connected with groups of writers, artists and other such professions, which some of the people described in this chapter will demonstrate. This was already evident in the previous chapters, with Hobson, Brailsford and Hobhouse. However, what I argue is that there were also those outside the movement that could be seen as secularists. They did not have to be engaged or at least as closely

associated with individuals and organisations that were specifically secularist, they just needed to proselytise a secularist worldview in their work.

I delve into more of the later nineteenth century in this chapter (more so than previous chapters) to demonstrate the continuity of ideas between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While in some ways the previous chapters articulate that there was a change in campaign tactics, the continued deployment of well established secularist tropes and ideas demonstrate a pattern of persistent secularist ideas in literature. What makes this more interesting in the twentieth century is that these ideas do not stay confined to just secularist organisations and familiar secularists, but rather expand to those writing for a wider audience. This is echoed by the Positivist experience, where writers like George Eliot supported the ideas of Comte and “found expression in her novels.”¹ Wright argues that Eliot’s work can be seen “as a critique of Comte, a set of ‘experiments in life’ in which Positivist concepts are examined and sometimes found wanting.”²

In part, this chapter is inspired by the article “‘Bibliolatry’ and ‘Bible-smashing’: G W Foote, George Meredith, and the heretic trope of the book” by Joss Lutz Marsh. In this article, the long-lasting friendship between *The Freethinker* editor G W Foote and Victorian poet and novelist George Meredith is evaluated. The argument is that Meredith had innate sympathy for the work of secularists, which led him to befriend G W Foote. Meredith would first come into contact with Foote in 1878, with their friendship spanning many years. Their friendship was not ephemeral - with Meredith

¹ Wright, *The Religion of Humanity*, 174-176.

² Wright, *The Religion of Humanity*, 180-181. Similarly, other Positivist expressions are found in the work of both Thomas Hardy and George Gissing.

writing to Foote, after his release from jail, saying “You carry on a brave battle, for the best of causes.”³ Even Foote’s blasphemy trial and imprisonment apparently did not negatively impact their friendship. However, Meredith realised that he could not write in the forthright *Freethinker* manner about his personal indignation about religion or the religious establishment for a purely secularist audience. One reason was that it would come with all the “resulting limitations” of that narrower audience.⁴ Foote did not let on about his friendship with Meredith “less he damage him by association” but Meredith would offer his name in support as the “Sage of Box Hill” in his later years (as well as donations to the secularist and freethought cause).⁵ However, Meredith’s understated affiliation with the movement could have made him a better secularist advocate than those who professed openly like G W Foote and *The Freethinker*. Without the limitations of a narrowed and solely secularist audience, Meredith could reach those not actively in sympathy with the causes of *The Freethinker* or other secularist organisations.

Meredith was friends with many of the literary figures of his day and was recognised in his lifetime for his work. He was the first writer to be given the Order of Merit (previously the preserve of military and political figures) and was president of the Society of Authors, “a recognition of his eminence by his professional peers.”⁶ Thomas Hardy credits Meredith’s advice and

³ Jack Lindsay, *George Meredith: His Life and Work* (London: The Pitman Press, 1956), 221.

⁴ Marsh, “‘Bibliolatry’ and ‘Bible-Smashing,’” 324. George Eliot had the same approach, replying to a letter encouraging her to write a completely positivist work that there was a “distinction between propaganda and aesthetic teaching.” Wright, *Religion of Humanity*, 176.

⁵ Marsh, “‘Bibliolatry’ and ‘Bible-Smashing,’” 324.

⁶ Mervyn Jones, *The Amazing Victorian: A Life of George Meredith* (London, Constable, 1999), ii.

encouragement as being a motivating force to dedicate himself to writing.⁷

Meredith therefore, over his lifetime, was an influential author, recognised by his peers.

Like with the relationships between secularists and those with secularist sympathies through the Rainbow Circle, the literary secularists overlap with other notable individuals outside their circle with whom they had shared interests. Meredith was also friends with W T Stead, who himself frequented the South Place Ethical Society.⁸ Stead was also involved in the international peace movement, much like H N Brailsford and J A Hobson.⁹ Meredith, like Stead and many secularists, had a “common philosophy of naturalism and positivism.”¹⁰ Both of these can be read in one of Meredith’s most famous poems, “The Lark Ascending.” In the poem the love of Earth was referenced with “because their love of Earth is deep” or “for singing till his heaven fills, ‘tis love of earth that he instils” alongside all the other references to nature.¹¹ But there are also the references to heaven merely being the sky rather than any other divine characteristic, which indicate his reverence for nature over religion or superstition. In the *RPA Annual*, Edward Clodd in “A Brief Note on the Religion of George Meredith” stated that Meredith’s rejection of religion was based on history and science which “he knew enough of to confirm him in that which was instinctive rather than

⁷ Mohammad Shaheen, *Selected Letters of George Meredith* (London: MacMillan, 1997), 138.

⁸ Joseph O. Baylen, “George Meredith and W. T. Stead: Three Unpublished Letters,” *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 24 (1960): 47.

⁹ Baylen, “George Meredith and W. T. Stead: Three Unpublished Letters,” 50.

¹⁰ Baylen, “George Meredith and W. T. Stead: Three Unpublished Letters,” 51.

¹¹ G M Trevelyan, ed., *The Poetical Works of George Meredith* (London: Constable and company Ltd., 1912), 222-223.

critical.”¹² Clodd goes on to say that Meredith did not believe in a personal god but rather a general sense of spiritual attunement with nature.¹³

Meredith, like many secularists was also radically supportive of women. His biographers (both women) praise him for his ability to capture women realistically in his writing, which was “a healthy antidote against the nauseous and abominable travesties of themselves and their species circulated by the libraries.”¹⁴ Not only that, but he wrote in *The Times* in 1906 after some suffragettes were arrested at the House of Commons that, “woman is a force to be reckoned with” and that the reason for them being punished for their political action was that men did not understand this.¹⁵ Many secularists were of the same opinion – that women deserved the same opportunities and privileges as men, more of which will be discussed in the next chapter on the secularist support of women.

Meredith followed a similar path to many converts to secularism, freethought or otherwise – he went to hear Charles Bradlaugh speak. He also followed in the footsteps of poet James Thomson, the “laureate of freethought”, who was also a friend of Foote and Bradlaugh.¹⁶ However, unlike someone like Henry Snell, there was no hard-won conversion to Secularism, instead Meredith found “an air he wanted to breathe.”¹⁷ However, the disinclination towards religion was found much earlier, when he was at school. As he stated in one letter, “I remember, at that age, how all

¹² Edward Clodd, “A Brief Note on the Religion of George Meredith,” *RPA Annual* 1910, 80.

¹³ Clodd, “A Brief Note on the Religion of George Meredith,” 80.

¹⁴ Jones, *The Amazing Victorian*, 139.

¹⁵ Jones, *The Amazing Victorian*, 141.

¹⁶ Marsh, “‘Bibliolatry’ and ‘Bible-Smashing,’” 318.

¹⁷ Marsh, “‘Bibliolatry’ and ‘Bible-Smashing,’” 325.

love of the Apostles was belaboured out of me by three Sunday services of prodigious length and drowsiness.”¹⁸ His dislike (or even boredom) of religion was written into his novels as well. Harry in *Harry Richmond* has his “pagan honour” in reaction to the “Christian idioms that rule the school.”¹⁹ Meredith also reflected on how he had a six week “spasm of religion” but that he then never again “swallowed the Christian fable.”²⁰ Fable is an interesting choice of words, as it often used by secularists to group Christianity in with other religions (either foreign or ancient). This is seen with Bradlaugh’s numerous references to stories in the Bible referred to as fables like in *The Bible! What it is!* For example, in a chapter on Numbers, Bradlaugh talks about “the fable concludes” when talking about a favourite story of secularists, Balaam’s Ass.²¹ There are several reasons to call it a ‘fable’ as the story contains several surreal elements. Balaam, after angering God, was unable to see angel’s barring his path, but bizarrely his donkey could and would not move.²² As Bradlaugh pointed out, “Is this intended as a covert sneer? Did the writer mean that asses are always the first to perceive invisible angels?”²³ Even more strangely, when Balaam beats the ass to get it moving again, the animal asked Balaam why he would do such a thing.²⁴ Bradlaugh then highlighted that since Balaam “manifested no surprise whatever when his ass spoke, we must conclude that the phenomenon was not entirely new to him.”²⁵ It was such a staple of secularists that F J Gould

¹⁸ Lindsay, *George Meredith: His Life and Work*, 22.

¹⁹ Lindsay, *George Meredith: His Life and Work*, 23.

²⁰ Lindsay, *George Meredith: His Life and Work*, 27.

²¹ Charles Bradlaugh, *The Bible: What It Is!* (London: Holyoake & Co., 1861), 78.

²² Bradlaugh, *The Bible: What It Is!*, 78.

²³ Bradlaugh, *The Bible: What It Is!*, 78.

²⁴ Bradlaugh, *The Bible: What It Is!*, 78.

²⁵ Bradlaugh, *The Bible: What It Is!*, 78.

lamented that secularists would rather laugh at the story of Balaam than do something more productive for the movement.²⁶

With Joshua, Bradlaugh stated that the sun standing still was “one of those fables that detects itself” as that kind of phenomenon would have had to be recorded elsewhere (as it would have affected the entire world).²⁷ Bradlaugh also stated that Jesus was “not simply a series of absurdities, but, in truth, a series of fables destitute of foundation in fact.” Other favourite words of secularists were ‘myths’, ‘tales’ or ‘stories’ (when they were not belabouring the points about dogma). The specific word choices that Meredith made would have resonated with secularist audiences, with their long tradition of biblical criticism and use of comparative religion to diminish the importance of Christianity. It also places him alongside the existing secularist tradition.

Meredith criticised religion even more, calling Christian morals an “instance of the poverty of humanity’s mind hitherto.”²⁸ In response to the clergy’s criticism of an address by John Tyndall, Meredith wrote: “The man or the country that fights priestcraft and priests is to my mind striking deeper freedom for freedom than can be struck anywhere at present. I foresee a perilous struggle with them.”²⁹ Finally, in one of Meredith’s novels, *Beauchamp’s Career*, the character of Shrapnel attacks Providence.³⁰ Throughout his work and life, Meredith demonstrated his sympathy for secularist ideals and antipathy towards elements of Christianity, much like

²⁶ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 117.

²⁷ Bradlaugh, *The Bible: What It Is!*, 100.

²⁸ Lindsay, *George Meredith: His Life and Work*, 191.

²⁹ Lindsay, *George Meredith: His Life and Work*, 192.

³⁰ Lindsay, *George Meredith: His Life and Work*, 210.

those involved in the movement.

In her article, Marsh charts the relationship between Foote and Meredith but also the unorthodoxy in Meredith's novels. Some of that unorthodoxy Marsh attributes to Foote's influence.³¹ The article concludes with: "Contrary to the critical practice that divides such high literature from sub-literature, we must see in Meredith's radical play...the same driving forces, and the same methods, as those which informed the blasphemous penny paper on which *Robert Elsemere* heaped opprobrium."³² Class divisions are at play once again, with radical literature being more acceptable than the penny press and open polemic that dominated nineteenth century secularist activism. However, Marsh's argument can be extended throughout other artists' works and artistic output. There can be no doubt that more examples like Meredith exist. While links to secular organisations and individuals can give an indication of support for secularist causes, this does not always have to be the case. People who had varying or loose ties to secularist circles but nevertheless still had the same philosophical viewpoint as secularists, would reflect these positions in their work. They too, then, can equally be viewed as secularists, alongside those who were obvious in their activism through organisational affiliation.

Three other examples of this argument could be found in the writing and opinions of Wilfred Scawen Blunt, Ivy Compton-Burnett and Marjorie Bowen, who all found different levels of influence in their lifetimes. What makes them different is the relative lack of association with traditional secularists than those found in political circles of Hobson and Robertson (or

³¹ Marsh, "'Bibliolatry' and 'Bible-Smashing,'" 325.

³² Marsh, "'Bibliolatry' and 'Bible-Smashing,'" 333.

even Meredith). Though, in the case of Blunt and Bowen, they had some contact and perhaps some limited influence in that arena as well. As with Meredith, their influence could have been either direct or indirect. With the distance from the more radical elements of the secularist movement in the nineteenth century or from their class, their writings portray secularist characters in a sympathetic light without the political baggage associated with the movement in general. They brought secularism and the ideas of freedom of thought and belief, or at least freedom from religion, to a wider and unsuspecting audience. They criticised traditional religion in a way that was not necessarily anti-religious or anti-biblical, but highlighted dim-witted religious adherents, and instead made protagonists the clear-headed rationalists. Finally, they employed religion as a literary device, without any special religious or moral quality.

Finally, it would be remiss to not include a discussion of the direct proselytising influences of secularist publications in the twentieth century, such as the successful publishing venture the *Thinker's Library*, published by Watts & Co. The long-running *Thinker's Library* was a different type of outreach than in the nineteenth century penny press, as it was designed to reach a mass audience. The series was made up of numerous literary and scientific classics, and amongst these The Rationalist Press Association slipped in the stalwarts of the nineteenth century secular movement. As such, they mixed in and popularised some of the more complex and previously controversial secularist subjects and authors. It was a successful publication venture, with the circulation reaching the hundreds of thousands. It will be briefly examined later on in this chapter.

Wilfred Scawen Blunt: sympathy with Satan

Wilfred Scawen Blunt was an unconventional member of the upper class in England, who took the side of the Charles Stewart Parnell and the Irish nationalists who advocated Home Rule. He also attacked imperialism and was an admirer of Persian culture and Islam. He worked in the diplomatic corps and was credited with being intelligent but also “not a man to whom you could safely entrust your daughter.”³³ Despite his reputation, eccentricity and one time imprisonment, Blunt was wealthy (having inherited his family estate) and had friends in high places, such as the future Prime Minister Winston Churchill.³⁴ Blunt wrote to Churchill upon the latter’s Ministerial appointment and stated: “A line of congratulation on your having got the Home Office for however long or short tenure it may be.”³⁵ He also recalled a conversation where Churchill said he would bring about prison discipline reform and that “as an ex-convict” he offered his knowledge.³⁶ Churchill followed through with Blunt’s suggestion, and asked Blunt to write a memorandum on prison reform.³⁷ Blunt based his proposals on his own experiences, having previously been imprisoned for his political advocacy of Irish Home Rule.

The memorandum focused on the imprisonment of suffragettes - he

³³ James Mitchell, “The Imprisonment of Wilfred Scawen Blunt in Galway: Cause and Consequence,” *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, 46 (1994): 65.

³⁴ Mitchell, “The Imprisonment of Wilfred Scawen Blunt in Galway,” 101.

³⁵ Churchill Archive, CHAR 12/4/1, letter from Wilfred Scawen Blunt to Winston Churchill, 15 February 1910.

³⁶ CHAR 12/4/1, 15 February 1910. Interestingly, he also notes that it would save Churchill from some pain from the suffragettes if he let it be known that he was interested in reform (especially for political prisoners.)

³⁷ Mitchell, “The Imprisonment of Wilfred Scawen Blunt in Galway,” 101.

equated their detention with his own as having been “more or less political.”³⁸ He described his first stint in Galway as a “spiritual retreat,” as the regulations were not followed to the letter, and he had a more freedom than he otherwise would have expected.³⁹ Blunt emphasised that most people in the prison were not there for violent crimes and that the most serious offence was “a man who got drunk and stabbed a sheep at a fair.”⁴⁰ However his second prison experience in Kilmainham was not nearly as pleasant, being of a “scientific modern type”, the prison resembled a panopticon and the prisoners felt that they were constantly being spied upon.⁴¹ His remedy was to have rehabilitation for non-violent offenders and that political prisoners should essentially be treated as prisoners of war “honourably, that is, and as opponents whom the law has captured.”⁴² Reform under Churchill did eventually occur, but not to the degree that Blunt advocated.⁴³ However Blunt’s idea was probably a bit too idealistic for the time - with an emphasis on rehabilitation of prisoners rather than purely a punishment. In some ways his attitude was very humanitarian - for example, he advocated ending solitary confinement. However, in other ways he was inconsistent, as he still supported capital punishment. In fact, he disagreed with private prison execution because it spared the “soft hearted public” from witnessing the end

³⁸ Churchill Archive, CHAR 12/4/3-12a, Wilfred Scawen Blunt, *Memorandum on Prison Reform: Especially as to the treatment of political prisoners*, 1.

³⁹This came to an end with an inspection of the prison, small luxuries were removed and friendly guards fired for drunkenness. Some of Blunt’s own biases come through in the memorandum where he states that “all prison warders in Ireland at that time were addicted to drink.” Churchill Archive, CHAR 12/4/3-12a, 3

⁴⁰ CHAR 12/4/3-12a, 4.

⁴¹ CHAR 12/4/3-12a, 4.

⁴² He also disagreed with the force feeding of suffragettes. Archive, CHAR 12/4/3-12a, 8.

⁴³ Warren Dockter, “The Influence of a Poet: Wilfrid S. Blunt and the Churchills,” *Journal of Historical Biography* 10 (2011): 90.

result of the criminal justice system.⁴⁴ This was not the only set of contradictory beliefs that Blunt would hold.

Blunt had a significant relationship with the Churchills. When Winston Churchill was writing the biography of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, Blunt provided the younger Churchill with letters between Lord Randolph and himself.⁴⁵ However, as has been pointed out by Warren Docker, despite all the interactions with two generations of Churchills, Winston Churchill's biography by his own son limits the impact of Blunt, perhaps to "downplay his father's relationship with such a politically radical figure as Blunt," and so he is only "peripheral" in Churchill's biography.⁴⁶

This reflects the same phenomenon that happened to Meredith after he died. Meredith's radical image was slowly sanitised. His support for women's equality, while important, was emphasised, rather than his attack on the bourgeoisie or other radical views.⁴⁷ It was noted in *The Literary Guide* that in a reflection of Meredith's life on the wireless, Lady Milner (the daughter of one of Meredith's closest friends) "said little concerning his pronounced heterodoxy."⁴⁸ More so, his rationalist critiques became spiritualist interpretations, in other words he "had been respectablised."⁴⁹ This was even reflected in the historiography of Hobson and Hobhouse, who clearly have secularist and radical leanings, yet most of the scholarship about them has omitted this part of their history. This could be a wider issue when it comes to secularists (or more likely secularist sympathisers). There were

⁴⁴ CHAR 12/4/3-12a, 10.

⁴⁵ Docker, "The Influence of a Poet: Wilfrid S. Blunt and the Churchills," 76.

⁴⁶ Docker, "The Influence of a Poet: Wilfrid S. Blunt and the Churchills," 71.

⁴⁷ Lindsay, *George Meredith: His Life and Work*, 361.

⁴⁸ "George Meredith," *The Literary Guide* 493 (1937): 127.

⁴⁹ Lindsay, *George Meredith: His Life and Work*, 363.

often deathbed conversion stories that circulated after a prominent atheist's death. This occurred even with Bradlaugh, with facts about his life contested after his death - which then became a primary motivation for Hypatia Bradlaugh-Bonner to write the official biography of her father.⁵⁰ The lives and motivations of secularists, even the most public like Bradlaugh, can become clouded by their own notoriety or the inability of the religious to contemplate non-religious motivations. It could be a symptom of the generally religious biographers being unable to comprehend Secularism, or a lack of faith in general, as a significant motivating factor in someone's life and actions. In Blunt's case, there seemed to be a major family rift with research into Blunt's life "handicapped from the start by the extreme hostility of Blunt's only daughter, Judith."⁵¹ According to his grandson, the rift was mainly over Blunt's opinion of women, which he thought was a misunderstanding.⁵² Though she did recognise that Blunt "loved and was loved by many beautiful women, not one of them seems to have deflected him for long from the main purposes of his life."⁵³ Whether his daughter's attitude about Blunt's dalliances were the cause or his attitude towards women, it did hamper the investigation into Blunt's life. When his grandson wrote his biography in 1961, there was additional correspondence locked away for a further eleven years.⁵⁴ Overall, it is interesting to see how complicated it can be to discover secularist motivations when their radicalism or heterodox views are omitted or downplayed by biographers.

⁵⁰ Nash, "The Credulity of the Public Seems Infinite", 247.

⁵¹ Earl of Lytton, *Wilfred Scawen Blunt* (London: MacDonald, 1961), 11.

⁵² Lytton, *Wilfred Scawen Blunt*, 14.

⁵³ Lytton, *Wilfred Scawen Blunt*, 20.

⁵⁴ Lytton, *Wilfred Scawen Blunt*, 13.

Where Blunt first came into contact with secularist circles was through Herbert Spencer, the scientist and secularist favourite. In Blunt's diary, he recounted receiving a letter from Spencer, which became the impetus for his work *Satan Absolved*. Writing to Blunt after he read a review of his work in *The Times*, Spencer stated: "Might not some such ideas as these, presented with power, produce considerable effects upon a few men, though not perhaps on many?"⁵⁵ Though Blunt dedicated the poem to Spencer, Spencer himself did not want to be credited as the commissioner of the piece. Blunt scathingly remarked on this absence of support: "it is not very courageous of him to leave me alone in the coming battle."⁵⁶ More interestingly, Blunt was not very impressed with Spencer in general:

"He is so very dry, and so much wrapped up in himself, his ailments, his work and his ideas, to the exclusion, it seems to me, of individual sympathies. His mind is clear and logical, he expresses himself well, but without eloquence or such power as compels attention; not once was I able to feel myself in the presence of a great man, only of a very well informed one, a pedagogue and able reasoner."⁵⁷

Given the prominence of Spencer within secularist publications, an outside perspective of Spencer being unremarkable is perhaps telling of the appeal of strictly secularist literature in general. With those outside the movement producing accessible novels, poems and other literature, they could have reached different audiences than those from inside the movement.

Despite the dry impression, Blunt agreed to write *Satan Absolved*. He introduced the poem and apologised to those "who sincerely believe that

⁵⁵ Wilfred Scawen Blunt, *My Diaries: Being a Personal Narrative of Events, 1888-1914* (London: Martin Secker, 1920), 506. Spencer seems to have recognised the power of secularist literature which did not fall under the usual secularist banners

⁵⁶ Blunt, *My Diaries*, 402.

⁵⁷ Blunt, *My Diaries*, 393.

Nineteenth Century Civilisation is synonymous with Christianity, and that the English Race, above all those in existence, has a special mission from Heaven to subdue and occupy the earth.”⁵⁸ A bold statement, one which would not have been out of place in *The Freethinker* or in an anti-imperialist speech by Bradlaugh or Robertson. Like *Paradise Lost*, Blunt’s Satan is a more honest and sympathetic character than those that appear in the rest of the poem. Satan arrives in heaven and states that he wants to end his rebellion against God. The first figures he comes across are the angels, who are scared of telling God the truth about man - that nothing has changed since Jesus was crucified and humanity is still a fallen species. While being questioned by God about the state of things, Gabriel tries to skirt around the issue of harmony and peace on Earth, attempting to equate love with the power of the Christian religion. However, God interrogates the angel’s choice of words, with the ever observant Satan sighing at Gabriel’s equivocations with “Alas, poor Gabriel.”⁵⁹

Satan, when recognised by the Almighty, shows God the flaw in his creation of man, comparing “the one comedian shape” of “the lewd bare-buttocked ape” against all the other animals.⁶⁰ Satan’s argument is that humans were a bad choice from the beginning and there were other, much more beautiful and noble animals, that God could have used to elevate above all the rest. One can already see the very secularist angle, making man low and comedic and just one of the many different creatures of creation – with no special place above them. As the argument goes on, Satan makes

⁵⁸ Wilfred Scawen Blunt *Satan Absolved* (London: Folkard and Son, 1899), 1.

⁵⁹ Blunt, *Satan Absolved*, 11.

⁶⁰ Blunt, *Satan Absolved*, 24.

sly comments on the authenticity of the 'facts' in the Bible: "These are the facts recorded, facts (say fables) yet."⁶¹ The use of fable, like that employed by Meredith, Bradlaugh and others appeared once more. Satan also mocks the sale of church offices with an aside stating that they have "grown quite unsaleable".⁶² In the end, the angels side with Satan with their criticism of man, finally overcoming their reluctance to tell God the truth. Satan is sent down to Earth, absolved and as an agent of heaven and God, to try again with the gospel with some other life form.

There are many similarities between *Satan Absolved* and other secularist literature. It points out the hypocrisy of religion (the sale of church offices, as mentioned) but also that so few in the Bible are actually good people (Satan references only four people). Additionally, it used humour and irony to make its points, making Satan the most likeable (and honest) of the angels. *The Freethinker* similarly used humour, such as printing illustrated Bible quotes, which were always paradoxical or nonsensical. For example, in Comic Bible Sketch XXVII, they illustrate the Bible phrase "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" with a man with a newly struck match to light a pipe.⁶³ Or with the phrase "I do set my bow in the cloud" from Genesis, the *Freethinker* illustrates the line literally - with God measuring the angle of a rainbow while sitting on a cloud.⁶⁴ However, *Satan Absolved* manages it without the usual vehemence as the other anti-religious secularist tracts. The end result is an amusing, secularist poem, using all the same secularist arguments but in a new form. It follows in the tradition of the secularist press

⁶¹ Blunt, *Satan Absolved*, 28.

⁶² Blunt, *Satan Absolved*, 41

⁶³ Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain*, 123.

⁶⁴ Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain*, 124.

to use lampoon and ridicule to highlight absurdity or inconsistency with religious texts.

Blunt wrote from a relatively safe position, given his aristocratic status and relative affluence. However, he also had a strong irreligious streak, which you can read throughout *Satan Absolved*. There are a few reasons that could account for his irreligion – the first being that he believed religion led to his mother’s death.⁶⁵ Additionally, after his initial positive view of some Islamic reformers, he had come to the conclusion that “The less religion in the world perhaps, after all, the better.”⁶⁶ He was also sceptical of Spiritualism – but not to the extent that it stopped him when facing illness, from making “a bee-line for St Winifred’s miraculous well, Holywell in Cheshire, admitting to himself that his feelings about religion, though illogical, were not extinct.”⁶⁷ His mixture of irreligion and Christian superstition, as well as his influence and connections among politicians and the literary class, make him an interesting, though perhaps inconsistent, secularist.

Aside from his inconsistency about religion, he had a very secular view (and more enlightened view for the time) of the Islamic religion. He had been a long admirer of Persian culture (and was well known for breeding Arabian horses) and so it’s not surprising he wrote about Islam. In *The Future of Islam* he equated the validity of belief of those who worship Islam with those who worship Christianity: “To doubt the sincerity and even, in a certain sense, the sanctity of such person, would be to doubt all religion... There is

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Longford, *A Pilgrimage of Passion* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), 9.

⁶⁶ Longford, *A Pilgrimage of Passion*, 330.

⁶⁷ Longford, *A Pilgrimage of Passion*, 336.

no sign as yet that it has ceased to be a living faith.”⁶⁸ More so than that, he stated that it will have the same longevity as Christianity:

“Neither in considering its future is it easy for a candid English mind to escape the admission that, for all purposes of argument, the Mohammedan creed must be treated as no vain superstition but a true religion, true inasmuch as it is a form of the worship of that one true God in whom Europe, in spite of her modern reason, still believes. As such it is entitled to whatever credit we may give true religions of prolonged vitality; and while admitting the eternal truth of Christianity for ourselves, we may be tempted to believe in the Arabian mind, if in no other, Islam too will prove eternal.”⁶⁹

Blunt used the same argument which Hobhouse employed in his sociological work. More specifically, Blunt argued that one religion was no better than the other, no less likely to perpetuate itself or no less a religion than Christianity. Or as Hobhouse would perhaps have put it, religion was just another part of someone’s experience and not something divine. Blunt also managed to highlight the fact that despite all the advances of reason, the same kinds of religious sentiments pervaded Europe. Blunt brought European man down from his lofty heights in *The Future of Islam*, as he brought man down among the animals in *Satan Absolved*.

Instead of deeply criticising either religion, Blunt finished with the idea that they should drop the pretensions of conversion and instead “moral sympathy” should “unite the two great bodies of men who believe in and worship the same God.”⁷⁰ Even coming to the conclusion that they’re worshipping the same God is an incredibly secular concept, given the religious history and enmity between the two religions. As discussed in

⁶⁸ Wilfred Scawen Blunt, *The Future of Islam* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co, 1882), 142.

⁶⁹ Blunt, *The Future of Islam*, 142.

⁷⁰ Blunt, *The Future of Islam*, 172.

chapter one, the idea that each have equal validity and longevity and that they should overcome their differences for the better good, is at the heart of Holyoake's view of Secularism – everyone can believe what they want and should let those who they do not share the same beliefs have theirs.

This also reflects the secular use of comparative religion to undermine Christianity by secular thinkers. For example, one can see this in Moncure Conway's *Lessons for the Day*. In "Orthodox unbelief and unbelieving orthodoxy" Conway began with dialogue in Lucian's *Zeus Tragoedos* where when attempting to prove that the gods exist, a character is forced to quote Homer which makes the gods seem "so absurd that the audience cheer."⁷¹ Conway, moving ahead in time, compared the different interpretations of the Christian God by the different denominations. However, he concluded that "no argument to prove their existence is ever used newer than those which were used, and brokedown, sixteen centuries ago."⁷² He made the point again with a reference to a Christian reverend insulting the Goddess Kali in India. The reverend asked the natives why the Goddess did not strike him down - the same kind of statement that Damis states in *Zeus Tragoedos* when asking Timocles "why the gods did not interpose to prevent denials of their existence."⁷³ These kinds of stories were employed by secularists throughout the nineteenth century (but were also criticised as "bitter sensationalists devoid of argument").⁷⁴

The same kinds of analyses exist in the *Thinker's Library* as well. In

⁷¹ Moncure Conway, *Lessons for the Day* (London: Watts & Co., 1907), 113.

⁷² Conway, *Lessons for the Day*, 115.

⁷³ Conway, *Lessons for the Day*, 116.

⁷⁴ Nash, "The Credulity of the Public Seems Infinite", 251.

The Religion of the Open Mind, Adam Gowans Whyte described some aspects of the evolution of religion. For example, in the chapter on theology he argued that “the true history of religion teaches that religion arose naturally and grew naturally. All our ideas of the supernatural are rooted in the natural.”⁷⁵ Robertson in *A Short History of Christianity* made the argument that checks on the veracity of a particular religion comes in the check of “intelligently hostile forces” - such as other religions.⁷⁶ As such, it was impossible to decipher myth from reality, no matter what religion. Robertson did not give deference to any religion: “Buddha, Zoroaster, and Moses are only less obviously mythical figures than Krishna, Herakles, and Osiris.”⁷⁷ He finished the argument that “any rational defence” of the “Christian cult” had to admit “that in the story of its origins there is an element of myth.”⁷⁸ F J Gould, Annie Besant, Moncure Conway and J M Robertson were just a few of the secularists that would employ comparative religion in their arguments for secularism (and of course, against the dominant position of Christianity). Blunt’s defence of Islam was in line with secular arguments and part of a long tradition of subtle and not-so-subtle critiques of the Christian religion.

Ivy Compton-Burnett: no such thing as Providence

While Wilfred Scawen Blunt may not have had the most straightforward trajectory towards secularist thought, there are others who espouse either a secular worldview in their personal lives or through their works. One that

⁷⁵ Adam Gowans Whyte, *The Religion of the Open Mind* (London: Watts & Co., 1935), 105.

⁷⁶ J M Robertson, *A Short History of Christianity* (London: Watts & Co., 1931), 1

⁷⁷ J M Robertson, *A Short History of Christianity*, 1.

⁷⁸ J M Robertson, *A Short History of Christianity*, 1.

does both was Ivy Compton-Burnett.

Ivy Compton-Burnett was the first daughter of her father's second marriage – the sixth of twelve children overall. Dr. Burnett was a homeopath and both his first and second wife came from circles that supported the practice. Burnett's five children from his first marriage were raised by his second wife Katherine Rees, though she was more attentive to her own seven children than those inherited from Dr. Burnett's first marriage.⁷⁹ Compton-Burnett's biographer, Hilary Spurling, draws many strands of the fractious relationship between twelve siblings and step-siblings and the characters that would populate Ivy's novels. For example, a mother who was not interested in looking after twelve children, an absent father and the pressures of remaining a respectable middle class Victorian family.⁸⁰

It was Compton-Burnett's tutor who may have confirmed Ivy's consistent irreligiosity. Mr Salt was a socialist, atheist and vegetarian and it may have been due to Dr. Burnett's homeopathic practices that someone outside the Victorian norm would become their tutor.⁸¹ In a recording in 1963, the interviewer Kay Dick queries Compton-Burnett's lack of religion: "...Then, as I grew up, as I got to be sort of 14, 15, 16, as far as one can put into words, one's reason rejected it...Well, that's how it seems to me, and I don't see how people believe anything."⁸² She continued with: "Well, I would have thought that people would have lost all their religious beliefs, but apparently

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Sprigge, *The Life of Ivy Compton-Burnett* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1973), 24.

⁸⁰ Hilary Spurling, *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett* (London: R. Cohen, 1995), 34.

⁸¹ Spurling, *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett*, 53.

⁸² Kay Dick, *Ivy & Stevie: Conversations and Reflections by Kay Dick* (London: Duckworth, 1971), 2.

they haven't. A lot of them are coming back to them again."⁸³ Her atheism would last all her life, no such inconsistencies with religion or even the death of her life long companion Margaret Jourdain would change her views.

Ivy was educated alongside her brothers before being sent to a boarding school to prepare for University at Royal Holloway College in Egham.⁸⁴ Compton-Burnett went to college to study classics, though "such a thing, for a nicely brought-up girl who had no need to earn her living, was almost unheard of: history and literature, a little French, music lessons and sums were as much as was generally considered advisable, or even decent."⁸⁵ Whether it was Ivy's ambitious mother or the fact Ivy was "exceptionally clever", Ivy excelled at university.⁸⁶ She graduated with a BA in classics in 1906 and later went home to teach her younger step-siblings.⁸⁷ She would have more responsibility, becoming one of the guardians of her youngest step-siblings when her mother died in 1911.⁸⁸ However, her sights were set on becoming a writer.

Ivy Compton-Burnett's writing career started in 1911 with *Dolores*, though most critics and her biographer Spurling, dismiss this as a juvenile work or at least not in the same league as her later novels⁸⁹. She did achieve widespread critical acclaim between the 1920s and 1930s – with most of her books focusing on the family and domestic settings. What made Compton-Burnett's books interesting for this discussion is that the worldviews

⁸³ Dick, *Ivy & Stevie*, 5.

⁸⁴ Sprigge, *The Life of Ivy Compton-Burnett*, 27.

⁸⁵ Spurling, *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett*, 53.

⁸⁶ Sprigge, *The Life of Ivy Compton-Burnett*, 27.

⁸⁷ Sprigge, *The Life of Ivy Compton-Burnett*, 34.

⁸⁸ Sprigge, *The Life of Ivy Compton-Burnett*, 46.

⁸⁹ Spurling, *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett*, 163.

presented in them are often very secular ones. It is not described using 'secular' as a specific term but the reviewers capture the essence of this in their critiques of Compton-Burnett's literary work: "Compton-Burnett's novels suggest that we acknowledge human limitation and do not rigidly impose laws that expect superhuman compliance."⁹⁰ It is by "disavowing the mechanistic morality of the Christianised" that sets her novels apart from those that came before.⁹¹ However, it's this rejection of the superhuman that defines her work as modern.

"...what is usually said, and what has been said for nearly forty years. Most critics would agree that Ivy Compton-Burnett is 'probably the purest and most original of contemporary English artists' (Rosamond Lehman) and a 'remarkable and unusual novelist, who has, in her own well-tilled field, no rival and parallel' (*The Times Literary Supplement*); that her novels are 'unique in style and content' (Phyllis Bentley) and that they are 'conceived on the same moral and intellectual level as those of Henry James' (Edward Sackville-West)."⁹²

As such, not all the characters who were immoral, harsh or mean get their comeuppance. In some instances this was translated by some critics into Compton-Burnett being one of "the most amoral of living writers."⁹³ Or even that "Miss Compton-Burnett believes in pure wickedness."⁹⁴ Even without the specific anti-religious tone like the obvious candidates of secularist literature, dismissing the pre-eminence of Providence in the lives of fictional characters can be seen as amoral. However, like Blunt and Hobhouse, it is relegating religion to simply another cultural trope or character trait, which makes Compton-Burnett a secularist sympathiser through her novels. In the case of

⁹⁰ Kathy Justice Gentie, *Ivy Compton-Burnett* (London: MacMillan, 1981), 5.

⁹¹ Gentie, *Ivy Compton-Burnett*, 6.

⁹² Charles Burkhart, *I. Compton-Burnett* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1965), 14.

⁹³ Pamela Hansford Johnson, *I. Compton-Burnett* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1951), 6.

⁹⁴ Johnson, *I. Compton-Burnett*, 13.

Ivy Compton-Burnett, religion was not even a desirable characteristic, nor a sure sign of someone's moral quality.

Her characters also echoed nineteenth century attacks by secularists on the religiously minded, which may have provided material for the criticism of Compton-Burnett by some of her critics. Religious characters would often be "the silliest" like Beatrice in *House and its Head* or "hopelessly deluded" like Jessica in *Elders and Brothers*.⁹⁵ These characters would also rely on simplistic maxims, which showed "that canned or knee-jerk wisdom is often inappropriate."⁹⁶ One critic stated that the way Compton-Burnett described clergymen was to see them as "variously fools or hypocrites or plain atheists."⁹⁷ In her own life, Compton-Burnett would turn her pious sister Daisy's "clumsy answers upside down."⁹⁸ While Compton-Burnett would lampoon the fervently religious in her writing, Daisy herself spent most of her days as a missionary in Nigeria.⁹⁹ Commenting on another's essay about the "goodness" of her characters, Compton-Burnett stated, "It's because they're intelligent" to which the author of the article states: "and for her there was no greater virtue than intelligence."¹⁰⁰ Intelligence does not necessarily have to be explicitly secular, but dethroning a religious motivated morality in her novels makes it so in Compton-Burnett's case.

Not all critics believed that being critical of a deterministic universe without religious moral standards being imposed was a problem. They state

⁹⁵ Gentie, *Ivy Compton-Burnett*, 8.

⁹⁶ Gentie, *Ivy Compton-Burnett*, 28.

⁹⁷ Burkhardt, *I. Compton-Burnett*, 87.

⁹⁸ Spurling, *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett*, 116.

⁹⁹ Spurling, *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett*, 117.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Liddell, "Notes on Ivy Compton-Burnett," *Twentieth Century Literature* 25 (1979): 138.

that instead that the “concept of punishment for sins is a concept that Ivy Compton-Burnett viewed as harsh, arbitrary and a distortion of reality.”¹⁰¹ Or would disagree with the immoral sentiment entirely:

“Ivy Compton-Burnett is neither widely known nor widely read by the general public; on the other hand, literary specialists and fellow writers who know her work are almost uniformly enthusiastic about both the profundity of moral insight and the highly literate wit that characterizes her work.”¹⁰²

Other reviewers complemented the fact that the Compton-Burnett did not “intrude” on “excruciating” revelations or that the “actors play out their parts mercilessly without any helpful assuagement of pain usually the privilege and practice of an author.”¹⁰³ Compton-Burnett, through her work, divorced morality from religion, another secularist point of view.

The ‘literary specialists’ are often translated into Compton-Burnett being a “writer’s writer.”¹⁰⁴ While she did have a very successful literary career, her main influence may have been on the literary scene of the time. Even after calling Compton-Burnett amoral, the critic Pamela Hansford Johnston states: “There can be no doubt that from the publication of *Brothers and Sisters* in 1929 to the present day, Miss Compton-Burnett has been more widely and consistently praised than most writers of her time.”¹⁰⁵ While Compton may not have had influence within the secular movement, her real importance was because she was influential outside it (similar to Hobson and Hobhouse’s influence in politics outside the traditional secular organisations).

¹⁰¹ Gentie, *Ivy Compton-Burnett*, 11.

¹⁰² Frank Baldanza, *Ivy Compton-Burnett* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1964), preface.

¹⁰³ Hugh Corbett, “Reviewed Work: *Brothers and Sisters* by Ivy Compton-Burnett,” *Books Abroad* 31(1957): 312.

¹⁰⁴ Burkhart, *I. Compton-Burnett*, 14.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, *I. Compton-Burnett*, 37.

Examining *The Freethinker* for any reference to Ivy Compton-Burnett did not supply any secularist opinions on her writing. The journal had moved away from Foote's interest in literary subjects and spent little time on book reviews. Those books that were reviewed were largely science or history. Perhaps this reflects the editorial line of Chapman Cohen, as there is at least one diatribe against fiction as a whole by C. S. Fraser. He recognised that reading was pleasurable for many people, but this was not necessarily a positive thing when it came to fiction: "As a rational being, therefore, I would not advocate indulgence in a practice if its evil consequences outweighed the pleasure or happiness it gave."¹⁰⁶ He concluded in the next edition of *The Freethinker* that once people have stopped reading fiction and only read non-fiction "The satisfaction they will get is akin to and not much less than the sense of intellectual freedom which is experienced when we finally shed the last vestige of our religious beliefs."¹⁰⁷ Perhaps, like with Blunt's opinion of Spencer, secularists did not necessarily completely relate to those outside the movement. This is perhaps why they did not champion the likes of Ivy Compton-Burnett amongst their ranks.

One final issue that may have set Ivy Compton-Burnett outside Victorian Christianity was that she never married. There was a tension between her two friends' memories of their time with Ivy. While Elizabeth Sprigge stated that while Ivy's brother Noel was a radical, Ivy was always a conservative.¹⁰⁸ However, others like her friend Herman Schrijver, paint a much more radical portrait. Herman, stated that he believed Ivy and her life-

¹⁰⁶ C. S Fraser, "The Poison of Fiction," *The Freethinker* 57, no 29 (1937), 458.

¹⁰⁷ C. S Fraser, "The Poison of Fiction," *The Freethinker* 57, no 30 (1937), 475.

¹⁰⁸ Sprigge, *The Life of Ivy Compton-Burnett*, 47.

long friend Margaret Jourdain were “married.”¹⁰⁹ Additionally, that much of their social circle contained many gay men and she was fully aware of their preferences for men.¹¹⁰ He also commented that both Margaret and Ivy were “splendid atheists” but that Ivy especially “hated” religion.¹¹¹ If she was living with a person who she would never legally be able to marry in her time, it gives some added context to the themes in her books.

Marjorie Bowen: religion as just another horror trope

Marjorie Bowen was the most frequent pen name of Margaret Campbell, who wrote prodigiously throughout her life. Unlike Blunt and Compton-Burnett, Marjorie Bowen has a clear connection with secularist circles. As seen in the previous chapter, she was willing to lend her name and views to the International Freethought Congress. She also contributed multiple books to the Thinker’s Library with *Wrestling Jacob: A study in the life of John Wesley and some Members of the Family* (1937), *The Life of John Knox* (1940) and *The Church and Social Progress: An exposition of rationalism and reaction* (1945). One of the only commentators on Bowen’s work, the literary critic Edward Wagenknect, also identifies her “intellectually” as a rationalist - though clearly she had a mystical streak to her personality.¹¹² Like Blunt, secularist tendencies emerged in writing but personally, Bowen was more inconsistent with her beliefs.

Bowen’s early life was characterised by poverty, frequent moves and

¹⁰⁹ Charles Burkhart, *Herman & Nancy & Ivy* (London: Victor Gollancz Limited, 1977), 76.

¹¹⁰ Burkhart, *Herman & Nancy & Ivy*, 89.

¹¹¹ Burkhart, *Herman & Nancy & Ivy*, 83.

¹¹² Edward Wagenknect, *Seven Masters of Supernatural Fiction* (London: Greenwood Press, 1991), 154.

an unstable household composition. Her biography paints a picture of domestic fractures and unhappiness, “my parents’ marriage pleased no one, least among themselves.”¹¹³ She started to realise when she was a child that they were poor as “there was never enough to eat” and “luxuries of any kind were unheard of and unseen.”¹¹⁴ She was a sceptical child, refusing to believe that fairies brought her a birthday present.¹¹⁵ As well, from an early age she seemed to have an antagonistic perception of God, “I thought of this God as an active enemy, and decided to try and outwit him.”¹¹⁶ She also blamed Christianity for “centuries of bloodshed” and only started to admire people from “the liberal movement at the end of the century.”¹¹⁷ Bowen stated in a compilation by Watts & Co titled *Why I am a Rationalist: Books Which Influenced Me* that when “a hint of this heresy crept out” she was scolded as having the “sin of Lucifer - intellectual pride.”¹¹⁸ However, this did not have any positive impact on Bowen as she stated that “the result of this rebuke was that Lucifer became my secret hero.”¹¹⁹ As seen with Blunt, Lucifer can often become the sympathetic figure to secularists.

Like many secularists, she had an affinity for books and self-learning. While unsuccessful in her ventures (like drawing and painting), Marjorie Bowen would eventually find success in writing. Her first novel, *The Viper of Milan*, was published when she was sixteen and was an instant success.

¹¹³ Marjorie Bowen, *The Debate Continues: Being the Autobiography of Marjorie Bowen* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1939), loc 20.

¹¹⁴ Bowen, *The Debate Continues*, loc 386.

¹¹⁵ Bowen, *The Debate Continues*, loc 69.

¹¹⁶ Bowen, *The Debate Continues*, loc 496.

¹¹⁷ *Why I am a Rationalist: Books Which Influenced Me* (London: Watts & Co., 1942), 6.

¹¹⁸ *Why I am a Rationalist: Books Which Influenced Me*, 5.

¹¹⁹ *Why I am a Rationalist: Books Which Influenced Me*, 6.

Though the intrusion on her life “seemed not only unreal but unpleasant.”¹²⁰ And while a commercial success, being a minor, the money she earned was handed to her mother. Part of her prolific output was due to having to support herself, her mother, her sister and her grandmother.¹²¹ As Wagenknecht states, “she wrote for bread, which was generally eaten by somebody else.”¹²² However, despite inconsistencies in the quality of her writing, “her talent remains dazzling” and according to Wagenknecht she was “always a delight to read.”¹²³

Like Ivy Compton-Burnett, Bowen had a host of contemporary admirers, such as Mark Twain but nonetheless remains neglected as a subject of historical interest.¹²⁴ However, she has also been forgotten by the secular movement - to whom she contributed her own writing but also her voice at places like the International Freethought Congresses and even a Conway Memorial Lecture.

Compton in her supernatural fiction displays her secularist tendencies. In the series of short stories in *The Bishop of Hell and Other Stories*, she showed no distinction between ghost stories and religious iconography - and employed them equally as elements of the supernatural. She did not privilege religious imagery and used it merely as a tool of the narrative. For example, in the title story “The Bishop of Hell” this was cleverly deployed. The main character, Hector Greatrix was described as impious and wicked. Yet, despite this reputation, “what added a deeper edge of horror to his conduct

¹²⁰ Bowen, *The Debate Continues*, loc 1623.

¹²¹ Bowen, *The Debate Continues*, loc 1682.

¹²² Wagenknecht, *Seven Masters of Supernatural Fiction*, 179.

¹²³ Wagenknecht, *Seven Masters of Supernatural Fiction*, 180.

¹²⁴ Wagenknecht, *Seven Masters of Supernatural Fiction*, 180.

was that he had been an ordained clergyman.”¹²⁵ The narrator during the course of the story falls out with his one time friend, especially after Hector seduces the young wife of his cousin, and they both flee to the continent. The fact that Hector was a member of the clergy and yet undeniably wicked, mimics the secularist press pointing out the hypocrisy of the clergy. In a similar way, Gott used lecherous clergyman as anti-clerical attacks in the *Truthseeker*. Potentially, taking the trope to the next level, Bowen did not hold the position of a clergyman in high esteem and merely used the idea to signal that her character was completely depraved. Later on, Hector’s wild excesses came back to haunt him. He gets shot by the jilted husband in his face, so he can never again seduce someone else’s wife (and then shortly thereafter, dies of his injuries). But the narrator has one more encounter with Hector in a new guise, presumably the Bishop of Hell: “where the visage should have been was a ripple of flames quivering upwards, and through this crimson veil of fire gleamed his infernal eyes with an expression of unutterable woe.”¹²⁶ In another collection of stories, the same religious imagery was employed. In “One Remained Behind” the main character Rudolph sought out power through the dark arts but his attempts at fame and fortune are ultimately undermined by the devil (and he eventually drowns himself).¹²⁷ Bowen employed the spectre of hell or the devil, not for readers to reflect and repent, but in order to extract maximum horror from the audience. The characters were punished for their deeds, of course, but the point was for the reader to be titillated by the story rather than receive any

¹²⁵ Marjorie Bowen, *The Bishop of Hell and Other Stories* (St Ives: Clays Ltds, 2006), 97.

¹²⁶ Bowen, *The Bishop of Hell and Other Stories*, 111.

¹²⁷ Wagenknecht, *Seven Masters of Supernatural Fiction*, 173.

moral instruction. In that sense, Bowen merely used religion (and the iconography of Christianity) as just another tool in her supernatural arsenal.

Additionally, through many of the stories, we receive glimpses of rationalists, atheists or those who question that we know everything about the universe. In “The Housekeeper,” the Countess (one of the two main characters) when contemplating existence without “a man attached to her - better the grave” as having “had all the horror of the true atheist.”¹²⁸ In the “Bishop of Hell” the narrator described himself as someone “who believed in neither Heaven nor Hell.”¹²⁹ In other stories the characters questioned how much we can know, “We have but finite minds, I think we have but little conception of the marvellous future.”¹³⁰ They too - as it was described in the “Bishop of Hell” were not spared from the supernatural - whether they be devils, ghosts or other spectral entities. However, Bowen used these characters to question the nature of reality or instill in the reader that the narrators of these stories were sound of mind - so what they must be saying was true, no matter how unbelievable. Again, religion and rationality are equally deployed for enhancing the creepiness of the story.

Even when there was no reference to religion, the main emphasis of the story was to be astonished or completely unnerved by the events. For example, in “The Scoured Silk” we find that the husband to be of the young woman in the story has kept his first wife alive for the past 20 years in the walls of his house. The story ends with the husband being stabbed to death by the first wife, who then also expires. In “Kecksies” a spurned man Robert

¹²⁸ Bowen, *The Bishop of Hell and Other Stories*, 49.

¹²⁹ Bowen, *The Bishop of Hell and Other Stories*, 111.

¹³⁰ Bowen, *The Bishop of Hell and Other Stories*, 157.

Horne, *after his death*, takes on the appearance of the now-husband of the woman to rape and kill her. There was no moral to any of these stories, they are purely secular tales to arouse terror and horror in the reader.

Bowen revealed her thoughts about art and literature in a Conway Memorial Lecture, entitled “Ethics in Modern Art” which can give some insight into her own writing. She stated that in the past “few had the courage to be heretics or rebels” and that “only since the human mind has been freed completely from superstitions, myths, and theologies has the artist been able to discover and to proclaim truth, beauty, and goodness without any relation to rewards or punishments in a possible future existence.”¹³¹ Or potentially, in Bowen’s case, to employ those threats or rewards and punishments purely for exciting her readers. She also defended artists that “shock, puzzle, and offend a large number of people” for using new techniques in art.¹³² She specifically referred to critics of modern art declaring it “obscene”, “heretical” “amoral” or materialistic” - all words that would have resonated with her audience as freethought tracts were often called similar things.¹³³ She also equated the role of modern artist with science, in that the artist “must search, investigate, throw over obsolete dogmas, both about art and about life.”¹³⁴ After stating that what people previously thought came from God was not divine, the artist therefore could no longer rely on these old beliefs “and re-state them” without becoming a liar.¹³⁵ This resonates with how Bowen

¹³¹ Marjorie Bowen, “Ethics in Modern Art,” *Conway Memorial Lecture* (London: Watts & Co, 1939), 3-4.

¹³² Bowen, “Ethics in Modern Art,” 6.

¹³³ Bowen, “Ethics in Modern Art,” 9.

¹³⁴ Bowen, “Ethics in Modern Art,” 16.

¹³⁵ Bowen, “Ethics in Modern Art,” 21.

herself reused tropes from religion and reformulated them for her stories. She could not hold them with the same reverence without appearing “false” like “modern religious art.”¹³⁶ Bowen used the criticism directed against modern art (in all forms from art to architecture and writing) to demonstrate that it was the natural consequence of secularism. However, the artist could not give into the old (and often religious) sentiment but rather remain true to their vision of the new and modern.

The Thinker’s Library: secularists hidden in plain sight

Alongside the wide range of periodicals that became the forum for secularist thought in the nineteenth century, the Thinker’s Library (published by the Rationalist Press Association) was a potentially important proselytising tool for secularists. It is the one area of later secularist outreach that has been looked upon positively in the historiography. Despite this, there has not been an in-depth examination of the impact of the publication series. As there are hundreds of volumes, this is only a small examination to demonstrate the use of the Thinker’s Library as a tool of secularist activism.

The authors of the Thinker’s Library range from recognised secularists, atheists and freethinkers to the more popular historical and literary subjects outside the movement. The first book, *First and Last Things* by H G Wells was published in 1929, and ranges over a great deal of philosophical, sceptical and secular ideas. This was the third revision of the work, having originally been published in 1908. In some passages, it seemed that Wells was setting up an argument against science and reason: “The

¹³⁶ Bowen, “Ethics in Modern Art,” 21.

senses seem surer than they are. The thinking mind seems clearer than it is and is more positive than it ought to be. The world of fact is not what it appears to be.”¹³⁷ However, he always then later qualified the previous statement: “‘Science’ is really a persistent criticism and rearrangement of these rule-of-thumb workaday classifications. It is a persistent attempt to get to truer and truer conceptions of the essential kinds of things.”¹³⁸ However, it went deeper than a description of values of science and scepticism.

The interesting and valuable assertions from a secularist perspective, were the later discussion of faith, god and what Wells believed. He did two things that align him more with Holyoake’s definition of secularism than the atheism of Bradlaugh: he did not repudiate all religion but neither did he embrace the Christianity of his time. He was free, in the fashion of freethinkers, to come to his own understanding of faith, belief and good conduct. In references to his rules of conduct, he wrote: “They do not stand in any attitude of antagonism. A religious system is so many-faced and so enduring as Christianity must necessarily be saturated with truth even it not be wholly true.”¹³⁹ Wells does better than the most ardent atheists in understanding the unexplainable reason for faith and why the anti-religious freethinkers could not always win the argument:

“The only matters of fact material here are facts of experience. If in your experience Salvation is attainable through Christ, then certainly Christianity is true for you. And if a Christian asserts that my belief is a false light and that presently I shall ‘come to Christ,’ I cannot disprove his assertion. I can but disbelieve it. I hesitate even to make the obvious retort.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ H G Wells, *First and Last Things: A Confession of Faith and Rule of Life* (London: Watts & Co, 1929), 11.

¹³⁸ Wells, *First and Last Things*, 36.

¹³⁹ Wells, *First and Last Things*, 71.

¹⁴⁰ Wells, *First and Last Things*, 72.

This was a far more measured and straight-forward secularist view: I may not be able to change your mind in these cases, but I do not have to believe what you say either. It is a modern statement of freedom of thought and belief.

In the final section on Christianity, Wells states:

“You see it comes to this: that I think Christianity has been true and is for countless people practically true, but that it is not true for me, and that for most people it is true only with qualifications. Every believing Christian is, I am sure, my spiritual brother, but if systematically I called myself a Christian I feel that to most men I should imply too much and so tell a lie.”¹⁴¹

While he may have had sympathy and understand Christians and their faith, he also had a conception of what his own beliefs meant. However, in true secularist fashion, it did not really matter who believed what, just that they could live with each other and contribute to the common good. In Wells' case, it was couched in socialist language – but his conclusions followed the same type of reasoning that secularists used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: criticism but not necessarily repudiation of each other's beliefs.

The second and third books in the series were by long standing secularist favourites: Herbert Spencer (on education) and a reprint of Ernst Haeckel's *Riddle of the Universe*. Book four was a pronounced statement on atheism (rather than secularism) from Charles Bradlaugh: *Humanity's Gain from Unbelief*. This small volume is made up of Bradlaugh's greatest hits, as it were, collected by his daughter Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner. However, it was not the straight-forward religion-bashing that you would expect to get from Bradlaugh and rather concluded that the natural outcome of science and scepticism was non-religion.

¹⁴¹ Wells, *First and Last Things*, 75.

Bradlaugh argued that Christianity (or at least parts of it) was being outgrown, and the revolt against the more authoritarian aspects of the Old Testament were the results of this “beneficial heresy”.¹⁴² While the tendency to point out the hypocrisies within the history of religion and the Bible are still evident, they are reigned in and use a softer tone:

“Or, as I should urge, the gain to humanity by unbelief is that “the teaching of Christ” has been modified, enlarged, widened, and humanized, and that “the conscience of the Christian” is in quantity and quality made fitter for human progress by the every-increasing additions of knowledge of these later and more heretical days.”¹⁴³

In the second essay in the book “A Plea for Atheism” the negative view of tearing down religion or the negative view of atheists, was refuted with the idea that being atheist was a positive thing: “Atheism...is no mere disbelief; is in no wise a cold, barren negative; it is, on the contrary, a hearty, fruitful affirmation of all truth, and involves the positive assertion of action of highest humanity.” This again emphasised the idea that non-religion could be a positive motivating force in someone’s life. Bradlaugh then challenged theism (after pointing out various deficiencies in theism) “to do battle for their cause, and in hope that, the struggles being sincere, truth may give laurels to the victor...”¹⁴⁴ Bradlaugh, being confident, believed that the victor would be atheism.

What is important about Bradlaugh being an early edition to the Thinker’s Library was that he made his point with short and simple arguments the reasons for atheism, or an alternative to the current Christian monopoly. The Rationalist Press Association also included him as worthwhile and

¹⁴² Charles Bradlaugh, *Humanity’s Gain from Unbelief* (London: Watts & Co, 1929), 4.

¹⁴³ Bradlaugh, *Humanity’s Gain from Unbelief*, 25.

¹⁴⁴ Bradlaugh, *Humanity’s Gain from Unbelief*, 55.

adequate thinker alongside the more famous and respected people like H G Wells, Herbert Spencer, and number five in the Thinker's Library John Stuart Mill (*On Liberty*). He was not the only freethinker to make the first ten books of the series – he was joined by Joseph McCabe (number nine) with *Twelve Years in a Monastery*. In between you have the autobiography of Charles Darwin and *The Origin of the Species* – completing the link between science, philosophy, history and irreligion.

Throughout the entire series, there is a mixture of history (H G Wells and *A Short History of the World* for example), biology and secularist thought. This ranges from the more gentle critiques of religion and promotion of alternative thought like Wells to the contemptuous and harsh critiques of McCabe. For example, at the end of *Twelve Years in a Monastery* McCabe excoriates the idea of monastic life:

“Monasticism has neither interest nor advantage for the modern world; it is an enfeebled and corrupted survival of an institution whose congenial environment seems to have disappeared, and it is only maintained by the scandalous practice of enticing or permitting boys to undertake life-long obligations of a most serious character.”¹⁴⁵

It was not secularism by stealth, but by associating secularist favourites with important alumni of history, biology or political theory, it was stating with intent that secularist ideas were equally as important.

Conclusion

Secularisation as a historical process is complex and there are no simple answers for its continued evolution over time. There are many moving parts which could have influenced its adoption and evolution. However, the related

¹⁴⁵ Joseph McCabe, *Twelve Years in a Monastery* (London: Watts & Co, 1930), 238.

movements that supported it, openly and rigorously, were relatively small when compared to political or mass social movements like suffrage or labour. Nonetheless, there were some individual secularists that aided the nascent ascendancy of secularism in the twentieth century. These arguments for secularism become more forthright as the decades went on. For example, E M Forster (who is often credited as a Humanist) stated in a talk on Samuel Butler on BBC radio:

“His value, resides not in his rightness over this or that...not even in the frequent excellence of his prose and verse, but in the quality of his mind. He had an independent mind. He might indulge in private prejudices, but he never bowed to the prejudices of others, he suspected authority, he took nothing on trust, and he had no use for dogmas.”¹⁴⁶

These are all very secular and independent minded ideals, pushing forward the critical edge of secularism to question and not to give credence to dogma or prejudice. The independence was echoed again, and pointed directly at both religion and the larger political issues of the time:

“Here is his legacy, and his is of particular value to us today. The world of 1952 is so ugly and frightening that men take refuge blindly in anything that may shelter them. Some turn to communist dogma others to ecclesiastical: creeds spiritually opposed but alike in this, that they offer the individual shelter at the price of his unquestioning obedience to authority.”¹⁴⁷

This was a very direct reflection of much freethought writing in the nineteenth century – however this time expanded to include the wider ramifications of the day.

Another person most definitely associated with Humanism was Julian Huxley, the first president of the British Humanist Association. In his

¹⁴⁶ Mary Lago, Linda K Hughes and Elizabeth MacLeod Walls, *The BBC Talks of E M Forster, 1929-1960* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 424.

¹⁴⁷ Lago et al., *The BBC Talks of E M Forster, 1929-1960*, 424.

biography, Huxley spoke admiringly of his formidable grandfather, T H

Huxley:

“...a rebel Victorian, pro-Darwin and anti-clerical, who coined the word *agnostic* to describe his own religious position, as one not prepared to accept orthodox or indeed any dogmatic views on the origin and destiny of man in the absence of scientific evidence.”¹⁴⁸

This theme is continued in *Religion without Revelation*, which opens with:

“I’ve called this book *Religion without Revelation* in order to express at the outset my conviction that religion of the highest and fullest character can co-exist with a complete absence of belief in revelation in any straightforward sense of the world, and of belief in that kernel of revealed religion, a personal god.”¹⁴⁹

Huxley later stated: “I believe firmly that the scientific method, although slow and never claiming to lead to complete truth, is the only method which in the long run will give satisfactory foundations for beliefs.”¹⁵⁰ Huxley, as a scientist, was content with imperfection and ambiguity and praised their merits, the opposite of the certainty of religion.

He reflected back to agnosticism, the word that his grandfather coined, and finished with: “I hold it to be an important duty to know when to be agnostic. I believe that one should be agnostic when belief one way or the other is mere idle speculation, incapable of verification...”¹⁵¹ It was almost a challenge to understand your belief, rather than to just to accept it. It was a forthright statement to reject what you are just told to accept by any authority and to critically examine all beliefs.

He also echoed Bradlaugh’s statements from “A Plea for Atheism”: “A personal God, be he Jehovah, or Allah, or Apollo, or Amen-Ra, or without

¹⁴⁸ Huxley, *Memories*, 13-14.

¹⁴⁹ Julian Huxley, *Religion without Revelation* (London: Max Parish, 1957), 1.

¹⁵⁰ Huxley, *Religion without Revelation*, 4.

¹⁵¹ Huxley, *Religion without Revelation*, 5.

name but simply God, I know nothing of.”¹⁵² Huxley’s vision is ultimately a rational religion that will help humanity evolve in harmony. As Paul Phillips put it: “Huxley offered a new vision, or secular religion, necessary for the future” and that at its heart was unity.¹⁵³ A connection to Hobhouse’s thoughts about the sociology of religion was in a letter where Huxley states:

“I would say that the real problem today is not that of my linking up a separate field of study called classical culture with modern culture, including scientific thought, but that of introducing the historical approach to all studies...but in addition science is seen not merely as a static collection of facts and principles, but a developing adventure of thought.”¹⁵⁴

In this case, he was mainly talking about literature and science but went on to conclude that, “both the Humanities and Sciences could come to be regarded as part of a comprehensive humanism. The history of man is the progressive realisation of new possibilities.”¹⁵⁵ His opinion was that the rule of religious ideas was passed. As he stated in his Conway Memorial Lecture in 1930: “it is no longer possible for the world of thought to take such matters seriously (save as sociological phenomenon).”¹⁵⁶ Which brings Hobhouse’s views full circle, Huxley no longer had to meticulously argue the point that religion was just one aspect of Sociology, it was now according to Huxley, the only relevance it had left.

Huxley would also put many other humanist and secularist associates in positions within the UN in his tenure as the first Director of the United

¹⁵² Huxley, *Religion without Revelation*, 6.

¹⁵³ Paul T Phillips, “One World, One Faith: The Quest for Unity in Julian Huxley’s Religion of Evolutionary Humanism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68 (2007): 613.

¹⁵⁴ Phillips, “One World, One Faith,” 616.

¹⁵⁵ Phillips, “One World, One Faith,” 617.

¹⁵⁶ Julian Huxley, “Science, Religion and Human Nature,” *Conway Memorial Lecture* (London: Watts & Co., 1930), 14.

Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Their influence in the beginning of that organisation's history, is another largely unwritten chapter in the history of twentieth century secularism.

Alongside other literary figures of the early twentieth century such as Ivy Compton-Burnett, Wilfred Scawen Blunt and Marjorie Bowen, there is an argument that the secularists achieved positions of influence and thereby able to influence further generations, whether consciously associated with the advocates of a secular worldview or merely by being sympathetic to it. There's a great deal of research that could be done in this area to understand direct relationships like that of Meredith and Foote. However, it does suggest that secularisation as a process could have benefitted from these individuals that popularised the concepts that secularisation embodies: freedom of thought and belief and a criticism of established doctrine if it has no valid purpose.

This started with Hobhouse placing religious belief as just another sociological consideration when studying humanity. It carried on throughout the twentieth century, reflected back as reasonable atheists in novels, in a perceptive Satan telling God the truth where angels feared to tread, to Huxley's statement that you should not believe unless you've examined those beliefs. They are all statements of secularism: that freedom to examine religious beliefs and reject them is a valid and moral view to hold in the twentieth century. Some, like Huxley and Foote, made these statements from within secularist circles and those like Compton-Burnett and Blunt made them from without. However, all acted through their activities as secularists.

Chapter 5: Secularist support of women's rights: contraception and the right to knowledge

Although women may not have made up significant numbers within secularist organisations, their interests were nonetheless included in secularist campaigns. The movement certainly did not shy away from having outspoken women appear on their platform with campaigners Harriet Law and Annie Besant drawing the same large crowds as their male counterparts. Secularist women in the nineteenth century also closely linked their own emancipation with secularism.¹ No doubt, a more feminist position was a useful prop for secularists to critique the various established religions, but they also were genuinely supportive when it came to arguing feminist issues. But secularists were also in a position to support the emancipation of women because of their political connections or the organisations they were affiliated with. In typical freethought fashion, they did not hesitate from engaging with controversial topics but rather confronted religious moral frameworks with rational arguments and current social trends, though their arguments may not have had as much of the anti-clerical and actively blasphemous sentiments as those of their nineteenth century counterparts in the secularist press.

One of the most controversial and morally fraught issues from a Victorian standpoint was the access and use of contraception and the advocacy of family planning. Touching on the structure of the family, the duty of women, empire and Christian morality - birth control was a sensitive issue for many. However, just like blasphemy and attacking the hegemony of

¹ Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism*, 5.

thought and distribution of dissenting and non-religious views, secularists were fairly consistent in their support of the use of birth control and the dissemination of information on controlling the size of the family for women who wanted it. They also supported the liberalisation of family law in other areas such as divorce law, another pillar in undermining religious hegemony over family law. Finally, they almost universally supported women's suffrage, with the parallels and arguments against it being the same ones they saw in opposition to the extension of the franchise to working class men.

The reasons secularists championed these causes were myriad, however, they were freed from a large part of the Christian moral framework that their religious contemporaries were (to various degrees) bound by. Not all Christians disagreed with these campaigns, but secularists did not have to be consistent with any religious creed and so their rationalist approach made their arguments straightforward (for the most part, one could make an exception for the Malthusian League). They based their arguments on evidence and humanitarian reasons, using the reality of the changing social dynamics of the country against what looked like the out of touch and cruel church declarations on the subject.

There are similar people involved in these campaigns that were involved in other political issues, such as J A Hobson, J M Robertson and H N Brailsford, though other secularist individuals and organisations got involved, such as the Malthusian League. In the case of the Malthusian League, their influence may have been more of a hindrance, though they dominated the discussion for decades until the arrival of the prominent birth control advocate Marie Stopes. As well, there were new secularists in the

House of Commons, such as Ernest Thurtle, and the House of Lords, such as Lord Stanley Buckmaster, who would have important contributions to the breakthrough of unblocking access to contraceptive information for working class women.

Secularist interest in contraception

The publication of *The Fruits of Philosophy* (also known as the Knowlton Pamphlet) by Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant and their subsequent prosecution was just one of the several high profile moments of the career of these two secularists. However, it highlights the secularist movement's willingness to continue its campaign against both the hypocritical application of Victorian laws and middle class morality. The trial was of national interest, headlining both the "morning and evening newspapers on the breakfast table and the drawing-room table in thousands of homes."² But the publication of the *Fruits of Philosophy* by Bradlaugh and Besant was just one of several skirmishes around the topic of birth control (or more widely known as family limitation or family planning until the twentieth century) from secularists in the nineteenth century.

The lead up to the trial begins with the prosecution of a publisher in Bristol over the same pamphlet on birth control.³ Encouraged by Bradlaugh, Charles Watts claimed ultimate responsibility for the publication but changed his original plea from not guilty to guilty as he believed the pamphlet was

² J A Banks and Olive Banks, "The Bradlaugh-Besant Trial and the English Newspapers", *Population Studies* 8 (1): 1954, 23.

³ Hypatia Bradlaugh-Bonner, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work, Part II* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), 16.

indefensible.⁴ Bradlaugh, upon Watts' decision not to fight the charges, stated: "The Knowlton pamphlet is either decent or indecent. If decent, it ought to be defended; if indecent, it should have not been published. To judge it indecent, is to condemn, with the most severe condemnation." It was then that Bradlaugh and Besant formed their own freethought publishing company to print the pamphlet and bring the case to court.

While freethought publications by nature did not shy away from contentious issues, Bradlaugh's position highlights the link between fighting against blasphemy and the suppression of biblical criticism and the suppression of knowledge about science in the same way. Still, in the response to Charles Watts' position not to fight the charges, Bradlaugh stated: "I hold the work to be defensible, and I deny the right of anyone to interfere with the full and free discussion of social questions affecting the happiness of the nation."⁵ While clearly the issue of the Knowlton Pamphlet played directly to Bradlaugh's Malthusian interest, it highlights one of the reasons why freethought and secularist advocates had an interest in birth control literature. Like blasphemy charges, it is the power of the state to suppress knowledge and discussion that harmed people's individual choice. Whether this was the ability to declare that God did not exist in the most excoriating of terms, or to understand the mechanics of preventing conception, it was the same issue. Once Christian biblical objections were removed from the picture, it was the suppression of discussion and distribution of knowledge that remained - the issue long familiar to secularists, atheists and freethought advocates. Of course, the *Fruits of*

⁴ Bradlaugh-Bonner, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work*, 16.

⁵ Bradlaugh-Bonner, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work*, 17.

Philosophy itself was a reproduction of an eighteenth century American work. But the interest in the subject began even earlier within the secular movement with Robert Dale Owen and Richard Carlile. Given the long association with birth control issues and secularists, I'm going to trace the chronology from the earlier association to the twentieth century secularists.

Robert Owen published his opinions on population in *The Free Enquirer* in the 1820s. As a response to Malthus, he disagreed with the way to combat overpopulation, "namely, sexual abstinence and late marriage."⁶ Even more audacious than nineteenth and twentieth century birth control advocates, "he explicitly included unmarried women" in the group of people who should have access to such technologies.⁷ Even secularists in the twentieth century mainly focussed on access for married women. Perhaps they believed this was the only way to argue the point without being dismissed or were themselves affected by some aspects of Victorian morality. Owen also espoused (like Hobson and Marx) underconsumptionist economic theories - which believed that redistribution would solve problems like poverty and population issues. This, of course, was in conflict with Malthusian (and Bradlaughian) view that resources were finite and could only be solved by limiting population growth.

Other radicals and freethinkers would continue to advocate and publish birth control methods throughout the nineteenth century. Like most of the literature around contraception in the nineteenth century, the message mainly argued for the Malthusian position of "the relationship of poverty to

⁶ Robert Jutte, *Contraception: A History* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2003), 107.

⁷ Jutte, *Contraception: A History*, 107.

overpopulation” and to help families avoid “ruinous fertility.”⁸ The methods were the same as other campaigners who advocated various chemical solutions, sponges, condoms, pessaries, the ‘safe’ method and the withdrawal method.⁹ Until modern methods of contraception (such as the pill) or more reliable older methods (like condoms) were available, much of the advice around contraception was a mixture of reliable and completely erroneous assumptions about women’s biology.

Richard Carlile was also interested in contraception. However, Carlile saw the dissemination of birth control literature as a way to attack organised religion and “the moral hegemony of the Church.”¹⁰ Carlile and others saw contraception as a direct method of undermining faith.¹¹ Carlile’s first book on the subject was *Every Woman’s Book or What is Love* in 1825.¹² However, for the working class, the approach of Carlile was also associated with the acceptance that the “utilitarian argument that unemployment was a ‘natural’ problem to be overcome by restricting the labour pool.”¹³ Coupled with the overriding advocacy of contraceptive advice coming from the middle class, preaching almost exclusively to the working class, the early birth control advocates were somewhat hamstrung in their efforts. In more extreme left wing working class circles, the opponents of contraception argued against family planning, believing that self interest should not “prevail over loyalty and

⁸ Richard Allen Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 53.

⁹ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 53.

¹⁰ Angus McLaren, “Contraception and the Working Classes: The Social Ideology of the English Birth Control Movement in its Early Years,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 18 (2009): 244.

¹¹ McLaren, “Contraception and the Working Classes,” 245.

¹² S Chandrasekhar, *A Dirty, Filthy Book* (London: University of California Press, 1981), 19.

¹³ McLaren, “Contraception and the Working Classes,” 245.

class and community”.¹⁴ They believed that there needed to be a “deterioration of social conditions” in order to have revolutionary social change.¹⁵ However, even without this revolutionary class perception, there were still very practical barriers for working class women to adopt the contraceptive measures preached by the middle class birth control advocates (which will be explained below).

The secularist press and birth control in the twentieth century

The secularist press would also periodically publish stories of women’s issues, including contraception. As with Carlile and Owen, the reasons behind supporting contraception were varied. *The Freethinker* in 1931 stated, “Questions such as those relating to Divorce, Birth Control etc., must be faced from the angle of sane humanity and not frowned upon through the distorting mirrors supplied by priest or parson.”¹⁶ The same themes are repeated in “A Woman’s Point of View”, reprinted from a speech at the National Secular Society Conference. Hypatia Rosetti commented that “freethought has brought to bear the strong light of common sense” on a variety of issues.¹⁷ This included “helpful” and “popular” methods of birth control so “that not even the Bishops dare to ban it, but have to give it a shame faced support.”¹⁸ What is interesting about Rosetti’s paper is that it is from a woman’s point of view, rather than many of the same issues raised by

¹⁴ McLaren, “Contraception and the Working Classes,” 249.

¹⁵ McLaren, “Contraception and the Working Classes,” 249.

¹⁶ J H Round, “Book Review” *The Freethinker*, v. LIII, no. 38, 603-604.

¹⁷ Hypatia Rosetti, “A Woman’s Point of view,” *The Freethinker*, v. LI, no. 24, 380.

¹⁸ Rosetti, “A Woman’s Point of view,” 380.

her male secularist counterparts. But secondly that freethought allows for “the development of freer and happier humanity” because of its progressive views of women and their abilities at the time.¹⁹ Birth control looked like common sense to the secularists as they were persuaded by the arguments - being freed from the pronouncements from the church on the subject. Potentially, they were convinced more by the utility of birth control precisely because of the opposition of the church (which they were used to).

In the *Literary Guide*, the same types of views are found. There were kind words for Marie Stopes’ pamphlet *How I was born*, which praised Stopes for trying to get parents to talk to their children about questions of sex.²⁰ Needless to say, the reviewer was less impressed by Stopes’ religious sentiments, and grumpily proclaimed, “But, in the name of reason, why should the Deity be dragged in?”²¹ In another review in the *Literary guide*, this time on *The Morality of Birth Control* by Ettie Rout, the reviewer stated that for the main issue of the use of birth control, “hardly any person who reads this paper is likely to differ, on any of the subordinate issues.”²² The reviewer, only known by J M went on to say that there was “an appalling amount of hypocrisy about the whole subject.”²³ He then recounted that a man who had wished to “divert a distinguished admirer” from himself, used the argument that he was an “Atheist and a Socialist” and even “a

¹⁹ Rosetti, “A Woman’s Point of view,” 380.

²⁰ However, the high-mindedness of the review shines through with “There can be no doubt that many parents, by their foolish attitude, commit an outrageous wrong upon those whom they should protect before all others.” MacLeod Yearsley, “Book Review,” *The Literary Guide* no. 344 (New Series), February 1925, 42.

²¹ Yearsley, “Book Review,” 42.

²² J M, “The Population Problem,” *The Literary Guide* No. 349 (New Series), July 1925, 138.

²³ J M, “The Population Problem,” 138

Malthusian.”²⁴ The hypocrisy, he then pointed out, was that his accuser only had two children.²⁵ The assumption by the author was that his accuser had already employed birth control methods to limit his family. He also echoed *The Freethinker* in that the book and its recommendation of birth control was “both scientific and humane”.²⁶ The default position for many secularists not only saw the rational side of planning a family but also saw that it was generally more tolerable than the position advocated for so long by the Church of England and other religious communities.

The praise for birth control advocacy can be even more profuse. In a book review of *The Future of the Race* in *The Literary Guide* the reviewer stated about the “excellent book” that birth control was one of “the greatest of human discoveries, on par with, if not of even vaster moment than, those of fire and printing.”²⁷ The reviewer also believed that those that opposed the dissemination of birth control information would be viewed in the same light as “the religionists who so fiercely opposed heliocentrism...the abolition of slavery, the burning of ‘witches’ and the use of anaesthetics for the relief of pain.”²⁸ Echoing others, he also emphasised the point that he would find it “difficult to see how there could be many exceptions” from Rationalists supporting “the birth control movement.”²⁹ While positive in this sense, the Neo-Malthusian mission was not entirely looking out for the welfare of

²⁴ J M, “The Population Problem,” 138

²⁵ J M, “The Population Problem,” 138

²⁶ J M, “The Population Problem,” 138

²⁷ Charles Beadnell, “Book review: The Future of the Race,” *The Literary Guide*, No. 470 (New Series), August 1935, 155.

²⁸ Beadnell, “Book review: The Future of the Race,” 155

²⁹ Beadnell, “Book review: The Future of the Race,” 155.

humanity, eventually leading towards eugenics. Combined with the economics of the Malthusian League itself, the humanity was sometimes lost.

In a pamphlet entitled *Social Control and the Birth-rate and Endowment of Mothers* (1890) published by the London Freethought Company, the author took a very forward looking view (at odds, as will be seen, with contemporaries). It recounted the paper from the Statistical Society that stated that the prevalent remedy of shipping excess people to the colonies will “sooner or later...altogether fail us.”³⁰ Additionally, it made an argument more in line with late twentieth century attitudes, advancing the idea of zero population growth: “what is needed, and what we must come to eventually is an equalisation of the birth-rate and death-rate, producing a stationary state of population.”³¹ One of the suggestions was the delay of marriage but also state support for mothers.³² This pamphlet tends to show some of the differences between secularist interest in family planning. While the decline of the birth-rate was widely supported among secularists, not all agreed with state support to achieve that goal (certainly not the Malthusian League).

There was also, of course, *The Fruits of Philosophy*, or perhaps more important the court case around Knowlton’s pamphlet. Oddly enough, it was secularist involvement early on, especially with prosecutions for obscenity, that hung a shadow over the entire advocacy of birth control. Charles

³⁰ G A Gaskell, *Social Control of the Birth-rate and Endowment of Mothers*, (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1890), 3.

³¹ Gaskell, *Social Control of the Birth-rate and Endowment of Mothers*, 3.

³² Of course, it was only “legitimate marriage” that would be state-supported with illegitimate births falling “outside the community” and not provided the same support. Gaskell, *Social Control of the Birth-rate and Endowment of Mothers*, 12-113.

Bradlaugh and Annie Besant were not the only secularists charged with obscenity either. Another freethinker was found guilty of publishing Robert Dale Owen's book *Moral Physiology* - for that the publisher Edward Truelove was given four months' hard labour.³³ Truelove in a book about the trial, pointed the finger of blame of the prosecution on the same group long affiliated with the persecution of blasphemers, the Society for the Suppression of Vice.³⁴ The problem according to Truelove was that the "fair and legitimate liberty of the press had been imperilled" by the prosecution and therefore also the free discussion of the population question.³⁵ Additionally, he had an issue with "medical or philosophical" topics being prosecuted under obscenity.³⁶ Other freethinkers such as John William Gott, Ernest Pack, Thomas William Stewart and Harry Boulter would also be prosecuted for not only their attacks on Christianity but also for the supposedly profligate and indiscriminate spread of birth control ideas, literature and appliances."³⁷

There were of course others involved in birth control advocacy aside from the more 'mainstream' secularists, there were more fringe elements like the Legitimation League, George Bedborough and Havelock Ellis. *The Adult* was the journal of Bedborough and the Legitimation League. The first issue described that "It's pages will be open for the discussion of important phases of sex questions which are almost universally ignored elsewhere."³⁸ Later in

³³ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 57.

³⁴ Edward Truelove, *The Queen v. Edward Truelove* (London: Edward Truelove, 1878), v.

³⁵ Truelove, *The Queen v. Edward Truelove*, v.

³⁶ Truelove, *The Queen v. Edward Truelove*, vi.

³⁷ David Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain*, 172.

³⁸ "Editorial" *The Adult*, June 1897, 1.

the editorial, it stated that “*The Adult* advocates the absolute freedom of two individuals of full age, to enter into and conclude at will, any mutual relationships whatever...”³⁹ The goal of the league was to protest “iron-bound marriage customs” and to offer help “on those on whom the law, or its administration, or its abuse, presses harshly on account of their heterodox sex relationships.”⁴⁰ Bedborough, in the tradition of all freethought publishers, also faced a prosecution for selling *Sexual Inversion* by Havelock Ellis and made an appeal in *The Adult* for support while he was going through the courts.⁴¹ The prosecution for obscenity *The Adult* argued was, “ a gross violation of the freedom of the press, and to imprison a man for selling it to an adult customer is an outrage on the primary right of free citizenship.”⁴² As will be seen, obscenity was a common method to discredit birth-control literature. The ‘moral panic’ by the authorities can be seen in Home Office examinations of the literature that these freethinkers produced, but also by the fact that they were kept under surveillance by the police.⁴³ The same issues that faced the blasphemers were at play with the prosecution of some birth control advocates - that knowledge and the dissemination of opinion were too dangerous to the general public.

There was also the case of the Malthusian League member Dr Henry Arthur Allbutt. While he would not face prosecution, he would have his medical license revoked for publishing *The Wife's Handbook*.⁴⁴ The

³⁹ “Editorial” *The Adult*, June 1897, 1-2.

⁴⁰ “Editorial” *The Adult*, June 1897, 3-4.

⁴¹ “An Appeal to the People,” *The Adult* August 1898, 189.

⁴² It also made the argument that it was a scientific publication. “An Appeal to the People,” 189-90.

⁴³ David Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain*, 187-188.

⁴⁴ F D’Arcy, “The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain,” *Population Studies* 31 (3): 1977, 434.

publication may have not been the problem but rather by making it cheap to buy it was and therefore within “the reach of the youth of both sexes to the detriment of public morals.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the Malthusian League chose to defend those that had tripped over the obscenity line. In Allbutt’s case, they argued that the General Medical Council should have had the doctor tried with obscene libel and by revoking his medical licence had “exceeded its authority.”⁴⁶ *The Malthusian* also followed the trial of James White, for publishing *True Morality*, which had also been advertised in the journal itself. Emphasising that the league itself had “taken no part in disseminating practical information upon methods of prevention”, it asked its members to contribute to his defense fund.⁴⁷ White, at 60 years of age and in poor health, was found guilty and sent to Durham prison; but the League lobbied the Home Secretary for his release and provided him funds while he was incarcerated.⁴⁸ However, White did not survive his three month sentence and died while imprisoned at Durham Prison.⁴⁹ These types of trials would stay the Malthusian League’s own efforts, preventing the organisation from publishing practical advice on birth control until 1913. However, the prosecution of Bradlaugh and Besant in some contemporary views may have “legitimised the teaching of practical methods for the limitation of the family.”⁵⁰ Instead of providing practical advice, the Malthusian League used

⁴⁵ D’Arcy, “The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain,” 434.

⁴⁶ The General Medical Council obliged, and the court sided with them, both in the original prosecution and on subsequent appeal. D’Arcy, “The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain,” 434.

⁴⁷ “Prosecution of Mr James White,” *The Malthusian*, v. XXXI (No. 12), December 15, 1910, 98.

⁴⁸ “The James White Case,” *The Malthusian*, v. XXXV (no. 4), April 15, 1911, 31.

⁴⁹ “Death of Mr James White,” *The Malthusian* v. XXXV (no. 6), June 15, 1911, 41.

⁵⁰ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 53.

their journal, *The Malthusian* (later rebranded to the *New Generation*), to defend those with whom they shared common ground.⁵¹ The Malthusian League's fight for birth control and family planning would later encompass the defense of anything considered obscene, if it related to sex or sexuality. For example, they condemned the banning of both of some of Havelock Ellis' work and Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* in 1938.

The Malthusian League

What is apparent from the literature on the history of contraception is what seems to be the embarrassment over the inclusion of the Malthusian League. Many historians writing on the subject seem to lament the fact that the history almost begins with such a peculiar organisation. While trying to downplay to a certain extent the influence of the Malthusian League, it was from its founding in 1877 to the arrival of Marie Stopes, the only organised pressure group advocating family planning and birth control. Though even with Marie Stopes, the scientific study into which methods of contraception were effective did not start to be investigated until the late 1920s.⁵² Nonetheless, as Rosanna Ledbetter states in *A History of the Malthusian League*, "to deny it a prominent place among those who promoted family planning movement in English Society, indeed in world society, at a time when many opposed it would lead to an even more serious distortion of the development of the movement".⁵³ Additionally, the Malthusian League was "singular in its efforts"

⁵¹ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 229.

⁵² Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 53.

⁵³ Rosanna Ledbetter, *A History of the Malthusian League* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1976), xx.

to advocate for “rational, planned parenthood as the cornerstone of sound domestic strategy.”⁵⁴ Many anti-birth control advocates were heavily influenced by the ability to export extra citizens (mainly working class of course) to the colonies - which will be discussed in detail further on. However, it also continued to campaign and produce family planning pamphlets and propaganda well into the 1950s. It formed alliances and partnerships with other advocacy organisations, as well as giving evidence to national committees.

The Malthusian League was the “first birth control organisation in the world” and from its founding to the 1920s, “it remained a small, eccentric, rather disreputable society.”⁵⁵ The origin of the Malthusian League is related to Bradlaugh and Besant’s trial over the Knowlton Pamphlet. Besant herself suggested the idea to members of the London Dialectical Society and Besant and Bradlaugh’s defence committee, which included the eventual Malthusian League founders Dr Charles Drysdale and his wife Dr Alice Vickery.⁵⁶ Within a month, the organisation came into existence and rapidly accrued members (though the reported figures did not continue for very long, suggesting that growth was slow thereafter).⁵⁷ The society had two main goals, firstly to “agitate for the abolition of all penalties on the public discussion of the Population Question” and essentially reduce the civil prosecutions and penalties that had affected freethinkers previously.⁵⁸ Prosecutions for

⁵⁴ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, xiv.

⁵⁵ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, xiv.

⁵⁶ D’Arcy, “The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain,” 429.

⁵⁷ D’Arcy, “The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain,” 429.

⁵⁸ “The Malthusian League,” *The Malthusian*, No. 39, April 1882, 392.

obscenity when publishing birth control literature, echoed the prosecutions for blasphemy in the nineteenth century.

Secondly, it wanted the ability to advocate “by all practicable means, a knowledge of the laws of population, of its consequences, and of its bearing upon human conduct and morals.”⁵⁹ The Malthusian League was founded in 1879, and was followed two years later by the creation of its journal, *The Malthusian*.⁶⁰ It published without interruption through both world wars, and outlasted the core organisation itself, until folding in 1952.⁶¹ Additionally, the Malthusian League would publish pamphlets, such as in 1885 when they printed and distributed over 60,000 leaflets and between 1893 and 1894 with 128,000 leaflets.⁶² The Malthusian League again followed the same patterns as nineteenth century freethought with mass publication and distribution of its propaganda.

In 1908, the emerging field of eugenics was a topic that ran through many editions of *The Malthusian*. While their economic positions argued against state intervention and support for the working class, it was not that different from other conservative political views of the time. The introduction and acceptance of eugenics into the Malthusian arsenal was perhaps inevitable and certainly unsurprising. While humanitarian in one sense, to liberate women from excessively large families, the Malthusian League was

⁵⁹ “The Malthusian League,” 392.

⁶⁰ Ledbetter, *A History of the Malthusian League*, xviii.

⁶¹ Ledbetter, *A History of the Malthusian League*, xviii. The office of the Malthusian League did not manage to survive the war entirely intact. Primary sources are difficult to find as the office was destroyed during the bombing of London in 1940. Ledbetter, *A History of the Malthusian League*, xix.

⁶² The Malthusian League’s ability to produce and distribute leaflets rose and fell with their income. D’Arcy, “The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain,” 432.

also very inhumane with their advocacy of eugenics. In one of the first articles, the author stressed there was still a difference between Malthusians and Eugenicists (positive and negative eugenics).⁶³ The main difference being that the Malthusians stressed “the rapid breeding of the good stocks” while the negative eugenists want to restrict “the bad stock from propagating.”⁶⁴ The author also took the time to attack the notion of original sin and unhealthy attitudes towards sex.⁶⁵ However, it did not take very long for this distinction between the Malthusians and eugenicists to disappear. In the May 1910 issue of *The Malthusian*, the lead editorial boldly stated, “there is no essential point of difference between negative eugenics and Neo-Malthusianism.”⁶⁶ The description of the “Methods of Eugenics” outlined after the introduction rejected policing and marriage certificates but accepted sterilisation of “the unfit”.⁶⁷ While state intervention went too far when arguing for support for the working class, clearly in other ways it was acceptable. So while the Malthusian League was forthright in the defence of access to information and humane positions on family limitation, in other ways they became aligned with the restriction of individual autonomy (if it benefited the race as a whole.)

However, due to the shadow of previous prosecutions, as mentioned, the Malthusian League was very hesitant to publish practical advice and instead specialised in academic treatises on Malthusian principles.

⁶³ “Neo-Malthusianism and Eugenics,” *The Malthusian*, v. XXXII (no. 9), September 1908, 1.

⁶⁴ “Neo-Malthusianism and Eugenics,” 65.

⁶⁵ “Neo-Malthusianism and Eugenics,” 66.

⁶⁶ “The Union of Eugenics and Neo-Malthusianism,” *The Malthusian*, v. XXXIV (no. 5), May 15, 1910, 34.

⁶⁷ On the positive side, it also advocated reform of divorce law. “The Methods of Eugenics,” *The Malthusian*, v. XXXIV (no. 5), May 15, 1910, 34.

Additionally, their odd economic and political stances would put them in opposition with the people they were trying to reach. For example, the Malthusian League while supporting family limitation, did not support state benefits such as “school meals and medical examinations for the poor” or “old age pensions, improved workmen’s compensation, better housing, and national health insurance.”⁶⁸ This would have been a hard sell to the working class, who the Malthusian League were mostly trying to reach.

However, the Malthusian League was actively pro-suffrage. Charles Drysdale helped found the first medical school for women and his wife Alice Vickery was admitted to the Pharmaceutical society - the first for a woman chemist.⁶⁹ *The Malthusian* also explicitly linked the struggle for suffrage to the ability of women to limit their family. In the clearly titled “Women's Suffrage and Neo-Malthusianism”, the author related the fact that the Women’s International Council had made the connection between limiting family size and suffrage and “they do not fear to openly proclaim this connection.”⁷⁰ The author did not suggest that the suffrage groups make Malthusianism a “plank in their platform” but they should confront the issue instead of avoiding the subject.⁷¹ Bessie Drysdale in the next issue, argued much of the same point. While suffrage would get women the vote, “unless other sections of women’s enfranchisement....are attended to at the same

⁶⁸ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 79. This would also alienate some of their own members’ support - such as J M Robertson, discussed later on in this chapter.

⁶⁹ Angus McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Groom Helm, 1978), 110.

⁷⁰ “Women’s Suffrage and Neo-Malthusianism,” *The Malthusian*, v. XXXIII (no. 1), January 1909, 4.

⁷¹ “Women’s Suffrage and Neo-Malthusianism,” 4.

time, very bitter disappointment awaits our earnest suffragists.”⁷² While he recognised the problem of being dependent on a husband (once they’ve had children) and disparity in pay, being Malthusian, Drysdale stopped short of advocating state intervention and instead relied on the natural decrease in population to solve the problem. In a pamphlet on “A programme of Women’s Emancipation”, Alice Vickery echoed many of the same sentiments. While voting and the ability to sit in parliament head the list, education, property and the limitation of family size are also included.⁷³

This prohibition from publishing actual contraceptive advice finally changed in 1913, with the publication of a leaflet entitled *Hygienic Method of Family Limitation*. Due to continued moral concerns about who might access this information, one had to apply for the pamphlet in writing.⁷⁴ Moreover, couples had to each fill out a declaration that they were married or would soon be married and “that they believed in the voluntary limitation of families”.⁷⁵ Proving that it was difficult to escape the Victorian morality around sex outside marriage - even for secularists.

As it was established to defend the secularists Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, it is unsurprising that some of its members were also radicals and secularists. Aside from its founders, Drysdale and Vickery, it also would include J M Robertson as a member (though they would clash on certain

⁷² Bessie Drysdale, “The Sex Disability and the Enfranchisement of Women,” *The Malthusian*, v. XXXIII (No. 2), February 15, 1909, 9.

⁷³ Senate House Special Collections, Malthusian League Leaflets, Alice Drysdale-Vickery, “A Programme of Women’s Emancipation.”

⁷⁴ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 58.

⁷⁵ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 58. Even better was when the president of the Malthusian League C V Drysdale testified in front of the National Birth Rate Commission and “refused to give the commission an examination copy until one of them signed the protective statement”. Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 58.

issues.) However, not only Robertson would be involved in the advocacy of birth control but J A Hobson would also support contraceptive information - even being an expert in the first National Birth Rate Commission. *The Malthusian* also shows some of the crossover between secularists and birth control advocates. In advertisements in the journal, one would find Hypatia Bradlaugh-Bonner and Joseph McCabe giving lectures alongside C V Drysdale.⁷⁶ What secularists brought to the contraceptive debate was a rationalist perspective, free from the moralising Christian position that dominated much of the discourse. They were also able to see through some of the hysterical commentary about the declining British birth rate. Additionally, as noted, much of the secularist press was also broadly in favour of the dissemination of contraception and information limiting family size. They were ultimately correct in their analysis of the decline in the birth rate and the reasons for family limitation, in that it was based on economic pressures. Finally, they recognised the same kind hypocrisy when banning contraceptive literature that was evident with the prosecution of blasphemy in the nineteenth century.

National Birth Rate Commission

Secularists provided a moderating voice within the nineteenth and twentieth century concern on the declining birth rate in the UK. While there was a rise in fertility from the 1840s to 1870s, on the whole it declined.⁷⁷ From the

⁷⁶ "Special Propaganda Work." *The Malthusian*, v. XXXII (no. 1), January 1908, 4.

⁷⁷ Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex and Contraception 1800-1975* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004), 15. Even during a period where the population increased, certain professional classes saw a drop in fertility rates.

1870s the birth rate would rapidly fall, reaching the lowest ebb in the 1930s.⁷⁸

The national and religious response to this decline was verging on the hysterical. J M Robertson encapsulated the perhaps exasperated response of secularists, criticising “the deliberately insincere rhetoric about decay of national energy, the approaching distinction of the Anglo-Saxon, the fall in the vitality of the higher races, and all the rest of it” as “lugubrious humbug.”⁷⁹ Nonetheless, rhetoric or not, the changes in the birth rate led the National Council of Public morals to hold a series of national commissions. While increasingly being dominated by religious voices, secularists would still provide evidence at the commissions.

Established in 1913, the National Council of Public Morals promoted “Race Regeneration - Spiritual, Moral and Physical.”⁸⁰ Much of the debate about the falling birth rate was concerned with the health of the ‘race’ - which mainly meant the professional classes. The first Commission published the results and advice of their investigation in 1916 with *The Declining Birth-Rate: its causes and effects*. The Commission highlighted the reasons for the investigation as the public was told “with almost mathematical regularity that ‘this is the lowest rate since registration began’.”⁸¹ It also stated that “it may or may not be a good thing that fewer children have been born” but still reflected some of the contemporary racial anxieties with “is the declining birth-rate an index of physical deterioration?”⁸² Additionally, it referenced the “alleged

⁷⁸ Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, 15.

⁷⁹ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 5.

⁸⁰ *The Declining Birth-Rate: its causes and effects* (New York: E P Dutton & Company, 1916), faceplate.

⁸¹ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, v.

⁸² *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, v-vi.

moral degeneration” which had been “frequently upon the lips of preachers.”⁸³ This relatively straightforward criticism (however light) was not be repeated in subsequent commissions as will be shown. However, the need for such an investigation could be partly attributed to a failure within the medical profession to adequately engage with the subject of birth control.

While the Malthusian League’s timidity meant that they waited until 1913 to provide practical birth control advice (rather than economic essays), they were by no means alone. There was little impetus from the medical profession to engage with family planning or investigate contraception. It was only with Marie Stopes arrival and the establishment of the first private birth control clinic (followed closely by the second established by the Malthusian League) that statistically meaningful data started to be produced on the efficacy and safety of birth control. It was the later interest by the medical profession in preventative medicine but also of eugenicists that finally led to the scientific investigation of birth control.⁸⁴ The medical profession was a conservative body, which tended to confuse “religious, moral, social and political prejudices with doubtful physiology.”⁸⁵ Drysdale, a doctor himself, was continually baffled by the medical community and stated: “there is something mysterious, incomprehensible and afflicting in the attitude of reserve maintained by the mass of British medical practitioners.”⁸⁶ Though, some would be relatively straight forward about the subject, like the physician

⁸³ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, vi.

⁸⁴ Merriley Borrell, “Biologies and the Promotion of Birth Control Research,” *Journal of History of Biology* 20 (1987): 57.

⁸⁵ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 114.

⁸⁶ D’Arcy, “The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain,” 435.

A W Thomas. In the *British Medical Journal* in 1906, Thomas commented that he had “no hesitation in saying that 90 per cent of young married couples of the comfortably off classes use preventatives. This is quite enough to account for the declining birth-rate without looking round for other causes.”⁸⁷ This was in response to another physician who stated that a potential cause of the declining birth rate was the “hypernutrition” of women.⁸⁸ As the medical profession would continue to argue against the safety and therefore use of contraception, Thomas remained a minority voice among doctors.⁸⁹ However, this was an amusingly hypocritical position, as the medical profession had one of the lowest birth rates in the country, with only the clergy having a lower birth rate.⁹⁰ A fact that the Malthusian League delighted in pointing out whenever possible. As a consequence, there were no studies on birth control carried out by the medical profession until the interwar years.⁹¹

Nonetheless, the lack of scientific study on the subject did not stop the National Birth Rate Commission from deciding to deliberate on the issue. Due to the lack of medical studies, they stated in the medical section of the report that regretfully they were “unable to present a definite pronouncement to the physical consequences of the use of these devices.”⁹² Though they had to make the distinction between abortion and contraception as “fundamentally distinct, medically, medico-legally, and ethically.”⁹³ This

⁸⁷ A W Thomas, “The Decline in the Birth-Rate,” *British Medical Journal* Oct 20, 1906, 1066.

⁸⁸ Thomas, “The Decline in the Birth-Rate,” 1066.

⁸⁹ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 121.

⁹⁰ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 121.

⁹¹ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 114.

⁹² *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 57.

⁹³ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 57

potentially had to be stressed as those opposed to birth control would often conflate the two.⁹⁴ The Secretary of the Malthusian League in his testimony would also strenuously point out the difference between their stance on contraception being entirely different than the advocacy for abortion.⁹⁵ An examination of the statistical evidence formed part of the investigation, as were the “alleged causes” which included environmental and physiological reasons, economic motivations and “methods of restraint (moral, mechanical and chemical).”⁹⁶

Though at the time, the secularists would come out against abortion, the use was prevalent among both the working and middle class. Abortion could be seen as the natural consequence of withholding birth control information from the women who wanted it.⁹⁷ Like in some countries today, Victorian doctors would only allow abortion if the mother’s life was in danger.⁹⁸ While the exact numbers of abortions would be difficult to obtain (especially as it became expressly illegal), the Chrimes affair illustrates that there was a huge demand.

Richard and Leonard Chrimes set up a mail-order business to sell “female remedies”, though the advertisements implied that “their pills were in fact abortifacients.”⁹⁹ Luckily for historians (but not the women involved), the

⁹⁴ Depending on the advice and time period, pamphlets also advised non-invasive methods of inducing an abortion, such as “coughing, sneezing, jumping and violent exercise.” Patricia Knight, “Women and Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England”, *History Workshop* 4 (Autumn, 1977), 57.

⁹⁵ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 95.

⁹⁶ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, ix.

⁹⁷ Angus McLaren, “Abortion in England, 1890-1914,” *Victorian Studies*, 20 (1977): 381.

⁹⁸ McLaren, “Abortion in England, 1890-1914,” 389. Abortion was only made a statutory offence in 1803 but would see further restriction in three subsequent acts in 1828, 1837 and 1861 (which of course is still in effect in Northern Ireland). Angus McLaren, “Women’s Work and Regulation of Family Size; the Question of Abortion in the Nineteenth Century,” *History Workshop* 4 (1977): 73.

⁹⁹ McLaren, “Abortion in England, 1890-1914,” 381.

brothers decided to attempt to blackmail all the women that had contacted them for their remedy. The brothers had more than 10,000 addresses of women who had contacted them for their pills.¹⁰⁰ Other instances of 'fads' to induce abortions circulated in working class communities. For example the use of Diachylon (a lead based product) appeared in the nineteenth century after the observation that women working with lead in factories often had a higher instances of miscarriages.¹⁰¹ A 1906 survey in Sheffield revealed that 25% of doctors had "attended cases of lead poisoning due to abortion attempts."¹⁰² Women themselves saw it as just part of the repertoire in avoiding unwanted pregnancy.¹⁰³ Some women may not have realised it was illegal, as Marie Stopes related that she had "20,000 requests for criminal abortion from women who did not apparently even know that it was criminal."¹⁰⁴ Marie Stopes was also staunchly against abortion. The reaction against abortion from secularists would gradually change throughout the twentieth century but in this instance, they sided with the majority.

The Malthusian League's primary motivation for limiting families was economic which would be echoed by other secularists. The Commission's report was at pains to point out that "the law of Malthus" should not necessarily be applicable to a country like the UK.¹⁰⁵ It stated that factually, there was no evidence of over-population at the time and that consumption of food and other goods had increased.¹⁰⁶ The report stated that the

¹⁰⁰ McLaren, "Abortion in England, 1890-1914," 381.

¹⁰¹ Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, 116.

¹⁰² Knight, "Women and Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England," 59.

¹⁰³ Knight, "Women and Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England," 65.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Neushul, "Marie C Stopes and the Popularization of Birth Control Technology," *Technology and Culture* 39 (1998): 253.

¹⁰⁵ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 40.

¹⁰⁶ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 40.

improvement of working class conditions lead to the fall in birth-rate of that profession.¹⁰⁷ Thus the motivations that have been variously classed as “love of comfort, snobbishness, vulgar ambition, timorousness, or praise of proper pride, desire for self-improvement, and prudence” were the greatest reasons for the declining birth rate.¹⁰⁸ These arguments would be often repeated throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

On the moral and religious aspects of contraception, the view was almost universally against contraception. The Anglican position was almost uniformly opposed to contraception, with the “urgent necessity” of upholding the sacrament of marriage “as a divine institution for the procreation of children.”¹⁰⁹ However, while wholeheartedly condemning any mechanical means of contraception, it still sanctioned limiting “marital relations to those parts of the month in which conception is less likely to take place.”¹¹⁰ The free churches, as distinct from both Anglican and Catholic teachings, had no overarching pronouncements on contraception.¹¹¹ Thus the Commission wrote that they could not reach any definitive conclusion among the practices and pronouncements about the advice or moral guidance of the Free Churches to their followers.¹¹² Despite the lack of evidence, the Commission leant on the established and hierarchical churches for their belief that the

¹⁰⁷ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 41.

¹⁰⁸ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 41-42.

¹⁰⁹ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 63.

¹¹⁰ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 64. Unfortunately, with the limitation of medical investigations the prevailing wisdom was unhelpful as the time recommended where women were least fertile was actually when women were most fertile.

¹¹¹ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 66.

¹¹² *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 66. However, as Solway states, many of the clergy “believed family limitation was an extremely sensitive, personal issue the public discussion of which bordered on the obscene” which could account for the lack of public discussion from these congregations. Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 92.

nonconformists would “unhesitatingly condemn” the use of any mechanical devices for aiding contraception.¹¹³ Later on, the Commission decided when commenting on the purpose of marriage and parenthood, that it only “seems necessary for our present purpose...that such restriction is not in the general interest” and that “to promote such conditions as will make it unnecessary in the particular interests either of parents or children.”¹¹⁴ Essentially, taking a religious interpretation for the meaning of marriage (which was hardly surprising).

The Malthusian League also gave evidence at the first National Birth Rate Commission. Additionally, J A Hobson was a member of the Commission and also an expert who gave evidence. They were in a position to give the secularist point of view when it came to matters (and morality) of family limitation. The secretary of the Malthusian League C V Drysdale gave evidence to the Commission, as one of the only birth control organisations in the country (no matter how eccentric). *The Malthusian* was delighted, stating that “we can only express our most sincere gratification at the formation of this commission.”¹¹⁵ The journal also hoped that “the whole matter will soon be made public” with the promise of a full published report.¹¹⁶ In giving evidence, Drysdale mentioned in his introduction that the Malthusian League had carried out their activities “ever since the Knowlton or Bradlaugh and Besant trial of 1876-7”, harking back to the secularist origins of the organisation.¹¹⁷ Additionally, while mentioning that they had in the past only

¹¹³ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 67.

¹¹⁴ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 76.

¹¹⁵ “Birth-Rate Commission,” *The Malthusian*, v. XXXVII (no. 11), November 15, 1913, 84.

¹¹⁶ “Birth-Rate Commission,” 84.

¹¹⁷ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 87.

limited themselves to “exposition of the economic, moral and eugenic aspects of the population doctrine” it had recently started to endorse contraceptive devices.¹¹⁸ After attempting to clear up various misinterpretations and misinformation about the Malthusian League, Drysdale criticised the response to their work. For example he stated that the “educated classes” while clearly adopting to use contraceptive information for their own benefit now “put every obstacle in the way” for those less fortunate.¹¹⁹ Despite Drysdale’s paternalistic attitude towards the working classes, he pointed out the various arguments raised against providing contraceptive advice to the working class. Recounting their efforts in South London on dispensing information that there was “no justification whatsoever for the belief that” the working class (or “less fit elements of society”) would not welcome the ability to limit their family size.¹²⁰ Of course, being Neo-Malthusians, they were conscious that despite the birth rate declining, they wanted to see the drop “properly directed.”¹²¹ The assumption being that this would be the reduction of the more ‘unfit’ members of society while maintaining the respectable middle classes and artisans. It is impossible to separate out the Malthusian League’s position on birth control being, on the one hand a useful humanitarian intervention and the other hand, a useful population control check on the working class.

¹¹⁸ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 88.

¹¹⁹ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 89.

¹²⁰ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 90.

¹²¹ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 91. Hobson while questioning Drysdale asked whether wealth was how he saw ‘fitness.’ Drysdale responded, “to some extent, yes” but pointed out that someone could “show capacity” and could subsequently acquire that fitness. *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 124.

Regardless, the Malthusian League, through the testimony at the Commission, drove home the more rational conclusions - as they were free of dogma and church doctrine. In the section on statistics, Drysdale pointed out that “all the evidences goes to show that the modern decline of the birth-rate is almost entirely due to the prudential restriction of births within marriage.”¹²² Drysdale credited the motivation of parents to provide the best for the children that are born, but also greater economic pressures and the desire of men and women to dedicate their lives to social movements.¹²³ However, he went further and stated that being a “frank upholder” of women’s suffrage, the “emancipation from excessive and undesired maternity is absolutely essential.”¹²⁴ The Malthusian League was the only organisation that would tie female emancipation to women’s ability to control their own fertility.¹²⁵ Other suffrage groups did not emphasise family limitation as “they considered it an inappropriate, divisive issue that could only weaken their struggle.”¹²⁶ Drysdale also denounced the stereotype of rich, idle women who did not want to have children, instead laying the cultivation of irresponsible luxury upon the husband.¹²⁷ Furthermore, he argued directly against the church when it came to abstinence in marriage. He admitted that it “it is a much-disputed point” but that the League believed that abstinence in marriage was “rare” but also “definitely injurious to the bodily and mental health of both men and women.”¹²⁸ He however pointed out that until a few

¹²² *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 92.

¹²³ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 93.

¹²⁴ Of course, he also stated that the “interests of the race cannot be properly safeguarded” as well. *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 93.

¹²⁵ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 134.

¹²⁶ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 134.

¹²⁷ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 94.

¹²⁸ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 94.

years before, most of the medical community was against contraception entirely and that this attitude had shifted, so he suggested that the position on abstinence would also shift.¹²⁹

In response to a question from Lady Willoughby De Broke about the effect of a declining birth rate on the ability to send people to the colonies, Drysdale carefully trod between patriotism and the Malthusian doctrine. He first clarified that the Malthusian League was “not deficient in any of the questions of patriotism” but questioned sending the poor to colonies who were “getting rather tired of that sort of thing...they want, if anything, our best.”¹³⁰ A somewhat more enlightened position than those like De Brooke who saw the colonies as a pressure valve release for domestic overpopulation. There were other discussions about Ontario (Canada) “being a young country” had “plenty of room for expansion” or that it was “untenantable” that Australia could not support a larger population.”¹³¹. Drysdale argued that they should have “more efficient colonizers” as “those who die” are not of use to the Empire either.¹³² Though clearly supporting the empire, Drysdale did not think that disposing of superfluous workers would maintain the stability of the UK itself, nor would it benefit the Empire.

Aside from being a member of the Commission, J A Hobson also gave evidence. While not supplying the same kind statistical evidence that Drysdale put forth, Hobson wanted to “set before the Commission a general

¹²⁹ However, while seeming prescient in one sentence, in the next he conformed to Victorian stereotypes. The Malthusians believed in early marriage and contraception. Drysdale credited the delay of marriage in women as being “the probable cause of ‘sexual frigidity’” which caused great unhappiness in marriages. *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 97.

¹³⁰ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 127.

¹³¹ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 102-103.

¹³² *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 126.

survey of the situation” - economic, social and moral.¹³³ He emphasised that economic motivations, for differing reasons, were most likely the main reason for family limitation by both the working and middle classes.¹³⁴ This, though obvious in retrospect to historians, was an innovative position to hold at the time. However, he also referred to the quality of life for children and the “increased general regard for the nurture and education of children” no matter what class.¹³⁵ He also combatted the “old religious belief” that Providence would provide for those children who would lose their parents; instead parents had realised that it was in their control to limit family size.¹³⁶ A subtle and most likely uncontroversial point but Hobson points it out all the same time, taking the control from God and placing it in the hands of the individual. In contrast, the Catholic evidence given before the committee states that *coitus interruptus* and any type of contraceptive device were a sin and were “strictly forbidden.”¹³⁷ Despite the testimony from so many groups, especially religious, Hobson makes the pragmatic argument that “the conscious regulation of growth of population” was already firmly embedded within societal norms.¹³⁸ This was a common point made by many birth control proponents, who understood that family planning was already *de facto* accepted in most families. In contrast, the Catholic Church wanted to turn back time, and offered their solution to the problem. In the Commission report, they argued for a “higher and nobler view of the state of Christian

¹³³ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 282.

¹³⁴ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 283.

¹³⁵ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 283. This was also the position that Marie Stopes and others argued, that children should be wanted and given a loving and safe home.

¹³⁶ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 284.

¹³⁷ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 391

¹³⁸ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 284.

marriage” and that married couples should “overcome their egoism and selfishness.”¹³⁹ As such, Hobson pointed out that the position of the Church (especially the Anglican and Catholic Churches), was untenable.

Hobson went on to review the economic drivers, again the wages of the working class and quality of life. He then proceeded to lay out a defense of the secular support of the state for an increased birth rate (if that was desirable.) Otherwise, he would argue that lower birth rate was desirable not just for the working or middle classes “but in the interest of the nation as a whole.”¹⁴⁰ If an increased birth rate was needed, a sweeping change to the social welfare of the state was required to support it. Unsurprising, given his previous involvement with articulating the Labour policy of a national minimum wage, Hobson suggested that this was “the first essential for the defence of family and home.”¹⁴¹ Additionally, leisure time, financial help during periods of unemployment, maternal help and financial aid and adequate housing were all prerequisites to see an increase in the birth rate.¹⁴² However, beyond the economic reasons, which would be standard for someone of Hobson’s Labour leanings, it was his social requirements that put forth a very secular argument.

It was not just the basics of food, clothing and shelter that were required for a happy and productive society but rather the ability for people to “enrich” their “personality”.¹⁴³ “No moral teaching”, no doubt a dig at some of

¹³⁹ Strengthening self restraint, “observing the penitential seasons of the Church” and taking part in the sacrament constituted the other helpful advice the Catholic Church offered to its flock. *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 393.

¹⁴⁰ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 290.

¹⁴¹ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 291.

¹⁴² *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 291.

¹⁴³ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 291.

the hardline religious positions, Hobson emphasised would stop the birth rate from declining.¹⁴⁴ While he emphasised the role of the state in distribution of wealth, Hobson was also making a stand against the earlier pronouncements of religious groups. Like Drysdale, he also argued that the position of women needed to be improved and that marriage should be based “on a more truly voluntary basis.”¹⁴⁵ When questioned by the panel after his initial argument, he gave an even more feminist answer on women. The question that Principal Garvie asked was even if a woman was a wife or mother, whether she “should have some sort of profession of her own which would give her economic independence?”¹⁴⁶ The forthright reply from Hobson was a rejection of the Christian position that the point of marriage was to raise children and the women’s place was looking after the family:

“My assumption was that every woman should have such an economic equipment as would enable her at all times of her life to have an alternative to living in the home and being kept by the wages or income of the husband. If she was brought up in such a way as to be able to earn her own living, she would choose the time of her marriage and she would choose the husband whom she wished to marry.”¹⁴⁷

In a time before suffrage was granted, this was turning the Victorian idea of the place of women on its head. Drilling down more into his views, Hobson confirmed that the basis for his views were mainly economic and assumed that it would be “impracticable” to restrict birth control.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 291.

¹⁴⁵ Even though this might further reduce the birth rate, Hobson believed that this would make marriage qualitatively better. *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 292.

¹⁴⁶ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 296.

¹⁴⁷ Hobson’s only concession was that “There are many grave difficulties in detail, no doubt, but I do not think they would prove insuperable in a society that understood how to organise itself.” *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 296.

¹⁴⁸ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 297.

In an addition to the report, signed by all but Hobson and the psychologist James Crichton-Browne, the report's authors stated that a greater birth rate and population was desirable as "the stagnation or decline of our population would be injurious to the manifold interests of the nation."¹⁴⁹ Additionally, neither Hobson or Crichton-Browne would return to the second Commission, which was much more hostile to birth control than the 1916 report.

In the 1925 report *The Ethics of Birth Control*, the Christian basis of the report is given even more emphasis. It stated that a Christian outlook was assumed and emphasised: "Theological principles and ecclesiastical pronouncements are far from being divorced from reason or reality...no judgement on this question which is open to that suspicion will carry much weight."¹⁵⁰ Indicating that any forthright attack on religion would be immediately dismissed, any secularists would have to tread a careful line in their arguments. Additionally, the Commission was regretful that the subject of birth control "should be thus openly discussed."¹⁵¹ Another indication that religious interests had triumphed - even though this report was nine years after the first Commission began. This sort of preface was not present in the 1916 report. Instead, it stated there were four main issues for the Commission to investigate: examining the decline through available statistics; the causes for decline whether through physiological reasons, the desire to limit family size, and methods of restraint; "the effects of the decline" and

¹⁴⁹ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, 72.

¹⁵⁰ *The Ethics of Birth Control: Being the Report of the Special Committee appointed by the National Council of Public Morals in Connection with the Investigations of the National Birth-rate Commission* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1925), 3.

¹⁵¹ *The Ethics of Birth Control*, vi.

whether artificial restraints have had any effect on family and society; and finally in the impact on the country and economy.¹⁵² In fact the only reference to religion was whether or not statistics could be classified by religion and if it was possible to do so.¹⁵³

It could also indicate that Hobson's presence on the original Commission did carry some weight in removing some of the theological representation from the outcomes of the first Commission. They were not completely removed as seen in the Addition to the Commission's first report, but they were certainly less pronounced. In the 1925 report, the Anglican position on birth control would follow the prayer book, in that the point of marriage was entirely for procreation.¹⁵⁴ Additionally, there was the emphasis that there was a "public interest in every marriage" because of the theological underpinning of the family.¹⁵⁵ It repeated the Catholic calls from the earlier Commission that spiritual resources can be called upon "where ordinary moral resources may be insufficient."¹⁵⁶ The wider public interest argument over birth control was extended due to the Commission's remit of advising the Ministry of Health to allow public health officials to provide birth control advice.¹⁵⁷ It was at this time where pressure was being placed on the government to allow local health clinics and mother's maternity centres to be allowed to dispense contraceptive advice.

¹⁵² *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, ix.

¹⁵³ *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects*, viii.

¹⁵⁴ This held sway up until at least 1946 when a woman was allowed to annul her marriage; her husband had insisted on the use contraceptive measures during their entire marriage. Norman St. John-Stevas, *The Agonising Choice: Birth control, Religion and the Law* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971), 41.

¹⁵⁵ *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 6.

¹⁵⁶ *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 5.

¹⁵⁷ *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 118.

There was a secular voice in the testimony given at the Commission, provided by Bertrand Russell as one of the witnesses called to give evidence. He gave a representation to the Commission on behalf The Worker's Birth Control Group, affiliated with the Labour Party.¹⁵⁸ The position of this group was straightforward: "to make child-bearing, in the wage-earning class, as it already is among the well-to-do, a deliberate choice, rather than an accident or even (as sometimes) an undesired calamity."¹⁵⁹ Russell and the Worker's Birth Control Group made the argument that it was immoral to leave women, who had been recently entitled to vote, in ignorance of their own physiology.¹⁶⁰ However, it was at the end of his testimony that Russell mapped out the secularist case for contraception. He noted that "Christian Scientists disapprove of medicine" and that "Quakers disapprove of armaments" and yet the State still had both.¹⁶¹ This would not be the last time a secularist would make the same comparison. Russell's main point was that "no one proposes to force information upon those who do not desire it; but they have no right to tyrannise over the men and women who do desire it."¹⁶² Russell was pointing out the obvious hypocrisy, that had existed since the debate started even before the 1916 Commission, that the working class was denied the information that the middle class was already acting upon. The same arguments were raised in the questioning of Russell by the Commission: abortion, under-population, whether women really needed to have small families. However, Russell generally responded with the health

¹⁵⁸ *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 118.

¹⁵⁹ *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 118-119.

¹⁶⁰ *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 122-123.

¹⁶¹ *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 125.

¹⁶² *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 125.

and economic arguments. In what could have shocked the panel, he also stated that a “stationary population” in the world was a positive thing.¹⁶³

It is easy to see that the secularist position of support for contraception was often referred to as humanitarian. The religious position gave very little help in the case of large families, medical ailments or simple poverty. The 1925 Commission did recognise the reliance on contraception by much of the population, but they also take the position that it was just the fashion or simply as the expression of selfish behaviour.¹⁶⁴ The reforms they suggested were primarily spiritual, and involved inculcating children early with “habits of discipline and control”, with an emphasis on preparing them for marriage.¹⁶⁵ The Commission was very aware that “for the first time in history...it is possible to secure the pleasures of the sexual act without any risk of consequence.”¹⁶⁶ Possibly indicating their main issue with the availability of birth control information. In the recommendations, the Commission once again emphasised that self-control was the best method of contraception and should be “carried out in a spirit of service and sacrifice.”¹⁶⁷ They did give some small amount of credit to the fact that economic arguments are the most compelling when it came to the use of contraceptives. Unhelpfully, their recommendations on that front were merely that the remedy resided “in the amelioration of those conditions” without any further hints at how that would

¹⁶³ *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 143.

¹⁶⁴ *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 7.

¹⁶⁵ *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 17-18.

¹⁶⁶ They were also worried, like in 1916, about the “dysgenic” effect on the population, instead of eugenic, as the more prosperous classes were those most likely to limit their family size. *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 24, 30.

¹⁶⁷ *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 25.

happen.¹⁶⁸ The secularist argument from 1916 to 1925 had changed very little - that this information was widely available and being used by the middle class. However, they added that it was now the right of women, by their enfranchisement, that they should be able to access medical information about their own bodies where they wish it.

However, a great deal had changed from 1916 to 1925 that led to greater challenges for established religion when it came to birth control. One was the conclusion of the First World War and the distribution of birth control in the form of condoms by the state to soldiers. But another was the outright spokesperson for birth control and family planning in the form of Marie Stopes. In the 1925 Commission, her forthright position on marriage and sex was brought up with Bertrand Russell. The Commission asks whether Russell would “object to the circulation of Dr. Marie Stopes’s book”, to which Russell replied simply “No, I do not object to that.”¹⁶⁹ The factual dissemination of information, already seemingly on morally questionable ground by the various National Birth Rate Commissions, was tame compared to the forthright championing of “romantic love and sexual fulfillment” that according to Stopes would await couples free from the burden of too many pregnancies.¹⁷⁰ Though Marie Stopes did not identify as a secularist, her involvement in the birth control movement and her combative relationship

¹⁶⁸ *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 26. In the discussion of what contraceptive methods were available (and their efficacy and safety), the Commission bypassed the issue and stated: “it is true that the ethical judgment must depend less on the methods used than on the motives and circumstances of each particular case.” *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 22.

¹⁶⁹ Further questioning clarified that it was not the ideal text and definitely not for consumption by children. *The Ethics of Birth Control*, 142.

¹⁷⁰ Solway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, 209.

with secularist organisations needs to be examined in context with secularist campaigners.

Marie Stopes and the establishment of birth control clinics

Through the 1930s, the establishment of the Mother's Clinics (and those by the Malthusian League) would make moot much of the philosophical and moral hand-wringing from those on the National Birth Rate Commission. Stopes, like her counterpart in the United States Margaret Sanger, did not contribute to any radical reinvention of birth control technology but rather they were able to expand the distribution of both the devices themselves and information about them.¹⁷¹ While the public health officials remained excluded from giving advice by the Ministry of Health, the void was filled with these alternative clinics. Of course, the Malthusian League still persisted and would come into conflict with Stopes. They even had alternative preferences for devices, Stopes preferring the Pro-race cap (a cervical cap) and the Malthusian League advising the use of the diaphragm.¹⁷²

One of the conflicts between Stopes and the Malthusian League was over a new journal. In 1922, the Malthusian League changed their old journal from *The Malthusian* to the *New Generation*. In an attempt to solicit articles and messages of "encouragement" the Malthusian League wrote to members of the Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress (CBC), of which Stopes was the president.¹⁷³ Stopes was furious and wrote a series of

¹⁷¹ Neushul, "Marie C Stopes and the Popularization of Birth Control Technology," 246.

¹⁷² The continued combativeness between the Malthusian League may have led Stopes to continue recommending the cap even when women would find it "unsanitary" or "disgusting." Neushul, "Marie C Stopes and the Popularization of Birth Control Technology," 256.

¹⁷³ They were also hoping to get their first articles for free. Wellcome Trust Library, PP/MCS/B.1, Letter from Malthusian League, December 2, 1921.

letters to members of the CBC who had been contacted to point out the differences between the two organisations. The CBC held a meeting and passed the resolution, “That the CBC should not, as a Society, be connected in any way with the Malthusian League” though it was left to members to help the Malthusian League “in any way they like.”¹⁷⁴ Stopes then emphasised the differences between the organisations and ended the letters with “if you ask for my private and personal opinion, which is, of course, an unofficial one...I should think that really the best line to pursue would be not to write for the Journal.”¹⁷⁵ She even criticised that the request came in the form of the circular, yet wrote to many members in the same way, substituting introductory notes to letters with a personal remark but copying the bulk of the letters word for word.

However, Stopes would then go on to attempt to publish advertisements for her birth control clinic in *The New Generation*. In March of 1922, she wrote to the editors of the *New Generation* to question why they would not carry advertisements for her clinic. In a way that must have annoyed the Malthusian League, she pointed out that she founded the “first Birth Control Clinic...in the British Empire”.¹⁷⁶ The *New Generation* editorial board had twice refused to place an advertisement and Stopes wanted to know “as an interested member of the public...the general policy of the paper.”¹⁷⁷ The reasons that Drysdale finally gave to Stopes were that they

¹⁷⁴ Wellcome Trust Library, PP/MCS/B.1 December 16, 1921, Letter from Mary Stopes to Lady Constance

¹⁷⁵ She went one step further and advised the member “not to even answer the letter.” PP/MCS/B.1, December 16, 1921, Letter from Mary Stopes to Lady Constance.

¹⁷⁶ Wellcome Trust Library, PP/MCS/B.1, March 9, 1922, Letter from Marie Stopes to Edward Cecil.

¹⁷⁷ PP/MCS/B.1, March 9, 1922, Letter from Marie Stopes to Edward Cecil.

were “unable to approve of the practical methods” used at Stopes’ Mothers’ clinic but also because, as she believed, that she did not “bow the knee to Bradlaugh!”¹⁷⁸ Despite Stopes claiming to have facts about the movement that pre-dated Besant and Bradlaugh’s publication of *The Fruits of Philosophy*, Stopes stated that she “refrained out of consideration to the Malthusians” from publishing or speaking about them before.”¹⁷⁹ However it was due to their “overt and covert hostility” due to the *New Generation* that she finally spoke out.¹⁸⁰

However, both the Malthusian League and Marie Stopes faced the same problems with proselytising to the working class. The main one being that the comforts of a middle class house, with the privacy that came with it, were not available to working class women. Caps, pessaries and diaphragms all required preparation, as well as a familiarity with one’s own body, which was under appreciated by birth control advocates.¹⁸¹ Additionally, women had a general dislike for the condoms (as well as being expensive), from evidence collected at the time.¹⁸²

Despite the increasingly conservative (and religious) stance on birth control, the issue would grow beyond Marie Stopes and the Malthusian League in the 1920s. After Marie Stopes’ first clinic was established in 1921, the Malthusian League would set up the second in Walworth Road in South London. The Malthusian League’s efforts were supported by Sir John

¹⁷⁸ Wellcome Trust Library, PP/MCS/B.1, March 26, 1922, Letter from Marie Stopes to R Jennings.

¹⁷⁹ PP/MCS/B.1, March 26, 1922, Letter from Marie Stopes to R Jennings.

¹⁸⁰ PP/MCS/B.1, March 26, 1922, Letter from Marie Stopes to R Jennings.

¹⁸¹ Deborah A Cohen, “Private Lives in Public Spaces: Marie Stopes, the Mothers’ Clinics and the Practice of Contraception,” *History Workshop* 35 (Spring), 1993: 110.

¹⁸² Neushul, “Marie C Stopes and the Popularization of Birth Control Technology,” 255.

Sumner who bought the building that the clinic would operate out of, and Mr A K Bulley who donated £350 for the first year's running costs.¹⁸³ Operating the clinic was not without its hazards, as volunteers had to contend with graffiti, being pelted with eggs and vandalism.¹⁸⁴ In 1922 Dr Norman Haire, an Australian gynecologist, joined the clinic and offered lectures on birth control, hygiene and other topics which increased the number of people coming to the clinic.¹⁸⁵ While he would later leave the clinic, he approached birth control and its efficacy with scientific rigour, which had been lacking from some of Stopes work.

Within a few years of the first clinics being opened, political pressure from a variety of women's groups across the country would take the fight to the government. The main and quite simple argument was that maternal health centres and the government should be funding education and access to birth control, rather than the private clinics like those operated by Stopes and the Malthusian League. The first major organisation to express this position was the Women's Co-Operative Guild at their 1923 congress, this was followed by the Women's Labour Conference in 1925, the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, the Women's Liberal Federation and the National Council of Women.¹⁸⁶ The Health Minister at the time was J Wheatley, a Catholic, who would not waver on the policy of forbidding local

¹⁸³ Audrey Leathard, *The Fight for Family Planning: The Development of Family Planning Services in Britain 1921-74* (London: MacMillan, 1980), 15.

¹⁸⁴ Leathard, *The Fight for Family Planning*, 16.

¹⁸⁵ Leathard, *The Fight for Family Planning*, 16.

¹⁸⁶ While the Labour Women's Conference passed the motion for contraceptive advice to be provided by a paid health service, it was dropped from the main Labour Party conference. The main party believing that it would prove unpopular among the male working class. Leathard, *The Fight for Family Planning*, 33.

health officers from providing contraceptive advice.¹⁸⁷ What finally started to move the issue was another secularist, MP Ernest Thurtle.

Elected in 1923, Ernest Thurtle (11 November 1884 – 22 August 1954) was the Member of Parliament for Shoreditch and later Shoreditch and Finsbury from 1923 to 1954. He was born in the United States to British parents, who emigrated back to the UK when he was an infant.¹⁸⁸ Similar to Hobson, Thurtle “broke” with religion relatively early, and credited a number of books for that break, such as *Enigmas of Life* by W R Greg, but also a volume of essays by T H Huxley, and “Sixpenny Reprints” on science.¹⁸⁹ Despite a “protracted argument” with the local vicar after his absence from church was noticed, Thurtle “remained unconvinced and stayed outside the fold.”¹⁹⁰ He made his secularist stand stating that while he avoided “discussion of religious beliefs unless the subject is thrust upon me” he rejected “any censure” of such beliefs.¹⁹¹ Nonetheless, he still accepted that people were entitled to the “comfort” that they derived from religious beliefs.¹⁹² In *The Fellowship of Reason*, Thurtle examined different types of association. He recognised the benefit that people received from both political and religious association.¹⁹³ However, he went further and articulated his personal belief in freedom of thought. Rejecting “faithless” in a “restricted sense” Thurtle affirmed the positive value of “belief in human reason as a

¹⁸⁷ Leathard, *The Fight for Family Planning*, 33.

¹⁸⁸ He also described himself as an internationalist. Ernest Thurtle, *Time's Winged Chariot: Memories and Comments* (London: Richard Clay and Company, Ltd., 1945), 1.

¹⁸⁹ Thurtle, *Time's Winged Chariot*, 12-13.

¹⁹⁰ Thurtle, *Time's Winged Chariot*, 14.

¹⁹¹ Thurtle, *Time's Winged Chariot*, 14.

¹⁹² Thurtle, *Time's Winged Chariot*, 14.

¹⁹³ Ernest Thurtle, *The Fellowship of Reason* (London:Watts & Co, 1938), 3.

guide to truth.”¹⁹⁴ Thurtle also rejected the idea that the “battle for Reason” was over - pointing out all the other secularist issues still at stake: marriage laws, radio broadcasts biased towards religion, Sunday laws, education and the established church.¹⁹⁵ He also made a point of highlighting the enforced religion within the army. After stating his faith as ‘agnostic’ he was put on latrine duty every Sunday, until he asked to be put down as C of E to avoid it further.¹⁹⁶ Thurtle had many interests in parliament, such as advocating the removal of the death penalty in the army. However, he would also be a champion for women and for their access to birth control information.

Thurtle was the vice president of the Worker’s Birth Control Group and would continually pester parliament with questions from 1924 onwards. In 1924 he asked the Catholic Health Minister Wheatley in Parliament “if he will consider the desirability of allowing local authorities to impart to people who wish to obtain it information as to birth control methods without penalising such local authorities by withdrawing their maternity and child welfare grants?”¹⁹⁷ Wheatley’s response was to say that public funds should not be used for controversial subjects, without the “express direction from Parliament.”¹⁹⁸ Wheatley was then pressed further by Thurtle and another MP Miss Jewson about the resolution passed at the Women’s Labour Conference, and that middle class women could access this information

¹⁹⁴ Thurtle, *The Fellowship of Reason*, 5-6.

¹⁹⁵ Thurtle, *The Fellowship of Reason*, 9-24. This potentially indicates a slight shift in secular concerns from the legal and political sphere to wider social and cultural issues.

¹⁹⁶ Thurtle, *Time’s Winged Chariot*, 49.

¹⁹⁷ Birth Control, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th ser., vol. 176, col 2050.

¹⁹⁸ Birth Control, vol 176, col 2050.

privately but not the working class from their public services.¹⁹⁹ However, Wheatley did not alter his position.

The next opportunity to bring up the subject was the following month in August 1924, where Thurtle questioned whether Wheatley had the “executive power” to actually change the instructions to councils and local clinics.²⁰⁰ Wheatley plead ignorance but confirmed that if even if he could, he would not “introduce such a revolutionary change.”²⁰¹ With the change of government (and a new Health Minister, Chamberlain) in 1925, the pressure increased - councils themselves were now passing resolutions to allow their health officers to be ungagged.²⁰² Thurtle continued to press the new health minister on the restriction on clinics.

In June 1925, Thurtle asked Chamberlain if he would essentially introduce legislation to allow maternity centres to be allowed to distribute birth control information.²⁰³ Mr Chamberlain, like his predecessor, declined to answer and suggested instead that “Any question as to the possibility of arrangements being made for the discussion of this question on the Floor of the House should be addressed to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.”²⁰⁴ Referring the same question to the Prime Minister, Thurtle was rebuffed with the comment that there was no time to discuss the introduction of a bill (unless raised by the Ministry of Health).²⁰⁵ Being given the

¹⁹⁹ Birth Control, vol 176, col 2050.

²⁰⁰ Birth Control, vol 176, col 2909.

²⁰¹ Birth Control, vol 176, col 2909.

²⁰² Leathard, *The Fight for Family Planning*, 33.

²⁰³ Birth Control, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th ser., vol. 185, col 783.

²⁰⁴ Birth Control, vol. 185, col 783.

²⁰⁵ Birth Control, vol. 185, col 1292

runaround by the Minister for Health and the Prime Minister, Thurtle introduced his own private member's bill on birth control in February 1926.

Thurtle repeated many of the same arguments that other birth control advocates of the same era make in the ten-minute bill. For example, he made a plea for the “no more tragic figure in our civilisation than the overburdened mother of a large family.”²⁰⁶ However, he repeated the hypocrisy over access as well, raised by other secularists, that the same information was obtainable and perfectly uncontroversial for middle class women but somehow that changed when the access was for working class women. He quoted statistics from Westminster with the birth rate of 11.2 per thousand and Shoreditch at 25 per thousand, with the main difference between the boroughs being the relative rates of wealth.²⁰⁷ He declared that the difference of almost double the birth rate was “extraordinary” and an “indefensible anomaly”²⁰⁸ He made the argument that it did not involve an increased expenditure by the government as it is already engaged in a variety of public health measures from vaccination to personal hygiene, and only unblocked one new type of information.²⁰⁹ He concluded with the blunt statement, “these are the days of sex equality, and, if the House is honest, it must realise some implications of that sex equality.”²¹⁰ However, despite support from the Labour Women and being in a Labour government the bill failed. In the end, 44 Labour MPs voted against the bill, which raised the ire

²⁰⁶ Local Authorities (Birth Control) Enabling, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th ser., vol 191, col 851.

²⁰⁷ Local Authorities (Birth Control) Enabling, col 850.

²⁰⁸ Local Authorities (Birth Control) Enabling, col 850.

²⁰⁹ Local Authorities (Birth Control) Enabling, col 850.

²¹⁰ Local Authorities (Birth Control) Enabling, col 852.

of the Labour women who wanted to see it passed.²¹¹ The *Manchester Guardian*, reported that the bill had been non-partisan with “a large measure of support in all quarters.”²¹² However, the respondent to the bill Mr Barr was one of “only two clerical members who come to the House in the panoply of their vestments and canonicals” and also referred to Thurtle as a member of the Labour Party “that is to say, a member of the godless party which is suspected of having the destruction of Christianity as its chief object.”²¹³ This seemingly tongue in cheek description does serve to highlight the religious aspect to the birth control debate.

In an unlikely turn of events, the body that finally did manage to unblock councils from being able to offer birth control advice was the House of Lords. Even more unlikely, was that the policy was pursued, and ultimately passed, by a vice president of the Malthusian League, Lord Buckmaster. Influenced by his daughter, Margaret Pollock who was an activist in her own right for birth control, Buckmaster raised the issue in April 1926.²¹⁴ Buckmaster proposed that the subject needed “rational, restrained and intelligent discussion which can be obtained nowhere better than within the walls of your Lordships' House.”²¹⁵ He repeated the refrain of granting the same access to working women that middle class women enjoy, accompanied by statistics. He outright dismissed the religious arguments of

²¹¹ Leathard, *The Fight for Family Planning*, 34.

²¹² “Our Parliamentary Correspondent: Birth control”, *Manchester Guardian* 10 Feb 1926, 5.

²¹³ “Our Parliamentary Correspondent: Birth control”, 5.

²¹⁴ Leathard, *The Fight for Family Planning*, 39.

²¹⁵ Despite the rational, he recounted some fairly harrowing stories about women overburdened by pregnancy. Welfare Centres, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Lords, 5th ser., vol. 63, col 996.

selfishness or that people only wanted to pursue pleasure. He also countered the argument that poverty is noble:

“The people who talk like that have never known the struggle. It is the most degrading, the most demoralising struggle to which a human being can be put. To suggest that poverty is a good thing is an astonishing suggestion when you remember that every man, from the time he first begins to work until the time when he can work no more, spends the whole of his energies trying to escape from it.”²¹⁶

While stating that he had respect for religion, he countered many of the religious objections raised before, such as abstention. He also heavily criticised the Catholic Church’s stance, and stated that the: “Church must remember that it is no longer living in the days when it could compel Galileo to come upon his knees and say that the sun went round the earth, and that the earth did not go round the sun.”²¹⁷ He also made the secular case about respecting alternative beliefs, and stated that the Catholic Church: “have no power to impose their views upon us, and, deeply as I respect them and their faith, I am entitled to ask precisely the same respect for the opinions which I just as earnestly hold.”²¹⁸ He continued to argue that Catholics objecting to the use of their taxes for the provision of birth control information was “perfectly fantastic”.²¹⁹ The same arguments were never made in terms of not paying for judges that had to arbitrate divorce or people not paying for the military when they did not support war.

Lord Buckmaster stated that he could not reconcile the Catholic view because his views were different. That the main purpose of life was to “fight

²¹⁶ Welfare Centres, col 998.

²¹⁷ Welfare Centres, col 1005.

²¹⁸ Welfare Centres, col 1005.

²¹⁹ Welfare Centres, col 1005.

these very evils of pain and sickness and unhappiness” and to pursue scientific discovery and truth.²²⁰ He finished his speech by moving that any instructions imposed by the government on giving advice to women by local health practitioners be removed.²²¹ Needless to say, not all the Lords agreed with the argument.

The Marquess of Salisbury stated that the issue was not working class women who were overburdened, but the birth control movement was run by women who had already limited their families. In a reply that seemed to disregard the expansion in the electorate in the previous decade, he stated that the movement was supported by “women who do not do their duty, women who prefer their own ease to the obligations that they have undertaken, women whose duty, not only to their husbands, but to their country, is to bear children and who will not do so.”²²² Earl De La Warr countered many of the arguments made by Salisbury (and others), amongst them stating: “Just as men in the industrial world are no longer content to be mere wage slaves, so I believe women are no longer content to be mere machines for the production of unwanted children.”²²³ Earl Russell accused Salisbury of wanting women to be a “serf...of her husband or the state.”²²⁴ But he followed that with the secular point of freedom of conscious that it was “entirely with her own conscience, whether she will bear a child or not.”²²⁵ In

²²⁰ Welfare Centres, col 1006.

²²¹ In the end, it was quite a minor change, as the policy did not require health authorities to give advice or provide birth control. It was only giving the option to do so if they wished to offer such a service. Welfare Centres, col 1007.

²²² Salisbury also stated: “We may be deeply sorry for the unfortunate, the unhappy, the wretched and the miserable women, but we have no pity whatever for the lazy woman. And it is not only the lazy woman; it is the vicious woman.” Welfare Centres, col 1012-13.

²²³ Welfare Centres, col 1038.

²²⁴ Welfare Centres, col 1044.

²²⁵ He also emphasised that they were free to exercise it and make more frequent demands than in previous periods. Welfare Centres, col 1044.

the end, the motion succeeded, with 57 Lords voting in favour of the resolution and 44 against.

Despite the government's attempts to stymie any public health approaches to contraception, the medical community would begin to take an interest in the subject by the end of the 1920s. The World Population Conference in 1927 dropped the Malthusian and eugenic trappings in the hope that the scientific community would take an interest in it.²²⁶ The organisers, including Margaret Sanger "specifically wanted to generate interest in contraceptive research."²²⁷ At this point in time, there was very little empirical research on the efficacy of certain types of birth control - though Stopes would claim extremely good results from the Mothers' Clinics.²²⁸ One of the results of this push towards scientific investigation was the Birth Control Investigation Committee (BCIC), though it was co-founded by the British Eugenics Society as well.²²⁹ The BCIC would take an empirical approach, testing the various methods of birth control practices, technologies and chemical spermicides - as well as statistics data from the birth control clinics themselves.²³⁰ The professionalisation of the birth control clinics also helped remove the stigma of the commercialisation of often ineffective measures.²³¹ Alongside the BCIC, other birth control manuals became

²²⁶ Borrell, "Biologies and the Promotion of Birth Control Research," 60.

²²⁷ Borrell, "Biologies and the Promotion of Birth Control Research," 61.

²²⁸ According to Stopes, only 31 women out of 5,000 cases became pregnant (or less than one percent.) However, this was challenged by various investigators and put efficacy between 50 and 72%. Cohen, "Private Lives in Public Spaces," 109.

²²⁹ Borrell, "Biologies and the Promotion of Birth Control Research," 74.

²³⁰ Neushul, "Marie C Stopes and the Popularization of Birth Control Technology," 263. The BCIC would become the Scientific Advisory Committee of the Family Planning Association in 1939 and would go on to provide 'The Approved List of Contraceptives', those that were tested and were shown to be effective. Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, 123.

²³¹ Leathard, *The Fight for Family Planning*, 5.

available in the 1930s (which were less emotional and spiritual than Marie Stopes' works).²³² Dr Norman Haire's manual *Birth Control Methods* (1936) was based on his 20 year practice, 15 years alone spent on birth control.²³³ However, the BCIC's first book *The Chemical Control of Contraception* was dedicated to none other than Julian Huxley.²³⁴ Huxley, of course, was the president of the Eugenics Society and first president of the British Humanist Association. However, the struggle for equal access to information persisted, as Ernest Thurtle's wife would have reiterated that poorer women still struggled with access to contraception in 1937, in a report compiled for the Health Minister on abortion.²³⁵ She echoed the secularist argument that the refusal to expand birth control facilities due to the fear of a lower birth rate was "a counsel of despair."²³⁶ This demonstrated once again, that even though gains were made in a particular secularist campaign, it did not mean that the struggle was entirely over.

What the efforts of many secularists demonstrate is the growing acceptance to reduce the impact of religion when it came to people's right to information and the ability to choose what to do with that information. As many advocates put it, this was only going to be more expected in the case of women, given they were now part of the electorate. Though the subject matter was different, the same right to publish and have alternative views is

²³² Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, 124.

²³³ Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, 125.

²³⁴ Borrell, "Biologies and the Promotion of Birth Control Research," 75.

²³⁵ Mrs Ernest Thurtle would write a Minority Report which stated that many middle class women could easily find someone to help them terminate an unwanted pregnancy, whereas "facilities are not available to poorer women, who are driven to take the risks of less skillful treatment at the hands of non-medical abortionists." *The Abortion Report Legal, Medical, And Sociological Aspects: Clarification Of Law Recommended*, *The British Medical Journal* 4093 (1939), 1251.

²³⁶ *The Abortion Report Legal, Medical, And Sociological Aspects: Clarification Of Law Recommended*, 1251.

reminiscent of the blasphemy trials in the previous century. What made secularists especially useful in the case of birth control was their insistence on the equality of access to information, the rationalist perspective (and undermining of religious arguments), and most importantly, the ability to exercise their own conscience. While the Malthusian League could have been more effective as a campaign organisation, they kept the issue in public discourse until action was picked up by women's organisations in the 1920s. Additionally, they had their somewhat prolific output with the long running *The Malthusian/New Generation* and also printing and distributing over three million pamphlets from 1878 to 1922.²³⁷ Secularists like Thurtle and Lord Buckmaster pressed the case for women's groups in Parliament and the House of Lords, expressly using secular arguments (alongside evidence and statistics) to counter the religious arguments of declining morality and biblical sanction.

It took over fifty years from the founding of the Malthusian League to grudging acceptance by the government to allow the stigma free dissemination of birth control information. But the pressure was consistently applied, first by the eccentric efforts of the Malthusian League itself, but then the advocacy of secularists like Hobson, Robertson and Thurtle, to make explicitly secular arguments for freedom of conscience over religious proscription. They articulated the same views as the secular journals but their efforts and campaigning were largely outside the secularist organisations themselves. Contextualising the secular points of view, shows that secularist campaigns continued beyond Bradaugh. Though there were some large

²³⁷ J A Banks, *Victorian Values: Secularism and the Size of Families* (London: Routledge & Began Paul, 1981), 113.

meetings and open air proselytising (much to Marie Stopes dismay), the campaign to allow the free dissemination of birth control information was done through pamphleteering and political pressure.

Coda: Suffrage and the Conciliation Bill

As seen above, the support for contraception and family planning was just one way secularists argued for the expansion of rights and control for women over their own lives. However, in general secularists supported women's emancipation enthusiastically. From Bertrand Russell standing as the Liberal and suffragist candidate in Wimbledon in 1907 to Moncure Conway attending one of the first public meetings calling for women's suffrage - secularists were at the forefront arguing for women's right to vote

The support for women's issues in general also had long roots within secularist circles. One of the pioneer freethought advocates secularists never failed to mention was Mary Wollstonecraft. The author of the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* was a secularist hero, whereas she was shied away from by mainstream suffragettes and feminists because of her 'free union' and bearing a child out of wedlock.²³⁸ J M Robertson in *A Short History of Freethought*, called Wollstonecraft "a new promise of higher life" and credited her as a "freethinking deist of remarkable original faculty."²³⁹ In *The Vote for Women*, Robertson highlighted Wollstonecraft's conviction that if only women were given the same opportunity of education "as rational beings" that their equality would become apparent.²⁴⁰ However, Robertson also made the point

²³⁸ Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism*, 193.

²³⁹ Robertson, *A Short History of Freethought v. II*, 207.

²⁴⁰ J M Robertson, *The Vote for Women* (London: A & H Bradlaugh Bonner, 1897), 2.

that it was merely a problem with political will, rather than any supposed inferiority of women that was blocking women's equality.

However, secularists regularly argued the case for women's suffrage in the secularist press, often for the reason of reducing religious privilege in society. However, they also would point out the unreasonable or irrational positions that those arguing against suffrage would make. Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner in an edition of *The Reformer* questioned whether women should help canvass in elections, given that it basically supported men who did not support their participation in the democratic process.²⁴¹ She made the broad point that denying men women's help in elections would bring them "to their senses and so hasten the day of the enfranchisement of women."²⁴²

In the *South Place Magazine*, it was argued that the barring of women from the vote (or from different vocations), was "exactly the same principle" which forced religious viewpoints upon others.²⁴³ The author also pointed out the impracticality of stating that the woman's place is in the home as there were a million more women than men in the country.²⁴⁴ In response to the article in the following edition, the tenacity of women to access equal opportunities was described as walking "over red hot ploughshares to secure."²⁴⁵ She went on to list the inequalities that still existed, referring again to the inequality in divorce and custody over children.²⁴⁶ *The Secular Review*

²⁴¹ Hypatia Bradlaugh-Bonner, "Women's Work and Women's Worth," *The Reformer* 8, August 15, 1899, 468.

²⁴² Bradlaugh Bonner, "Women's Work and Women's Worth," 470. Nonetheless, she concludes that she thinks not participating would slow the march towards suffrage.

²⁴³ Ernest A Carr, "The Equality of Women," *South Place Magazine*, 11 (IX), August 1904, 163.

²⁴⁴ Carr, "The Equality of Women," 163.

²⁴⁵ Harriet McIlquham, "Correspondence," *South Place Magazine*, IX (12), September 1904, 191.

²⁴⁶ McIlquham, "Correspondence," 192.

in 1882 welcomed the change in law with the Married Women's Property Act as a "step in social progress."²⁴⁷ Like elsewhere, secularists were not afraid to point out the fallacies in common arguments against reasonable social changes, such as contraception, divorce and equality - or point out where women still struggled for justice.

J M Robertson also pointed out the "insufferable hypocrisy" of talking about women's place "having their proper sphere in the home" when many women at the time did not have that luxury and had to go to work outside the home alongside men.²⁴⁸ He also made the point that the law where married women were able to keep their earnings had changed, "which before had been denied them on the grounds of Christian principle."²⁴⁹ Chastising what would be his own party soon enough, he argued not for just married women but all women's enfranchisement as "the best" and "fairest" policy.²⁵⁰ Robertson also pointed out that Conservatives would have something to gain by enfranchising a certain segment of women, whereas the Liberals would lose out (and therefore would not support suffrage.)²⁵¹ But he was quick to acknowledge that, "neither side does there seem to be any thought of moral principle."²⁵²

However, Robertson goes further in stating that liberalism had to accept women's suffrage in *The Mission of Liberalism*, published after he was elected to Parliament. He stated that he felt that liberalism "must accept

²⁴⁷ G B, "Married Women's Property Act," *The Secular Review* XI (16), October 14, 1882: 246.

²⁴⁸ Robertson, *The Vote for Women* 7.

²⁴⁹ Robertson, *The Vote for Women* 3.

²⁵⁰ Robertson, *The Vote for Women*, 8.

²⁵¹ Robertson, *The Vote for Women*, 5.

²⁵² Robertson, *The Vote for Women*, 5.

women's suffrage" as it had supported further extensions of voting rights.²⁵³ He made the further point that suffrage was not dependent on the majority of women demanding suffrage as it could lead to the same discriminatory position for men.²⁵⁴ He also dismissed the argument that women could not have suffrage because they could not bear arms, by making the point that many men could not fight either and others *would not* fight (such as the clergy).²⁵⁵ He even dismissed the actions of militants as irrelevant concerning suffrage, that it was not right to deny the rights of many from the actions of a few.²⁵⁶ But Robertson was not alone in advocating women's suffrage within the political sphere.

To demonstrate the reach and advocacy of secularists outside of just secularist circles, one needs to look at H N Brailsford's central role within the failed Conciliation Bill. While writing for the *Tribune* (alongside L T hobhouse and J A Hobson), Brailsford and his wife would be active in suffrage activities.²⁵⁷ Jane, Brailsford's wife, was arrested and went on hunger strikes, though due to her position as the wife of a prominent journalist, she did not face force feeding and was released after only three days in prison.²⁵⁸ At various times Brailsford would use his position as a journalist and as the Secretary of the Conciliation Committee to denounce the treatment of suffragettes. Brailsford was even going to stand as a parliamentary candidate for the South Salford Women's Suffrage Association, but later withdrew when

²⁵³ J M Robertson, "The Mission of Liberalism" Young Liberal Pamphlets No. 6 (National League of Young Liberals: London), 6.

²⁵⁴ Robertson, "The Mission of Liberalism," 6.

²⁵⁵ Robertson, "The Mission of Liberalism," 6.

²⁵⁶ Robertson, "The Mission of Liberalism," 7.

²⁵⁷ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 57.

²⁵⁸ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 70.

both the Liberal and Tory candidates came out in support of women's suffrage.²⁵⁹

An article celebrating the passing of the equal Franchise Act, started with describing Brailsford as “that staunch friend of the suffrage movement”.²⁶⁰ In his obituary, it stated “to no one man do women owe more for their political enfranchisement”.²⁶¹ As argued earlier, Brailsford was a secularist, losing his religion early on and associating with secularists like Hobson for most of his life. While many individuals are identified as socialists or have associations with other political movements, their actions are seen through the lens of that affiliation. The same can then be argued for secular intent – individuals can have multiple identities and interests. For example, Brailsford's biographer states that the campaign for women's suffrage was “inseparable from wider efforts to extend economic and political power to the disadvantaged.”²⁶² Brailsford himself highlighted that women's right to vote touched upon “every moral and social issue of the time.”²⁶³ In the Reform Bill, Brailsford asks that the “most vital question” that could be asked of civilisation was “whether it shall be a society in which one sex is to govern the other unchecked.”²⁶⁴ Presumably, Brailsford thought not, contradicting generations of religious pronouncements on the family and the role of

²⁵⁹ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 79.

²⁶⁰ “Women's Victory and After”, *Manchester Guardian*, October 25, 1928, 13. Looking ahead, Brailsford stated that he noticed that the invitation to the celebration of the passing of the act did not contain what was going to happen afterwards. He believed that it was only the beginning of the changes to women's rights.

²⁶¹ “Henry Noel Brailsford: A Leading Progressive Writer,” 3.

²⁶² Leventhal, 66.

²⁶³ H N Brailsford, *The Conciliation Bill: An Explanation and Defence* (London: The Women's Press, 1910), 16.

²⁶⁴ H N Brailsford, *Women and the Reform Bill* (London: National Union of women's Suffrage Societies, 1911), 1.

women. He echoed secularist sentiments further by calling the “whole inferior status of women...a continual insult.”²⁶⁵ Later, while addressing the flaws in only allowing certain segments of the population to vote, he cites the “irrational male fear of a majority of women.”²⁶⁶ In all his writing on suffrage, Brailsford did not ask for permission or support from organised religious bodies, instead he was forthright in the demand that the continued suppression of women’s right to vote was an indignity to women and unjust.

Brailsford would often appear to comment in the *Manchester Guardian* and likewise, his appearances on suffrage platforms would be noted (often with his wife). Like other secularists, Brailsford and his wife pointed out hypocrisy where they found it. In an outdoor speech in March 1912, Jane Brailsford critiqued comments made “against women who are working and suffering, who are devoting themselves to exactly the same cause to which and for which men in the past have sacrificed themselves and which they have received the applause of history.”²⁶⁷ At another address in Manchester, Brailsford gave an update on the Conciliation Bill, receiving a “hearty reception.”²⁶⁸

The Conciliation Bill was an attempt to give women with certain property qualifications the vote. It did not entitle married women to vote, as their husbands would already be registered to the property.²⁶⁹ Brailsford (as the secretary for the Conciliation Committee) with another journalist's help (H

²⁶⁵ Brailsford, *Women and the Reform Bill*, 6.

²⁶⁶ Brailsford, *Women and the Reform Bill*, 9.

²⁶⁷ “Militant Suffragists: Speeches at a London Meeting: Unyielding Attitude,” *Manchester Guardian*, March 8, 1912: 6.

²⁶⁸ “Women’s Suffrage Bill: Manchester Federation’s Progress,” *Manchester Guardian*, October 30, 1911, 3.

²⁶⁹ Though, in the article the plea for suffrage for all women was made. The Churchill Archives, CHAR 2/47/19 H N Brailsford, “The ‘Conciliation’ Bill: Is it Democratic?”

W Massingham who Brailsford worked with on the *Nation*) approached Churchill, then the Home Secretary, about reaching an agreement with the militant suffragettes.²⁷⁰ What at first seemed like a cordial and supportive exchange of letters, later turned into bitter accusations. Brailsford first met Churchill on March 15, 1910, to talk about more humane treatment for imprisoned suffragettes.²⁷¹ They would exchange letters and have face to face conversations over the next several months, discussing the Conciliation Bill and Churchill's support for it.

In April 1910, Brailsford wrote to Churchill, asking permission to quote him as having general support for the Conciliation Bill.²⁷² Churchill replied to Brailsford stating that he would be willing to be quoted as "welcoming the formation of the Committee and favouring its solution on non-party-lines."²⁷³ In another letter, Brailsford plainly stated what the failure of "the refusal of facilities" for the bill would mean: "the end of the truce, and the renewal of the old bitter struggle."²⁷⁴ Brailsford wrote to Lady Constance Lytton, and summarised his conversations over the matter with Churchill. He concluded that Churchill had "been consulted...at every step."²⁷⁵ Finally, Brailsford wrote to Churchill (after the Home Secretary revealed the depth of his opposition) and scathingly stated: "I have spent a great deal of time in my talks with [the militants] in trying to persuade them that they take an unduly cynical view of politicians. You have made me a convert to their bitter reading of human

²⁷⁰ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 71.

²⁷¹ Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, 71.

²⁷² The Churchill Archive, CHAR 2/47/1, Letter from Brailsford to Churchill, 13 April 1910.

²⁷³ The Churchill Archive, CHAR 2/47/61, Letter from Churchill to Brailsford, 19 April 1910.

²⁷⁴ The Churchill Archive, CHAR 2/47/9-10, Letter from Brailsford to Churchill, 19 April 1910.

²⁷⁵ The Churchill Archive, CHAR 2/47/70-71, Letter from Brailsford to Lytton, 15 July 1910.

nature.”²⁷⁶ In the letter to Lytton on July 10, he also stated that Churchill’s conduct had been “treacherous” and could not believe that he turned out to be a “jubilant and malignant adversary” of the Conciliation Bill.²⁷⁷ Despite the failure of the bill (and the resumption of militant suffrage activity), in an article in the *Manchester Guardian*, Brailsford credited that the committee “achieved much more than most experienced politicians thought possible” but the only way forward was in the hands of a political party.²⁷⁸ Though it ultimately did not get passed, it was an important attempt to bridge the divide between factions within the suffrage movement. Brailsford as secretary of the Conciliation Committee, had a lead role in attempt to gain political support for the bill.

Brailsford was also active in the response to Black Friday on 18 November 1910, where women campaigning for suffrage in front of Parliament were attacked by the police. Brailsford wrote in his capacity as secretary of the Conciliation Committee about the treatment of the women by the police. The Committee collected testimony from the women from the Women’s Social and Political Union who formed part of the deputation to Parliament. He noted that from “previous experience” police knew that the women would be “persistent and determined” in accomplishing their goals.²⁷⁹ He recounted that they were “flung hither and thither amid moving traffic” but

²⁷⁶ The Churchill Archive, CHAR 2/47/726-28, Letter from Brailsford to Churchill, 13 July 1910.

²⁷⁷ The Churchill Archive, CHAR 2/47/70-71, Letter from Brailsford to Lytton, 15 July 1910.

²⁷⁸ “Women’s Suffrage: A New Election Policy Proposed,” *Manchester Guardian*, May 16, 1912, 5.

²⁷⁹ H N Brailsford, Treatment of the Women’s Deputation of November 18th, 22nd and 23rd by the police, 1.

there were “graver” charges as well.²⁸⁰ He made the point that the actions of the police were excessive, that they terrorised the women involved and “intended to inflict injury and pain.”²⁸¹ Recounting various ways that the police attacked and violently assaulted the deputation, the complaint he made was the “long-drawn out agony of the delayed arrest, and the continuous beating and pinching.”²⁸² Finally, he concluded the report with instances of sexual assault, related by women “only with the greatest reluctance”, such as a police officer telling other men to treat the women “as they wished.”²⁸³ Brailsford as the head of the Committee used his position to highlight the particularly brutal treatment by the police. It was an important stance to take, to fight for the rights of women (and all involved) to have the right to campaign and petition Parliament. It is another extension of the right to free speech that was important to secularists throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Coda: Divorce law liberalisation

The same sentiments that saw secularists interested in the free and frank discussion of contraception can also be reflected in their approach to divorce law. The humanitarian plea for the normalisation of existing practices was echoed in the writing on the subject in the secularist press and by the likes of Henry Snell in the House of Lords. Perhaps as well, with Annie Besant as

²⁸⁰ Brailsford, Treatment of the Women’s Deputation of November 18th, 22nd and 23rd by the police, 1.

²⁸¹ Brailsford, Treatment of the Women’s Deputation of November 18th, 22nd and 23rd by the police, 2.

²⁸² Brailsford, Treatment of the Women’s Deputation of November 18th, 22nd and 23rd by the police, 3.

²⁸³ Brailsford, Treatment of the Women’s Deputation of November 18th, 22nd and 23rd by the police, 6. This included the suspicion of plain-clothed agents attempts to lift up various women’s dresses.

such a popular secularist advocate, her own personal story would have been well known within the secularist communities.

In the *Secular Review* the point was put plainly: “The marriage law was altered to suit the emergencies of modern times, insomuch as it has become optionally a civil contract; by the Draconian nature of the divorce law has remained intact.”²⁸⁴ Relating the issue back to religion, “Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder” put the liberalisation of divorce alongside other areas where the church ruled over civil society.²⁸⁵ The discussion around divorce law in the nineteenth and twentieth century was heavily influenced by the Anglican Church and its “doctrinal schisms.”²⁸⁶ Despite several commissions and recommendations, reform was slow as the various Christian churches did not want “to recognize any divorce at all.”²⁸⁷ However, very much like the discussions around birth control, the public at large wanted the law reformed.²⁸⁸

In another edition of the *Secular Review*, in response to the comment by Lord Queensbury, Angus Mackintosh advocated for secularists to organise precisely to change the divorce law.²⁸⁹ The National Secular Society also aimed for “A Reform of the Marriage Laws, especially to secure equal justice for husband and wife, and a reasonable liberty and facility of

²⁸⁴ Lord Queensbury, “Marriage and Divorce,” *The Secular Review* XI (27), December 30, 1882: 430.

²⁸⁵ The author highlighted the inequality in the law, stating that while men can divorce their wives for adultery, wives could not divorce their husbands for the same reason. Queensbury, “Marriage and Divorce,” 430.

²⁸⁶ B H Lee, *Divorce Law Reform in England* (London: Peter Owen Ltd, 1974), 19.

²⁸⁷ Lee, *Divorce Law Reform in England*, 19.

²⁸⁸ Lee, *Divorce Law Reform in England*, 19.

²⁸⁹ Angus Mackintosh, “Marriage and Divorce,” *The Secular Review* XII (1), January 6, 1883: 12.

divorce.”²⁹⁰ In the *RPA Annual* of 1905, the absurdity of the situation was pointed out, much like in the case of contraception. The author stated “for something like fifty to seventy-five percent of divorce cases are carried through by the consent of both parties”.²⁹¹ The main “unedifying” point being that the only state of affairs that the various ecclesiastical bodies could agree on was that adultery was the only thing that mattered when it came to the dissolution of marriage.²⁹² In the preamble of the 1935 Divorce Reform Bill, the sponsor A P Herbert pointed out that the law forced “those who wished to bring an end to the marriage....to take one of two alternatives - either one must commit adultery or one must commit perjury.”²⁹³ Much the same was echoed by Ernest Thurtle, who stated that even modest reforms were opposed by the Anglican and Catholic Churches.²⁹⁴ He also highlighted the issue that the churches were “much less concerned with the pleas of deserted women and others enduring hardship and suffering” than they were about maintaining their church’s position.²⁹⁵ The root of the issue was once again a religious privileging of the sanctity of marriage. As secularists did not have to align their moral views with those of the established churches, they saw only a need to reform.

²⁹⁰ Humanist Reference and Archives, Conway Hall, London. Box NSS/8/11, No. 10: Advertisement contained in copy of “Freethinker,” of 28th February 1915.

²⁹¹ E S P Haynes, “The Churches and Divorce,” *The RPA Annual* (1921), 51.

²⁹² Haynes, “The Churches and Divorce,” 51.

²⁹³ Lee, *Divorce Law Reform in England*, 16.

²⁹⁴ Thurtle, *The Fellowship of Reason*, 12.

²⁹⁵ Thurtle, *The Fellowship of Reason*, 12.

Conclusion

The secularist positions on issues affecting women were relatively straightforward as they did not have to worry about the Christian biblical position. However, they were also a continuation of many of the same arguments that the nineteenth century secularists fought for. Ideas around freedom of thought, the ability to publish without fear of obscenity charges and the same treatment regardless of class or wealth. Perhaps because some of these early twentieth century issues were critical to women, and the existing secularist historiography tends to focus on white, working class men, this area of research has been undervalued as part of secularist history.

Many of the ways they approached the issues also mirrored the advocacy of the nineteenth century, such as campaign groups, lectures, pamphlets, journals and general publication of their positions. However, what set them apart from the nineteenth century was their participation in national campaigns that were not solely secularist in nature. While birth control advocacy remained for a long period of time within the pages of *The Malthusian*, with the instigation (and competition) from Marie Stopes, the campaign became much larger. The opening of birth control clinics and the interest in the investigation of birth control methods would affect people way beyond the secularists themselves.

Secularists understood that the arguments against women's suffrage were arguments they had seen before against universal male suffrage. They could cut through the weak arguments by those opposing suffrage with rational assessments of contemporary life. For example, they pointed out that most working class women had to work outside the home, undercutting the

argument that women's place was in the home. They also, like Brailsford, used their connections to try and reach a compromise and break the deadlock over women's suffrage through the Conciliation Bill or highlight where the activities of the police were used to intimidate and harass the women from the Women's Social and Political Union.

Despite being part of a larger campaigning environment, many of their arguments maintained a very secularist viewpoint. It was not enough to have access to contraception, it was the principle of the dissemination of information (including the freedom to publish and distribute such information), that was a key issue. As well, it was the de-privileging of a religious perspective that was distinctly secularist in tone (also evident in the arguments made around divorce or women's place in the home). No doubt there are other areas to explore the secularist point of view within twentieth century social issues, divorce and marriage law being a prominent example where a secularist perspective could give wider insight into the reform process.

Conclusion: a changed time for the secular movement

This thesis set out to show that the secularist movement did not decline in the nineteenth century, but rather had different interests and tactics to those of the celebrated secularists of the nineteenth century. It also sought to suggest that the separation of the many terms used within the movement was artificial. This language evolved throughout the history of the various radical political elements in the UK from the eighteenth century onwards: Infidel became freethinker, which became rationalist, then became secularist, and finally humanist. They are a continuum of terms, all of which, over time, advocated a worldview based on rational tests and freedom of thought and belief. Artificial separation of these terms, as in Budd's *Varieties of Unbelief*, has only served to accentuate the narrative of decline.

The history of the UK secular movement has still only been partially explored. While the nineteenth century has dominated the historiography, with the eighteenth century brought in as supporting weight and precursor, the twentieth century has rarely been discussed with the same level of detail or rigour. Instead, it has been positioned as 'the end of an era': the twilight of a once vibrant, active and purposeful movement. Only the artefacts of the nineteenth century movement stand out as purely secularist, with the perceived fortunes tied to the National Secular Society and its first president, Charles Bradlaugh.

However, this position places too much emphasis on only one of the directions that secularist activism could take. The historiography has undervalued the concept of secularism as defined by G J Holyoake, and focused

on the atheism of Charles Bradlaugh. However, Holyoake's definition of secularism survived the bombast and the blasphemy trials of the nineteenth century to craft a more inclusive type of secularism in the twentieth century. As set out at the beginning of this dissertation, Holyoake's definition of secularism was expansive: "The doctrine that mortality should be based solely on regard to the well-being of mankind in the present life, to the exclusion of all considerations drawn from belief in God or in a future state."¹ It does not specify in what particular area it should be applied; rather the importance is on present life. It does not allude to the blasphemy trials that were reminiscent of the nineteenth century, though clearly that was a possible outcome given the historical evolution of blasphemy and obscenity in the UK due to the English Reformation. As I have shown, the historiography has been captured by the movement's own sense of change and a hagiographical approach to the movement's many figures. As such, it was unable to fully appreciate that another generation of secularists were fighting for further freedoms for those in the UK and internationally, and had embedded secularist values in their campaigning efforts.

In the nineteenth century, Bradlaugh made important strides for secularists, became the first known atheist MP, and worked to rewrite legislation that prevented secularists from benefitting from the protections of the law. However, it was not the final contribution that secularists would make in political life. In the twentieth century, there were a series of journalists, politicians and policymakers who would continue the tradition of questioning religious privilege when it came to the law, inside and outside of Parliament.

¹ Simpson, and Weiner eds, *Oxford English Dictionary: volume XIV Rob – Sequyle*, 848.

J M Robertson followed in the footsteps of Bradlaugh and entered Parliament in 1906. Henry Snell was elected in 1933 as MP for Woolwich. Henry Thurtle was elected as the MP for Shoreditch for the first time in 1923. They were able to use their position to critique and advance issues that were important to them as secularists

These new MPs were also supported by the efforts of radical journalists, who were actively engaged in the formulation of Labour policies, such as J A Hobson and H N Brailsford. Their socialist and liberal politics were informed by secular values. They argued for rational and humane tests in economics and policies affecting the working poor. L T Hobhouse and J M Robertson both articulated the modern conception of liberalism. Hobhouse also made the argument, using the new discipline of sociology, that religion was just another cultural artefact of human life. It was not divine and coercion of belief was immoral.

More so than nineteenth century secularists, most of these individuals did not have to fight blasphemy charges or fight for their right to sit in Parliament. They were able to use Parliament and the machinery of state to advance secular policies. This extended even to the National Secular Society, under the guidance of G W Foote, which finally overcame the legal ambiguity of leaving financial legacies to secular organisations. The organisation specifically changed the way it would collect legacies through a company, and used the new Company's Act to secure future financial security. They waited for a case that would be challenged in the courts, in order to overturn the nineteenth century problem of individuals being declared posthumously 'unsound' when they left legacies to a specifically

secularist organisation. It did not require an open air lecture, but rather patience and the sensible application of existing law to fight their case for them. The historiography consistently describes the National Secular Society as an organisation in decline, but the calculated campaign shows an organisation that was willing to adapt to new circumstances and make progress in other areas where the nineteenth century secularists failed.

Secularists also looked beyond their borders. As secularists, they offered unique critiques of imperialism. Hobson, Brailsford and Robertson argued against the Boer War and the First World War as they saw them as extensions of imperialist interest. Hobson recognised that one of the best ways to combat the suppression of different ethnic and religious (and non-religious) groups was through international agreements and norms. The international secularist organisations, through the international freethought conferences, recognised the growing threat of fascism in the 1930s. They highlighted fascism's threat against freedom of thought and belief and expressed solidarity with the freethinkers in countries where fascism was taking root. Secularism on an international stage also meant that Hobson, Brailsford and others advocated for greater transparency for foreign affairs at home as well as greater protection against future wars internationally.

In the early twentieth century, secularists were actively involved in progressive causes, such as women's rights, including suffrage and access to contraception or family planning advice. They were able to see the rational economic reasons for the decline in the birth rate across the country, and were not persuaded by the rhetoric around the decline in the 'English race'. As such, they were in a position to argue for freedom of thought and belief

over the issue of contraception. They articulated that it was individual choice that should matter when it came to a woman's right to limit her family size, rather than religious proscriptions. This is a direct embodiment of the secularist principles that Holyoake articulated. Secularists consistently argued that what mattered was the alleviation of suffering in this life, both in regards to women's health and to a family's economic prospects. Hobson, Russell and Thurtle were all able to argue either in Parliament or as part of the National Birth Rate Commission the secularist position for birth control. In addition, Brailsford was able to use his connections and influence within the political sphere to make the first major attempt at granting the franchise to women with the Conciliation Bill. He also highlighted the unjust treatment of women at the hands of police at a political demonstration.

In both these cases, secularists were able to apply rational tests to the issues at hand, and were not bound by Victorian morality or Christian doctrine on the issues. They were able to articulate their argument through the lens of an individual's thoughts and beliefs, and because of this were able to articulate a consistent position. Secularists did not just want to criticise religion in a way that would have caused a blasphemy or obscenity charge in the century before, rather they used reasoned arguments and the inherent contradictions of all religions existing together in society to make their points clear. In turn, their arguments were much more humane than the religious positions (both Anglican and Catholic) which emphasised biblical values and no practical help when confronting issues around family size. Additionally, secularists were able to articulate the social reality and emphasised safe

access, again making their arguments more rational and humane than their religious counterparts.

Finally, outside of the main organisations or those who readily identified as secularists, authors were making the same arguments. Wilfred Scawen Blunt could mimic Milton's sympathetic Satan in his poetry or articulate a secularist defense of Islam as being just as spiritually fulfilling as Christianity. It was a secularist position as it did not privilege one religion over the other, but rather advocated tolerance for differing religious points of view. Ivy Compton-Burnett was called wicked for having the rationalist or an atheist as the protagonist in her novels. Her stories refused to acknowledge that Providence would save pious characters or that being devout was a necessarily good trait. Her writing was secularist as religious morality did not dictate the plot or outcome of any story. Marjorie Bowen would employ elements of the Christian religion as just another way to frighten her readers. She reflected the thoughts of L T Hobhouse's sociology - in that religion was just another lens through which to view society. All of these writers did not have to be part of the secularist establishment to be secularists. In a similar way, the *Thinker's Library* would popularise secularists on a huge scale, selling hundreds of thousands of copies over the series, which included Charles Bradlaugh, Joseph McCabe and others as part of the collection.

Ultimately, 'decline' is far too simplistic a term for what occurred within the secularist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Overall, the twentieth century saw incredible innovations in how secularist arguments were made across politics, internationalism, and social and cultural life. It built on the successes of the nineteenth century by using

Parliament and the courts to make long-lasting changes to the state that furthered secularist aims. It used civil society groups to pressure government from the outside. Finally, it carried on the publishing efforts of the nineteenth century, but in a way that could reach new audiences outside the narrow secularist societies.

The limitations of this work are that there were only so many secularists that one could feasibly examine in one dissertation. As most of the historiography focuses on decline, new secularists needed to be identified. The examples chosen came out of natural connections, starting with J A Hobson who was an appointed lecturer at the South Place Ethical Society, although there were a few, like F J Gould and J M Robertson, who have some historical attention on their twentieth century activities, most notably articulated by Odin Dekkers and Susannah Wright. It was also limited by the need to argue that these individuals were secularists to start with, as it was often not part of their biographical narrative or really reflected within the relevant historiographies. For example, J A Hobson is often written about from the perspective of economic, social or liberal history - though for the most part his secularist history is missing (despite his lifelong affiliation with secularist organisations and campaigns). With time, other circles and links between other secularists may become clear. With a perspective focused on the beliefs, activities and association of individuals, perhaps greater numbers of people will be identified as secularists for what they believed and advocated during their lives. As a result, a richer understanding of the twentieth century secularist movement can be articulated.

As such, there are several recommendations for future research. The first and most obvious is to look for the continuation of ideas and activism between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, rather than to assume decline. Additionally, research into the secularist groups that did continue post-Bradlaugh might highlight more secularists who were involved in other political or social campaigns. One such example was the campaign for secular education, which continued beyond the nineteenth century, and was rooted in both old and new secularist organisations. Research could investigate these wider networks, to identify other secularists involved in those campaigns. For example, Karl Pearson who was involved in eugenics and birth control (and a pioneering statistician), also wrote *The Ethic of Freethought*. Where financial and membership records exist, research could focus on the support network around secularists (such as Charles Bowman).

As well, future research could examine the language of secularism and how it was used to argue for secularist values, against religious privilege or positions. As already discussed in relation to the issue of contraception, Ernest Thurtle continued to argue for an end to Sunday Trading laws (which was an issue for nineteenth century secularists). However, he also played a major part in ending capital punishment for desertion or cowardice in the military. The campaigners left little information behind of how they organised, though it is known that Thurtle as an MP was “at the forefront of the agitation.”² In a parliamentary session in 1926, in one of the attempts to abolish the death penalty for refusing to fight or other derelictions of duty, Thurtle rooted his argument in secularist language. He referred to human

² John McHugh, “The Labour Party and the Parliamentary Campaign to Abolish the Military Death Penalty, 1919-1930,” *The Historical Journal* 42 (1999): 234.

causes, rather than any other, which dictated both a soldier's actions and society's response: "They are due more to human weakness than to any vicious intent. We say that it is an outrage on elementary human justice that such offences should be punishable by the irrevocable penalty of death."³ He further emphasised the medical and environmental differences between people and that "Nature is by no means equal in the way in which she deals out these qualities."⁴ He made the same reference to nature for the capital offence of falling asleep while on duty: "Is it not quite obvious that when a soldier, worn out with fatigue and with lack of sleep, succumbs to it, he is just obeying the ordinary, elementary dictates of nature and cannot really help himself?"⁵ Again, what Thurtle demonstrated with his arguments was that there was a human choice to be made: that human justice needed to be rooted in the real world, and take account of medical conditions and the environment in which a soldier was raised.

³New Clause (Abolition of the Death Penalty for Certain Offenses), *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 4th Ser., vol. 194, col 1229. He also made the argument that admirals and other senior military officials were too out of touch to look at such an issue objectively..

⁴ He gave several examples of how the environment would affect a soldier's ability to deal with stress on the battlefield: "Take those two types of persons. Surely, other things being equal, even in the matter of natural endowments, the man who has good food all his life and who has lived an open-air life must inevitably be better fitted and better adapted to stand the intense strain of modern battle than the other man, who has been bred in the slums and undernourished all his life, yet you find that exactly the same kind of code is applicable to each class of person." New Clause (Abolition of the Death Penalty for Certain Offenses), vol. 194, col 1232.

⁵ He often related the same 'offence' back to life in the Commons: "Let this Committee remember the few all-night Sittings that it has to endure. When this House has been up just for about 16 hours and kept out of its bed five or six hours more than is usual, you find all over it Members falling asleep, because they cannot help themselves. If this House could be kept up for about 96 hours, without any sleep at all, I will guarantee to say that, willy nilly, 75 or 80 per cent of the Members would be falling into deep slumber. [An HON MEMBER: "Not if there was a death penalty attached! "] They would. The soldiers do not merely have to remain up for 24 or 36 hours. In many cases they were practically without sleep for a week or even more than a week." New Clause (Abolition of the Death Penalty for Certain Offenses), vol. 194, col 1234.

Continuing to look for secularists outside the narrow band of secularist organisations would benefit the historiography. Within literature, there is a great deal of continuity in thought across a wide range of authors. Could this be expanded to art or music as well? With this wider perspective of what secularist interests could include, historians could examine the issues that the movement itself was criticised for - being focused on its own specific secularist goals and not considering the wider movements at the time. Finally, looking more closely at the civil society groups, political policy makers and those individuals involved in party politics, including those who became MPs and Lords. What did they scrutinise? What committees were they on and what could they have influenced? What secularist arguments did they make when making recommendations to the wider government? This, I believe, would make for an alternative history of the secularist movement of insiders, rather than outsiders, to counter the idea of decline in the movement as a whole.

I believe this dissertation has contributed to the wider understanding of the secular movement. Firstly, it has questioned the idea of decline and discovered a continuity of activism into the twentieth century. It argues that the nineteenth century was not the only time where secularists could shape events and force political changes that benefitted not just the non-religious, but those who were not part of larger religious organisations. Secondly, it has highlighted where secularists could have a plurality of identities. They could be both socialist and secularists, with their ideas critiquing not only their opposition but their own party beliefs as well. Their perspectives as secularists also give them a unique vantage point to critique long held

assumptions, such as imperialism or patriarchal ideas around women, or even the death penalty. They can often be seen as the first articulation of progressive ideas around issues such as access to contraception. This dissertation has shown that you cannot just examine secularist organisations themselves to understand secularist activism or how secularist ideas could spread. The movement potentially became more diffuse, with a smaller central core, but it had the potential to reach a much larger audience than that of the nineteenth century.

Finally, it has demonstrated that there are other voices than Bradlaugh's who made important contributions to the movement, and which have often been overlooked by their own organisations. It demonstrates that you cannot solely rely on the secularist press to understand how secularists were advancing a non-religious worldview. It is only by embracing a more expansive view of what constitutes the secular movement, that we will be able to have a more complete picture of the history of secularism.

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