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# Mid-Nineteenth-Century Secularism as Modern Secularity

## 1 Introduction

In the early 1850s, a new philosophical, social, and political movement evolved from the Freethought tradition of Thomas Paine, Richard Carlile, Robert Owen, and the radical periodical press. The movement was called “Secularism.”<sup>1</sup> Its founder was George Jacob Holyoake (1817–1906) (Grugel 1976, 2–3).<sup>2</sup> Holyoake was a former apprentice whitesmith turned Owenite social missionary, “moral force” Chartist, and radical editor and publisher. Given his early exposure to Owenism and Chartism,<sup>3</sup> Holyoake had become a Freethinker. With his involvement in Freethought publishing, he became a moral convert to atheism. However, his experiences with virulent proponents of atheism or infidelity and the hostile reactions to them on the part of the state, church, and press induced him to develop in 1851–1852 the new creed and movement he called Secularism.

In retrospect, Holyoake claimed that the words “Secular,” “Secularist,” and “Secularism” were used for the first time in his periodical *The Reasoner* (founded in 1846), from 1851 through 1852, “as a general test of principles of conduct apart from spiritual considerations,” to describe “a new way of thinking,” and to define “a movement” based on that thinking, respectively (Holyoake 1896a,

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1 The foundational texts of Secularism include Holyoake (1854) and Holyoake (1870).

2 In addition to Grugel’s biography, for biographical sketches of Holyoake, see Royle (1974, esp. at 3–6, 72–74, and 312); and McCabe (1908).

3 Chartism was a working-class movement that emerged in 1836 and was most active between 1838 and 1848. The aim of the Chartists was to gain political rights and influence for the working classes. Chartism got its name from the formal petition, or People’s Charter, that listed the six main aims of the movement. These were: 1) a vote for all men over twenty-one, 2) the secret ballot, 3) no property qualification to become an MP, 4) payment for MPs, 5) electoral districts of equal size, 6) annual elections for Parliament.

The movement presented three petitions to Parliament – in 1839, 1842 and 1848 – but each of these was rejected. The last great Chartist petition was collected in 1848 and represented, it was claimed, six million signatories. The Chartists planned to deliver the petition to Parliament, after a peaceful mass meeting on Kennington Common in London. The government sent 8,000 soldiers, but only 20,000 Chartists turned up on a cold rainy day. The demonstration was deemed a failure, and the rejection of this final petition marked the end of Chartism. Many excellent works on Chartism have been published, including Chase (2007) and Royle (1996).

45–49). In using these new derivatives, he redefined in positive terms what had been an epithet for the meaner concerns of worldly life or the designation of a lesser state of religiosity within the western Christian imaginary. His bold claims for the original mobilization of the terms are corroborated by the Oxford English Dictionary. Never before Holyoake's mobilization had "secular" been used as an adjective to describe a set of principles or "secularism" as a noun to positively delineate principles of morality and epistemology, or as a movement to carry them forth.

Like Thomas H. Huxley's later agnosticism, Holyoake's Secularism deemed that whatever could not be "tested by the experience of this life" should simply be of no concern to the science practitioner, progressive thinker, moralist, or politician. The "Secularist" was one who restricted efforts to "that province of human duty which belongs to this life" (*Reasoner* 1852, 12: 34). But, as in Huxley's agnosticism, atheism was not a prerequisite for Secularism. Secularism represented "unknowingness without denial" (Holyoake 1896a, 36–37). Holyoake did warn against the affirmation of deity and a future life, given that reliance on them might "betray us from the use of this world" to the detriment of "progress" and amelioration, but belief in the supernatural was regarded as a matter of speculation or opinion to which one was entitled, unless such beliefs precluded positive knowledge or action.

It is important to distinguish Holyoake's brand of Secularism from that of his eventual rival for the leadership of the Secularist movement, Charles Bradlaugh. Unlike Bradlaugh, for Holyoake the goal of Freethought under Secularism was no longer first and foremost the elimination of religious ideology from the public sphere. While Bradlaugh maintained that the primary task of Secularism was to destroy theism – otherwise the latter would impede the progress of the new secular order – Holyoake envisioned Secularism as superseding or superintending both theism *and* atheism – from the standpoint of a new scientific, educative, and moral system. Holyoake insisted that a new, secular moral and epistemological system could be constructed alongside, or above, the old religious one.<sup>4</sup>

Mid-century Secularism thus represents an important stage of nineteenth-century Freethought – an intervention between the earlier infidelity of Richard Carlile and "Bradlaugh's rather crude anti-clericism and love of Bible-bashing" (Lightman 1989, 287–88). While he inherited much from the earlier infidelity of Carlile and Owen, Holyoake offered an epistemology and morality independent of Christianity, yet supposedly no longer at war with it. By the term "secular,"

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<sup>4</sup> Colin Campbell (1971, 54) referred to these two approaches as the "substitutionist" (Holyoake) and "eliminationist" (Bradlaugh) camps.

Holyoake did not mean the mere absence or negation of religion or belief, but rather a substantive category in its own right. Holyoake imagined and fostered the co-existence of secular and religious elements subsisting under a common umbrella.

In this essay, I examine the development of Secularism as a movement and creed, but also connect it to modern notions of the secular and secularity. I begin by briefly sketching Holyoake's periodical and pamphleteering career in the 1840s, distinguishing it from that of another prominent freethinker, Charles Southwell, and showing how Holyoake eventually developed Secularism as a moral program – to escape the stigma of infidelity, but more importantly to move Freethought toward a positive declaration of principles as opposed to the mere negation of theism. I treat Holyoake's Secularism in terms of class conciliation between artisan-based Freethinkers and middle-class skeptics, literary radicals, and liberal theists. I continue by outlining the principles of Secularism as sketched by Holyoake in several formats and across four decades, which also amounts to a brief word history of the associated term. I then distinguish Holyoake's branch of Secularism from that led by Bradlaugh, especially on the questions of atheism and sexual policy. I conclude with further remarks regarding the significance of mid-century Secularism as a historic moment inaugurating modern secularity.

## 2 From Infidelity to Moral Philosophy

A series of freethought periodicals from whence Secularism emerged began as working-class productions aimed at working-class readers and others with interests in the condition of the working classes. By the early 1850s, the policies of Secularism changed that exclusive basis. In 1841, the former Owenite Social Missionary, Charles Southwell – with Maltus Questell Ryall, “an accomplished iconoclast, fiery, original, and, what rarely accompanies those qualities, gentlemanly,” and William Chilton, a radical publisher and “absolute atheist” – founded in Bristol, England, a periodical that its editors claimed was “the only exclusively ATHEISTICAL print that has appeared in any age or country,” entitled *The Oracle of Reason, or Philosophy Vindicated* (Oracle 1842, 1: ii).<sup>5</sup>

Charles Southwell might, with important exceptions, be thought of as the Ludwig Feuerbach of British infidelity in the early 1840s, at least as Karl Marx

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<sup>5</sup> Holyoake (1892, Vol. 1, 142) described Chilton as “a cogent, solid writer, ready for any risk, and the only absolute atheist I have ever known.”

and Friedrich Engels characterized the latter in *The German Ideology* (1845).<sup>6</sup> In this work, contemporaneous with the founding of *The Reasoner* (founded in 1846), Marx and Engels argued that the Young Hegelian Feuerbach was merely substituting one kind of *consciousness* for another, “to produce a correct consciousness about an existing fact; whereas for the real communist it is a question of overthrowing the existing state of things” (Marx and Engels 1988, 65). Marx and Engels wrote:

The Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men [...] it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness. Since, according to their fantasy, the relationships of men, all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of their consciousness, the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations (Marx and Engels 1988, 36).

An atheist martyr, the criticism cannot be applied to Charles Southwell without qualifications. His writing constituted a political act with material and political consequences. However, the end he hoped to effect was in fact a revolution in ideas, which would, he thought, eventuate a change in material circumstances – precisely what Marx critiqued in Feuerbach (*Oracle* 1841, 1: 1).

My aim is not to engage in an extended comparison of English infidelity and post-Hegelian German philosophy, but rather to underscore the irony of Southwell’s abstraction of atheistic materialism from its socio-historical context in order to contrast it with the direction Freethought was soon to take under Holyoake. In warring strictly on the level that Marx referred to as ideological, seeing religious ideas as the real “chains of men,” Southwell insinuated that atheism was a purely intellectual affair, the proclamation of a truth that has arisen at different times in places, including ancient Greece, but that has been continually thwarted by priests of all ages (*Oracle* 1841, 1: 28).

Soon growing impatient with the lack of response to his philosophical disquisitions (*Oracle* 1841, 1: 2–4, 19–21, 27–9, 35–7),<sup>7</sup> however, Southwell opened the fourth number of *The Oracle* with a caustic and belligerent article entitled

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<sup>6</sup> The differences were many, such as the fact that Southwell was an artisan-class radical, not a university-educated philosopher trained in German philosophy. But Robertson (1930, Vol. 1, 75) compares the atheism in *The Oracle* to positions developed by Feuerbach. For biographical sketches of Southwell, see Royle (1974, 69–73); and Robertson (1930, Vol. 1, 73).

<sup>7</sup> As Charles Southwell and William Carpenter noted (1842, 2–7), several of these articles (“Is There A God?”) were also cited in the indictment as counts of blasphemy.

“The Jew Book.” Here, he took aim at sacred text, which proved more dangerous and thus more effective for his purposes:

That revolting odious Jew production, called BIBLE, has been for ages the idol of all sorts of blockheads, the glory of knaves, and the disgust of wise men. It is a history of lust, sodomies, wholesale slaughtering, and horrible depravity, that the vilest parts of all other histories, collected into one monstrous book, could scarcely parallel! Priests tell us that this concentration of abominations was written by a god; all the world believe priests, or they would rather have thought it the outpouring of some devil! (*Oracle* 1841, 1: 25).

On the date of its publication, Southwell was arrested for blasphemy and taken to Bristol Jail.<sup>8</sup> His trial became a *cause celebre* in the liberal press (Southwell and Carpenter 1842, iii-iv). His self-defense was unsuccessful, however, and on January 15, 1842, he was fined 100 pounds and sentenced to a year’s imprisonment (Southwell and Carpenter 1842, 102).

With Southwell incarcerated and unable to manage the publication, George Jacob Holyoake became the editor of *The Oracle*. Under Holyoake’s editorship, a change in rhetoric and tone was immediately evident. Holyoake would not change *The Oracle*’s purpose – to “deal out Atheism as freely as ever Christianity was dealt out to the people” (*Oracle* 1841, 1: 1) – but he refrained from such odiously provocative and offensive language as Southwell’s “The Jew Book” (*Oracle* 1842, 1: 67). Eschewing incendiary rhetoric, Holyoake sought sympathy for atheism on the basis of the conditions of poor workers and the failure of the Christian state to remedy them. Conditioned by personal loss from material want and its connection to religious observation, Holyoake had been predisposed to lose his faith in divine providence. For instance, Holyoake’s daughter died while he served a sentence for blasphemy in Cheltenham Jail in 1841–42. His continual exposure to worldly want and suffering eventually spelled the end of whatever faith he may have had.

When Southwell declined to resume editorship of *The Oracle* upon his release from Bristol Jail, Holyoake and company decided to fold the publication. But a new periodical, *The Movement And Anti-Persecution Gazette*, was founded on December 16, 1843, allegedly to continue the mission of *The Oracle* and to report the activities of the Anti-Persecution Union.<sup>9</sup> Central to *The Movement* was

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<sup>8</sup> He remained there for seventeen days until an offer of bail was finally accepted.

<sup>9</sup> The Anti-Persecution Union was formed primarily in response to the imprisonment for blasphemous libel of Charles Southwell and grew out of the “Committee for the Protection of Mr. Southwell.” Subscriptions for the Union and its establishment were announced in *The Oracle*

its departure for freethinking journalism. Not only did the editors maintain the tonal and rhetorical moderation characteristic of *The Oracle* after Southwell was removed but also *The Movement* launched the “third stage” of Freethought. As Holyoake saw it, the first two stages, free inquiry and open criticism of theology, were essential, but not constructive. The third stage, however, involved the development of morality: “to ascertain what rules human reason may supply for the independent conduct of life” (Holyoake 1896a, 34). The difference in emphasis marked what Holyoake later referred to as the “positive” side of Freethought, which would not simply destroy theism, but replace its morality with another, superintending system. With this, Holyoake echoed Auguste Comte, who held that “nothing is destroyed until it has been replaced” (Holyoake 1896a, 34).<sup>10</sup>

### 3 The Upward Mobility of Freethought

The successor to *The Movement*, *The Reasoner* was founded in 1846 by Holyoake with the fifty pounds he won for his five entries into the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows contest for the best new lectures, to be read to graduates into the Oddfellowship (Holyoake 1892, Vol. 1, 204–8). The publication became the central propagandist instrument for Freethought. By the time he began the new weekly, Holyoake was a leading freethinker. In *The Reasoner*, Holyoake was not only interested in distancing himself from the old infidel rhetoric but he also had another kind of Freethought movement in mind. While maintaining his right to the profession of atheism, he came to advocate the accommodation of other than atheistic views within a broader movement. Unbelievers, deists, monists, utilitarians, and liberal theists might all cooperate, provided that together they promoted a morality, politics, economics, and science of worldly improvement. While a seemingly contradictory position that alienated and angered some within the Freethought community, it represented the differentiation of a religious public sphere, within which belief and unbelief coexisted by means of an overarching secularity. Secularism marked a new stage in secularity itself, evincing a recognition that religious belief was unlikely to disappear.

After publishing *The Reasoner*, Holyoake soon became involved with George Henry Lewes and Thornton Hunt and connected with middle-class literary and political radicals, and budding scientific naturalists. They met in a group called

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(1842, 1: 72). Maltus Q. Ryall was its first secretary; Holyoake became its secretary by 1843; see *Movement* (1843, 1: 5–7).

<sup>10</sup> See also George Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh (1870, iv).

a “Confidential Combination.” Francis W. Newman, whose book *The Soul, its Sorrows and Aspirations* (1849) greatly impressed Holyoake, was among those who, including Hunt and the pantheist William Maccall, encouraged the formation of such a club (Royle 1974, 158). William Ashurst bankrolled *The Reasoner* and under the pseudonym “Edward Search,” suggested the words “secular” and “secularist” to describe Holyoake’s new branch of Freethought. Holyoake responded in the same issue of *The Reasoner* by calling the new movement “Secularism.” The connections initiated the cross-pollination of working- and middle-class Freethought that resulted in the development of Secularism proper. Adherents included W.H. Ashurst, Francis Newman, Thornton Hunt, George Henry Lewes, Harriet Martineau, Herbert Spencer, Louis Blanc, and others. (McCabe 1908, Vol. 1, 145; Royle 1974, 154–55; Blaszak 1988, 17; and Ashton 2008, 8–9). A few of these heterodox thinkers would even contribute articles to *The Reasoner*.

Many from this same circle of London writers also met at 142 Strand, the home and publishing house of John Chapman, the publisher of *The Westminster Review*, the organ of philosophical radicalism (Ashton 2008, 8–9).<sup>11</sup> Contributors to the periodical included Lewes, Marian Evans (formerly Mary Ann Evans and soon to adopt the penname of George Eliot), Herbert Spencer, Harriet Martineau, Charles Bray, George Combe, and, by 1853, Thomas Huxley. Many of the *Westminster* writers showed an interest in the writings of Auguste Comte “and in his platform for social improvement through a progressive elaboration of the sciences” (White 2003, 70). Marian Evans reviewed for the *Westminster* Robert William MacKay’s *The Progress of the Intellect* (1850), a work of Comtean orientation (*Westminster Review* 1850, 54: 353–68). Holyoake came to know Comte’s ideas through his association with Lewes and Evans, as well through Harriet Martineau, who was then preparing her translation of his *Positive Philosophy*. Holyoake’s contact with Comtean ideas was essential for the step that he was contemplating – to take Freethought in a new direction (Royle 1974, 156). Like Comte, Holyoake believed that religion had to be either substituted with or superintended by a “positive” creed rather than being simply negated by atheism. Martineau approvingly noticed the new direction that Holyoake was taking Freethought:

The adoption of the term Secularism is justified by its including a large number of persons who are not Atheists, and uniting them for action which has Secularism for its object, and not Atheism... [I]f by the adoption of a new term, a vast amount of impediment from prej-

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<sup>11</sup> Another, overlapping circle centered on W. J. Fox and the Unitarian South Place Chapel. See Barbara Taylor (1993, 60–74).

udice is got rid of, the use of the term Secularism is found advantageous (Martineau 1853, *Boston Liberator*, quoted in *The Reasoner* 1854, 16.1: 5).<sup>12</sup>

In 1853, *The Westminster Review* ran an article that included a discussion of Secularism, stressing that with Secularism, Freethought had “now abandoned the disproof of deity, contenting itself with the assertion that nothing could be known on the subject” (*Westminster Review* 1853, 60: 129). In 1862, the *Westminster* claimed, as evidence of the failure of Christian orthodoxy, that Secularism had become the belief system of the silent majority of the working classes, whatever the number of those who subscribed to its periodicals or associated with its official organizational structures (*Westminster Review* 1862, 77: 60–97). Here, the author echoed the earlier remarks about Secularism by Horace Mann in his Introduction to the 1851 census on religious worship (1854, 93), albeit with fewer histrionics.

By the early 1850s, the cross-pollination between the middle- and working-class Freethought movements was well underway. Holyoake’s reviews and notices of the works of Francis Newman, Lewes, Martineau and others in *The Reasoner*, together with his work at the *Leader* and the notices of his Secularism in the *Westminster*, completed a two-way circuit of exchange.

## 4 The principles and word history of secularism

Within two decades of its inception by George Jacob Holyoake in 1851–1852, although Holyoake was widely recognized as Secularism movement’s founder and first leader, Secularism had come to be identified with the much more charismatic and bombastic speaker, Charles Bradlaugh, and the National Secular Society (NSS), of which Bradlaugh was the first president at its founding in 1866. Previous to the founding of the NSS, Secularism had been a loose federation of local branches headed by Holyoake. By the late 1860s, Holyoake had ceded, somewhat unwittingly, his former centrality in the movement. Further, he no longer maintained exclusive control of the term Secularism, which he had coined to represent the movement.<sup>13</sup> Secularism, both the movement and the word, had slipped from Holyoake’s grasp for several reasons. First, Holyoake alienated staunch

<sup>12</sup> The quote circulated widely and was found as far afield as the *Scripture Reader’s Journal* (1856: 363–64).

<sup>13</sup> Holyoake’s inability to hold sway over his neologism may be seen as parallel to Huxley’s later difficulty with “agnosticism”, which Huxley had coined in 1869 to represent his own creed in the context of the Metaphysical Society.

freethinking atheists, who essentially refused his construal of Secularism, while they nevertheless operated under the rubric and remained important advocates for the movement. Confidence in Holyoake's leadership was undermined as his disputed business practices, aversion to centralized organization, and comparably measured rhetorical approach were criticized and challenged (Grugel 1976, 54–55). The founding of the secularist *National Reformer* in 1860, with Bradlaugh as co-editor, along with the establishment of the NSS in 1866 with Bradlaugh as president, did much to officially reduce Holyoake's prominence within Secularism. Further, the Knowlton affair of 1877 (discussed below) calcified the rift between the Holyoake and Bradlaugh camps, evoking the censure of the latter by the former.<sup>14</sup> Yet this disapprobation was a consequence of the significant media attention paid to Bradlaugh and Annie Besant on the occasion of their trial for obscenity, which further associated Secularism with Bradlaugh. Bradlaugh's election to the House of Commons for Northampton in 1880 and his eventual seating in 1886 augmented his renown (Crosby 1997, 177–78).

After the critical early years, Holyoake intervened on the behalf of Secularism on many occasions, for example to write the *Principles of Secularism Briefly Explained* in 1859, to pen *The Principles of Secularism* in 1870, to debate Bradlaugh in March of 1870, and with Charles Watts (Sr.), G. W. Foote and others, to (unsuccessfully) challenge the presidency of the NSS in the wake of the Knowlton affair (Holyoake 1859; Holyoake 1870; and Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870). Despite these efforts, Secularism was often regarded in the terms provided by the older infidelity, as reintroduced by Bradlaugh. That is, it was understood as the equivalent of atheism. Yet, as I show elsewhere (Rectenwald 2013, 46.2: 231–254; Rectenwald 2016, 107–134), it was to Holyoake and his version of Secularism that the scientific naturalists looked for a respectable and useful example of Freethought as they named, developed, and promoted their cosmology.

Late in the century, Holyoake sought to reassert his priority where Secularism was concerned – to solidify his legacy as its founder, and, yet again, to insist upon its original principles. In 1896, in *English Secularism, A Confession of Belief*, he left a retrospective index of ten documents that he regarded as foundational for Secularism's inception and establishment (Holyoake 1896a, 45–49). Other than the first two articles, the Preface to *The Movement* and the lectures to the Manchester Order of Odd-fellows, the documents had been published in *The Reasoner*. Holyoake clearly demonstrated that *The Reasoner* had been at the center of the movement. He reminded readers that he wrote all of the foundational texts, other than those that were addressed to him: “These citations from my own

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14 See *The Secular Review and Secularist* (1877, 1: 22–23, 65–66, 77, 78, 85–86, 93, 142, and 189).

writings are sufficient to show the origin and nature of Secularism” (Holyoake 1896a, 48–49). While an exclusive textual focus is by no means sufficient for understanding the cultural meaning and significance of Secularism, these texts nevertheless testify to the essential character of the Secularist creed as Holyoake saw it. Further, such a reading represents an exercise in “word history” or “historical semantics.” As Gowan Dawson and Bernard Lightman point out, drawing on Thomas Dixon’s *The Invention of Altruism* (2008), “the relation between words and concepts is never simply neutral, and the changing fortunes of a term have significant implications for the construction and communication of the ideas it might entail” (Dawson and Lightman 2013, 3; Dixon 2008). In the case of Secularism, the fate of the word involved its appropriation by others in the Free-thought movement and especially the larger Secular camp headed by Bradlaugh. This appropriation had significant implications concerning the meaning and understanding of Secularism proper, and has impacted the meaning and significance of modern secularism in general. It has led to confusion such that modern secularism is understood primarily as the absence or negation of religion and belief.

The first principle of Holyoake’s Secularism was materialism, as enunciated in *The Movement*: “Materialism will be advanced as the only sound basis of rational thought and practice” (*Movement* 1843, 1: 117), which “restricts itself to the known, to the present, and ... to realise the life that is” (*Reasoner* 1846, 1: i). The remaining points were made in *The Reasoner*, and included some of the first usages of the words “Secular” and “Secularism” as denoting and describing a new system of knowledge and morality. The twelfth volume of *The Reasoner* opened with an article entitled, “Truths to Teach,” which undertook to “indicate some of the objects which this journal endeavors to explain and enforce.” The first two points had been made in *The Oracle* and *The Movement*, and in earlier volumes of *The Reasoner*:

1. To teach that Churches, in affirming the existence of a Being independent of Nature, affirm what they do not know themselves – that they who say they have discovered Deity assume to have found what he has evidently chosen to conceal from men in this life by endowing them with finite powers ... – that whoever bids us depend upon the fruition of a future life may betray us from the use of this world.
2. To teach men to limit, therefore as a matter of truth and certainty, their affirmations to what they know – to restrict, as a matter of self-defence, their expectations to that which their experience warrants (*Reasoner* 1852, 12: 1).

In this article, later recognized as foundational to the incipient Secularism, one of *The Reasoner*’s stated aims was to set limits on knowledge claims. Such limits would involve the restriction of knowledge to “that which experience warrants.”

Theology was deemed a “science of conjecture” in affirming what can only be believed without knowledge, given the “finite powers” of the human faculties. With these principles, Holyoake sought to remove Freethought from the field of conjecture, and to confine it, as stated in the second point, to matters of “certainty,” or what could be known given our limited faculties. Under this principle, science was deemed the sole “Providence of Man,” which could be relied upon as an insurance against “false dependencies” (Holyoake 1854, 5–6).

With this announcement of aims, *The Reasoner* did not make the denial of deity necessary for the would-be Secularist. Knowledge for the benefit of humanity was separated from conjecture, which had not proven its benefits in the realm of experience. *The Reasoner* did warn against the affirmation of deity and a future life, given that reliance on them might “betray us from the use of this world” to the detriment of “progress” and amelioration. However, it warned only that such conjecture should be left behind for the purposes of pursuing knowledge and improving material conditions. Likewise, belief was not a disqualification for the pursuit of knowledge or progress, only a possible obstacle. One’s belief in the supernatural was a matter of speculation or opinion to which one was entitled, unless such belief precluded positive knowledge or action. This rhetorical and philosophical turn represented the cleanest break hitherto from the previous dogmatism of earlier Freethought considered as equivalent to atheism, while also marking the nascent Secularism as a precursor of agnosticism and scientific naturalism (Rectenwald 2013, 46.2: 234; Marsh 1998, 240). While Holyoake was inconsistent on this point and included atheism as the “negative aspect” of Secularism as late as 1854, he reiterated the distinction between Secularism and freethinking atheism often. For example, in March of 1858, he argued that:

[t]o make Atheism the Shibboleth of the Secular party would be to make Secularism an atheistic sectarianism as narrow and exclusive as any Christian Sectarianism. The principles of Secularism are distinct both from Atheism and Theism, and there can be no honest, useful, wide, and liberal party without keeping this point well understood (*Reasoner* 1858, 23: 81).

He later suggested that Secularism considered both theism and atheism as “belonging to the debatable ground of speculation” with their “theories of the origin of nature.” Secularism “neither asks nor gives any opinion upon them, confining itself to the entirely independent field of study – the order of the universe.” Holyoake could note in hindsight that similarly, “Huxley’s term agnosticism implies a different thing [than atheism] – unknowingness without denial,” but “unknowingness without denial” was fundamental to Secularism from its inception. (Holyoake 1896a, 36–37).

With the third object of “Truths to Teach” – “to teach men to see that the sum of all knowledge and duty is secular – that it pertains to this world alone” (*Reasoner* 1852, 12: 1) – Holyoake could rightly claim to have been an innovator, if not a neologist; “this was the first time the word ‘Secular’ was applied as a general test of principles of conduct apart from spiritual considerations,” Holyoake claimed (1896b, 51). The Secular principle was in effect an ontological demarcation stratagem, dividing the metaphysical, spiritual, or eternal from “this life” – the material, the worldly, or the temporal: “Secularity draws the line of demarcation between the things of time and the things of eternity” (*Reasoner* 1852, 12: 127). The “secular” for Holyoake designated the only domain where knowledge could be gained and effective action taken (*Reasoner* 1852, 12: 34). Like Karl Popper’s later demarcation of science from pseudoscience and metaphysics in the *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959), Secularism deemed that whatever could not be “tested by the experience of this life” should simply be of no concern to the scientist, moralist, or politician. The “Secularist” was one who restricted efforts to “that province of human duty which belongs to this life” (*Reasoner* 1852, 12: 34). According to Holyoake (1896a, 47), this was the first time the word “Secularist” was used to denote an adherent to a “new way of thinking” – to represent one who avowed Secular principles. In fact, W. H. Ashurst, writing to *The Reasoner* under the pseudonym “Edward Search,” first suggested the words “Secular” and “Secularist” to describe the new branch of Freethought that Holyoake was developing, and one who aligned with it. In the same article, Holyoake coined the term “Secularism” to describe “the work we have always had in hand” (*Reasoner* 1851, 11: 88).

Secularism was advanced not only as an epistemology but also as a morality and politics. With his fourth aim, Holyoake argued for the “independent origin” of morality. Rather than being based on religious doctrine, the source of morality was nature – “the real nature” of human beings – and its warrants were to be found in the consequences of actions, “natural sanctions of the most effective kind” (*Reasoner* 1852, 12: 1). Never a strict Benthamite, and harking back to the social environmentalism of Godwin and Owen, Holyoake based morality primarily on the purported goodness of human nature itself, and only secondarily, in conjunction with practical results. Without a basis of natural goodness, a secular system would be unable to warrant motives for right actions (Holyoake 1854, 6). Intelligence, an aspect of human nature developed by knowledge, was required in order to discriminate between good and deleterious effects. The results were evaluated by intelligence according to utilitarian ethics, which in turn resulted in moral knowledge that influenced future actions. Politics was simply morality writ large. Thus, a moral and political science was advanced, comprised of a guiding principle and a scientific method.

In its claims for a political science based on human nature, Secularism was similar to the Positivism of August Comte. However, Holyoake never suggested, as did Comte, that once discovering the social laws, human beings must subject themselves to those laws in an act of acquiescence, which has been seen as Positivism's conservative character. For Comte, the laws for conduct were not necessarily in human nature alone, but in a "social physics" based on human nature. Comte avowedly aimed at establishing a "social physics" in order to avert social and political chaos by positing a social lawfulness consistent with physical regularity.<sup>15</sup>

The fifth point urged the trust of nothing but "Reason" for the establishment of all knowledge. The concept of reason was, as usual, a very slippery one. Its meaning could really only be completely understood by reference to what it excluded – in all cases, religious and other metaphysical speculation. It was not primarily distinguished from imagination as in Romanticism, but rather from the unsubstantiated belief of theology. Reason was figured as the logical treatment of experience, relying on "nothing which does not come within the range of phenomenon, or common consciousness, or assumes the form of a law" (*Reasoner* 1852, 12: 130). The point was to derive knowledge by means of the intellectual processing of empirical data as opposed to accepting *a priori* convictions.

Free inquiry and discussion comprised the sixth aim. Only those statements withstanding the test of "universal free, fair and open discussion ... the highest test of vital truth ... can be trusted," Holyoake argued (*Reasoner* 1852, 12: 1). "[O]nly that theory which is submitted to that ordeal is to be regarded, as only that which endures it can be trusted" (*Reasoner* 1852, 12: 130). In the requirement that all propositions stand the test of criticism and "testing," the sixth object resembles Popper's criterion for science – the subjection of statements to possible disqualification or falsification in an agnostic field of testing and discourse.

These principles represented the "positive aspect" of Secularism. At least until 1854 and possibly later, Holyoake wavered slightly on the dividing line between Secularism and earlier Freethought; Secularism's "negative side," which was to "protest against specific speculative error" (theism), was occasionally revived. The two sides sometimes remained together under Secularism as a "*double protest*" (1854, 5). However, the tendency of the Holyoake camp was to jettison the protest and to emphasize Secularism as a new kind or stage of Freethought – that is, to assert Secularism's limitation to the field of positive knowledge and

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15 In an introduction to her compilation of Comte's major works, Gertrude Lenzer (1975, xxxiii), described Comte's form of materialism as an "anticipatory conservatism."

to posit a substantive morality, as opposed to or exclusive of the negation of deity and theology.

## 5 Atheism, sex, and secularism

On 5 April 1877, as was widely reported in the press, Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh were arrested and charged with printing and publishing “a certain indecent, lewd, filthy, bawdy, and obscene book, called ‘Fruits of Philosophy,’ thereby contaminating, vitiating, and corrupting morals” (Mills, Stone, Wilson, and Bulwer 1878, 607). Besant and Bradlaugh would stand trial for the publication, a trial that would gain enormous publicity and bring significant, and for some, unwanted attention to the Secularist movement. For Besant and Bradlaugh, the Knowlton affair, as it came to be called, represented a test of a free press, as well as the defense of “a discussion of the most important social question which can influence a nation’s welfare” (Knowlton, Bradlaugh, and Besant 1877, vi). This discussion involved the doctrine of population and the right of a free people to critically examine the issue of birth control. Although the trial ended in February 1878 in an acquittal on the grounds of a technicality exploited by Bradlaugh, the savvy former legal clerk, the trial put contraception onto the breakfast tables of the middle class and associated it with Secularism.

Dr. Charles Knowlton wrote and first published *Fruits of Philosophy, or the Private Companion of Young Married People* in 1832 in Massachusetts. The pamphlet was a neo-Malthusian pro-birth-control manual detailing the physiology of human sexuality and the means of couples for limiting the size of their families. In the “Philosophical Proem” introducing the text, Knowlton argued that the practice of sex was a physiological and moral necessity; he reasoned from Benthamite principles that any moderate expression of sexual passion that did not result in misery added a net pleasure to the world and thus was to be encouraged. Furthermore, the sexual instinct would not be curbed in the mass of humanity according to Malthusian abstentionism. Only practical measures to limit procreation – new methods of contraception – could solve the predicament resultant from the sexual instinct on the one hand and the tendency of population growth on the other (Knowlton, Bradlaugh, and Besant 1877, 9–11). Although the pamphlet was released anonymously, Knowlton was arrested, tried, and convicted of obscenity, serving three months of hard labor in East Cambridge jail.

*Fruits of Philosophy* was imported into Britain and published by the radical disciple of Richard Carlile, James Watson, who took over Carlile’s publishing ventures while Carlile was in Dorchester jail. Watson also became Holyoake’s

publisher and in 1853 Holyoake bought Watson's stock and sold it under the Secularist banner. As noted by Bradlaugh and Besant in their chronicling of the Knowlton affair in the Publisher's Preface of their republication of the work, *Fruits of Philosophy* was listed in Holyoake's "Freethought Directory" in 1853 (Knowlton, Bradlaugh, and Besant 1877, iii). *The Reasoner* had sometimes listed the birth control pamphlet among the books sold by Holyoake's Fleet Street House for Watson (although Holyoake had never explicitly supported the publication).<sup>16</sup> *Fruits of Philosophy* was published for a time by Austin Holyoake, George Holyoake's brother, in conjunction with the *National Reformer*, and when Watson died, the plates for all of his publications, including *Fruits of Philosophy*, were purchased from Watson's widow by Charles Watts, who published the work until 23 December 1876 (Besant, 1885, 83).

As a publisher of *Fruits of Philosophy*, it was Watts who, in January 1877, was first charged with printing and publishing an obscene book. The legal attention attracted by the work was probably due to several factors, not the least of which included new drawings inserted by Watts, and his lowering of the price (Besant 1885, 31). But another factor was the passage in August 1857 of the Obscene Publications Act, which made a court's interpretation the new test for obscenity. According to the new Act, a publication could be deemed obscene if it demonstrated – as argued successfully by Lord Chief Justice, Sir Alexander Cockburn in 1868 in the celebrated case of *Regina v. Hicklin* – a "tendency ... to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall" (Green and Karolides 2005, 232). Obscenity, that is, was now legally in the eye of the beholder, rather than based on something "objective" in the text itself. The law apparently emboldened prosecutors and facilitated arrests. Further, given this new definition of obscenity, the accused was effectively guilty until proven innocent (Dawson 2007, 116–61).

After his arrest, Watts met with Bradlaugh and Besant, who agreed to support him in his defense and to raise money for his trial. But upon further reflection, once out of Besant's and Bradlaugh's company, Watts decided not to defend the right to publish the book and to recant his not-guilty plea and enter a plea of guilty as charged. Upon his trial, Watts was fined 500 pounds and released (Besant 1885, 81). Besant and Bradlaugh not only immediately cut their business ties with Watts, who had been their publisher for the *National Review* and other works but also they decided to republish *Fruits of Philosophy* under the banner of their newly formed publishing partnership, the Freethought Publishing Com-

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16 See, for example, the advertisement "Books on Free Inquiry" (*Reasoner* 1854, 17: 95 and 256).

pany (Besant 1885, 80). While they found much wanting in *Fruits of Philosophy*, the right of publication, they argued, was a matter of principle. Bradlaugh and Besant reasoned that if they failed to assert “The Right of Publication” of a book that was not obscene but was also a scientific text, then the Freethought movement would be damaged and the cause of a free press severely compromised (Besant 1885, 82).

Not everyone in the Secularist movement agreed with this decision to republish, least especially Holyoake, who (unsuccessfully) attempted to remove Bradlaugh and Besant from the Executive Committee of the National Secular Society (NSS) (Besant 1885, 133). In 1877, in the midst of the Knowlton affair, Holyoake was invited by Freethinkers to chair a committee charged with reviewing the rules of the NSS. The commission challenged the position of president itself, a position that Bradlaugh had held from the beginning of the organization. The failure to rid the NSS of the presidency and thus to unseat Bradlaugh led to the formation of the British Secular Union (BSU) in August 1877, a new organization of the Secular movement established in opposition to the Bradlaughian NSS and supported by the new periodical *The Secular Review* as its official publication (Royle 1980, 18).<sup>17</sup> This organization, I suggest, was the result of more than the Knowlton affair; it registered a long-standing alienation between Holyoake and Bradlaugh and their respective camps. But the secession of George Holyoake, Charles Watts, and other Secularists from the NSS, and their founding of the BSU in the wake of the Knowlton affair, solidified an already significant breach within the Secularist movement, one that now appeared to ossify around the issue of sexuality.

In his study of Darwin and respectability, Gowan Dawson devotes a chapter to obscenity legislation in connection with Darwinism, treating in some detail the relationship between the Darwinian scientific naturalists and the two branches of Freethought, which Michael Mason has referred to as the “anti-sensual progressive” (Holyoake) and the “pro-sensual” (Bradlaugh) Secularist camps (Dawson 2007, 116–61; Mason 1994). Dawson suggests that the primary division between the Secularist camps was predicated on differences over sexual policy and birth control. According to Dawson, Bradlaugh and Annie Besant’s republication and legal defense in 1877–1878 of Knowlton’s *Fruits of Philosophy* became the primary reason for the split between the Holyoake and Bradlaugh

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<sup>17</sup> The final division of the Secularist camps as a result of the Knowlton affair is at quite odds with Laura Schwartz’s assertion (2013, 200) that Holyoake “remained neutral on the question” of the republication and defense of the *Fruits of Philosophy*. In fact, Holyoake wrote specifically to disavow the text in the press and seceded from the NSS to form a new secular union, the British Secular Union (BSU) in the aftermath of the controversy.

camps. Birth control and sexual policy, Dawson argues, “were by far the most divisive issue[s] within the British Freethought movement in the nineteenth century” (Dawson 2007, 119).

In figuring sexual policy as the fault line dividing the two Secularist camps, Dawson overlooks the well-documented, fundamental division within Secularism. This division, as Royle points out, not only took hold between the major two camps of Secularism, but also within them (1980, 120). The primary split dated to the early 1850s and went to the definition of Secularism itself. Differences in sexual policy may be understood in large part in terms of this fundamental split. From the beginning of the movement and creed, Holyoake had differentiated Secularism from the older Freethought movement, shifting its emphasis from a “negative” to a “positive” orientation. Philosophically, this entailed what he and others sometimes called a “suspensive scepticism,” which included not only denying atheism as a requisite commitment but also definitively disavowing any declarative assertion on the question of deity (Grant and Holyoake 1853, 56 and 200). As Holyoake argued (rather misleadingly) in the celebrated debate with the Reverend Brewin Grant in 1853, “[w]e have always held that the existence of Deity is “past finding out, and we have held that the time employed upon the investigation might be more profitably devoted to the study of humanity” (Grant and Holyoake 1853, 8). In terms of strategy, as we have seen, this position meant cooperation between unbelievers and believers; the invitation to join the Secularists extended not only to Christian Socialists such as Charles Kingsley and his ilk but also to liberal theists with reformist politics, such as Francis M. Newman and James Anthony Froude. In terms of principle, it meant that Holyoake’s Secularism, as opposed to Bradlaugh’s, was specifically not atheist.

Many leading Freethinkers rejected the construction that Holyoake had put on Freethought with his Secularism, as well as his aversion to centralized organization and purported failures in organization. These included, as we have seen, Charles Southwell; but the defectors also included Holyoake’s brother Austin, Robert Cooper, and most importantly, Charles Bradlaugh.

With Bradlaugh’s meteoric rise to prominence in the Secular field in the 1860s, the divide between the Secularist camps became more pronounced. In 1850, Holyoake had chaired a Freethought meeting and invited the young Bradlaugh, at the mere age of seventeen, to speak on “The Past, Present, and Future of Theology” (Courtney 1920, 105). By the late 1850s, Bradlaugh had found in the *Investigator* a vehicle for his trenchant atheism. In 1858, he had been elected president of the London Central Secularist Society, assuming the position Holyoake had held for nearly a decade. By 1860, he had become founder and co-editor of the *National Reformer*. Yet in an attempt to close the ranks of the Secularist

body, in November 1861, Bradlaugh invited Holyoake to join the *National Reformer* as a special contributor. Holyoake accepted, and even signed a letter entitled, “One Paper and One Party,” published in the periodical. Beginning in January 1862, he was responsible for curating three pages – either of his own writing, or from his associates. But in February, a correspondent to the paper complained of the paper’s diversity of opinion and asked what the *National Reformer* definitively advocated regarding religion. Bradlaugh’s answer effectively marked the end of Holyoake’s involvement: “Editorially, the National Reformer, as to religious questions, is, and always has been, as far as we are concerned, the advocate of Atheism.” The consequence was a fall-out between Bradlaugh and Holyoake that included a financial dispute, with Holyoake apparently demanding a year’s salary, after having only served three months in his capacity as “chief contributor” (Bonner 1895, 128–30).

By 1870, the lines were even more severely drawn. In a debate between Holyoake and Bradlaugh (chaired by Holyoake’s brother, Austin, by then an acolyte of Bradlaugh’s), the topic was the place of atheism within Secularism. In effect, George Holyoake denied that Bradlaugh was a Secularist at all. Further, Bradlaugh admitted that, according to Holyoake’s definition – a definition, he suggested, that the founder of the movement had a right to maintain – Holyoake was right that he should not be called a Secularist (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870, 10). Nevertheless, by then the President of the NSS, Bradlaugh asserted that Secularism necessarily amounted to atheism – “I hold that Atheism is the logical result to all who are able to think the matter out” – and that Holyoake’s reasoning was simply flawed (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870, vii). Holyoake, for his part, remained as firm as ever that Secularism did not “include” atheism, but concomitantly, that it did not “exclude” atheists (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870, 19–20), a point which Bradlaugh considered illogical (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870, 11). Holyoake further suggested that making atheism a condition of Secularism was to delay the work of Secular improvement indefinitely, while atheism made its clean “sweep” of theological notions:

Mr. Watts [then still a Bradlaugh supporter] goes on to state [in the *National Reformer*], “The province of Secularism is not only to enunciate positive principles, but also to break up old systems which have lost their vitality, and to refute theologies which have hitherto usurped judgment and reason.” *Here is an immense sweep.* None of us will live to see the day when the man who has made it, will be able to give us the secular information which we are waiting to receive now (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870, 19, emphasis added).

Instead of advocating the undertaking of such “an immense sweep,” Holyoake contended that Secularism should be established independently of theology as a creed having positive principles of its own, and that the work of secular im-

provement should be undertaken at once. He quoted a contributor to the *National Reformer* (again, his brother, Austin), who had asserted that it was “impossible to advocate Secular principles apart from Atheism ... There is no man or woman who is willing to listen to Secular views, knowing they are intended to set up a system entirely apart and devoid of all religion.” George Holyoake did not spare his brother criticism:

You set up Secular principles *for their own value*. Many persons are Secularists who can see religion even in this. *The provision is not to set up a thing “devoid of all religion,” but to set up a thing distinct in itself*, and you have no more right to say it is set up apart from the religion, than the clergyman has a right to say, when you set up Secular knowledge apart from his creed, that you intend thereby to set it up *devoid* of religion or public piety (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870, 8–9).

We see here that by Secularism Holyoake meant a substantive doctrine, not the mere absence or negation of religion or religious belief. For this reason, it could (logically or otherwise) stand parallel to (or above) religious systems. Moreover, he was even willing to allow Secularism to be construed as a religion in its own right. This was a more acceptable option than including atheism as a necessary element of Secularism.

Furthermore, whenever the question of sexual policy was raised, the issue of atheism was never far removed. In the 1870 debate between Bradlaugh and Holyoake, for example, Holyoake had distinguished between what he called “positive” and “negative” atheism. While the former was “a proud, honest, intrepid, self-respecting attitude of the mind,” “Negative Atheism” consisted of “mere ignorance, of insensibility, of lust, and gluttony, and drunkenness, of egotism or vanity” (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870, 47). With this distinction, which he registered seemingly out of the blue, Holyoake was in fact acknowledging a long-standing association of atheism with immorality, in particular with sexual profligacy and other sensual licentiousness. His definitions represented a not-so-subtle chastisement of the Bradlaugh camp for its neo-Malthusian advocacy in the *National Reformer* – its recommendations of preventive checks to procreation (birth control). Moreover, Holyoake also apparently commented on the position of his brother, Austin, whose own neo-Malthusian pamphlet, *Large or Small Families*, had appeared in 1870. While Bradlaugh denied knowledge of any such “Negative Atheism” or anyone who practiced it (Holyoake and Bradlaugh 1870, 56), given his well-known neo-Malthusianism, it must have been clear to those familiar with the contentious field of Secularism what Holyoake meant by the phrase “Negative Atheism.”

In the Publisher’s Preface to the 1877 edition of *Fruits of Philosophy*, the edition that led to the obscenity indictments brought against Bradlaugh and Annie

Besant, Bradlaugh and Besant charged Holyoake and company with hypocrisy, suggesting that he and Watson had sold and profited by the book for decades. If they had considered the book obscene all the while, then they had carelessly “thus scattered obscenity broadcast over the land” (Knowlton, Bradlaugh, and Besant 1877, iv). Likewise, why did they not stand behind the republication of the book? Holyoake’s disapproval of the decision by Bradlaugh and Besant to republish and defend the book had been registered by the time they wrote their publisher’s preface, given Holyoake’s disavowals in the press (Royle 1980, 92). It was clear that Bradlaugh and Besant were already acutely aware of Holyoake’s position.

Neo-Malthusian doctrine necessarily involved Secularists of the Holyoake camp in a moral quandary. Should birth control apply strictly to the moderation of family growth within the confines of marriage? If not, might it encourage sexual profligacy? Given his concern for Secularism’s respectability, Holyoake had always recommended moral discipline and reservation. Although possibly having some sympathy for neo-Malthusian practices within marriage, having supported more liberal laws for divorce, and despite his contact with Hunt and Lewes, he had for decades effectively skirted the issues invoked by Freethought in connection with sexual policy.<sup>18</sup> Further, with roots in the communitarianism of Owenite socialism, the implications of Malthusian political economy had always been unpalatable. Thus, the Knowlton affair thrust him into a confrontation he would have rather avoided. The Knowlton affair had connected Secularism with neo-Malthusianism, potentially embarrassing Holyoake, and not only for the associations with immorality that he feared. Not only did neo-Malthusian doctrine, *per se*, conflict with his socialist predilections but also the problem of sexual conduct exposed theoretical and practical contradictions within his kind of Secularism; Holyoake’s refusal to place primary importance on the elimination of Christian theology and morality, his insistence on suspending judgment regarding Christian values that supposedly did not conflict with secular progress – this abdication of normativity was impossible where sexual conduct was concerned. To be strictly consistent theoretically, a Utilitarian and neo-Malthusian moral code for sexuality would have signified widespread use of contraceptives and such extensive sexual activity as afforded a net pleasurable return for all concerned, regardless of the legal status of the partners. Yet Holyoake never advocated such a position. Certainly, as Michael Mason has observed, “[t]he exalted status of rationality in the advanced thought of the eighteenth cen-

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18 The debates in *The Reasoner* in 1855 over George Drysdale’s *The Elements of Social Science* (1854) reveal Holyoake’s equivocation.

tury had a lasting influence on all radical and reforming creeds in the nineteenth,” including Secularism (Mason 1994, 284–85). But, arguably, the utilitarianism of Holyoake’s Secularism was buttressed by and dependent upon prevailing Christian values, what Mason refers to as “classic moralism,” at least where human sexuality and social reproduction were concerned. Arguably, Holyoake’s position on sexuality owed less to anti-sensualist rationalism inherited from the Enlightenment than it did to the observance of Christian-based propriety. As John Stuart Mill put it to Holyoake in a letter in 1848:

[T]he root of my difference with you is that you appear to accept the present constitution of the family & the whole of the priestly morality founded on & connected with it – which morality in my opinion thorough[ly] deserves the epithets of “intolerant, slavish & selfish” (Mill, Mineka, Priestley, and Robson 1963, 741).

That is, Holyoake’s Secularism had not established an entirely unalloyed social science in place of or independent of religious systems. Rather, in his attempt to erect a substantive creed alongside (or above), but not necessarily in contradiction to Christianity,<sup>19</sup> his Secularism had implicitly assumed standards for sexual conduct having little or nothing to do with its own stated principles. In terms of secularity, this meant that Holyoake’s version of Secularism never entirely differentiated itself from the religious sphere.

## 6 Conclusion: Secularism versus the standard secularization thesis

Secularism, as Holyoake conceived it, opened up a space where working-class and genteel radicals, atheists, theists, and, anachronistically speaking, agnostics, could potentially cooperate for the material improvement of humanity, especially the working classes. But many Freethinkers, both those of his own generation and those to follow (see Richter and Shook, this volume), differed with Holyoake’s conception of Secularism and either rejected it outright, or modified it for their own purposes. As I have suggested, the major division between the Holyoake and Bradlaugh camps was based primarily on the question of atheism, but also included differences over Malthusian political economy and a pro-birth

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<sup>19</sup> Secularism did include the contradictory ambition of replacing religious belief and morality with secular values. This tension is explored in the epilogue of my book (Rectenwald 2016, 197–201).

control sexual policy derived from it. Sexual policy and atheism were not so easily disentangled; the mere mention of one often implied the other. Finally, sexual policy represented a contradiction within Holyoake's Secularism and, thus, illustrated the extent to which Holyoake had failed to establish a secular system as fully differentiated from the religious sphere.

Remarkably, the two different senses of Secularism that I have discussed, at least where the primary distinction is concerned, survive to this day in the forms and understandings of general modern secularism (and, so does confusion between them; see Langston et al. this volume). Under Bradlaugh's model, the mission of secularism is evacuative, the category of the secular is negative, and secularization is understood as progressive and teleological. Secularism amounts to a gradual, but eventual emptying of religion from the public (and in some cases, even the private) sphere. That is, Bradlaugh's Secularism amounted to a belief in what we now understand as the standard secularization thesis.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, under Holyoake's model, Secularism is constructive, the category of the secular is positive and substantive, and secularization is understood as an increasingly developing, complex plurality of belief, unbelief, and suspension between the two, along with other creedal commitments. As we have seen, Holyoake represented Secularism as a pluralistic, inclusive, and contingently constructed combination of willing theists, unbelievers, and agnostics. He did this by positing improvement in this life as a common aim of believers and unbelievers, leaving metaphysical questions largely out of the question. In this, I argue, Holyoake tacitly acknowledged the unlikelihood that Enlightenment rationality, extended into the nineteenth century, would utterly eradicate religious belief. As he put it in the 1870 debate with Bradlaugh, the complete evacuation of religiosity would require such "an immense sweep" that to attempt it was tantamount to insanity and resulted in the gross negligence of pressing secular matters. Holyoake grasped a sense of secularity as involving recognition and cooperation between religion and its others, a vision of the public and political spheres not unlike that which Jürgen Habermas has recently described as "post-secular" (2008, 25.4: 17–29). Rather than (or even while) expecting its disappearance according to a model of secularization (or Secularism), that is, the secularist had best accommodate religious discourse within a public sphere notable for its uneven and forever incomplete secularization. In fact, secularization and Secularism represented just this incomplete and permanent unevenness.

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<sup>20</sup> David Nash (2004, 1: 302–25) suggests that such a *belief* is in fact common among contemporary sociologists and others who maintain the standard secularization thesis, regardless of empirical evidence and theoretical disputation to the contrary.

Once Freethought entered this positive phase, however – one of positing a substantive moral and epistemological value system, as opposed to merely antagonizing religious believers and negating theism – it could develop into a new, more inclusive, sophisticated creed and movement. Edward Royle (1974, 160–62) has suggested that this development should be understood in terms of a kind of limited ecumenism, as the transformation of a religious sect into a denomination. However, such an interpretation fails to grasp the secular as a category distinct from and yet necessarily related to and dependent upon the religious (see Shook, this volume). With Holyoake's Secularism, Freethought was not, or was no longer, an entirely religious movement *per se*. Instead, by virtue of a demarcation principle that removed from consideration Christianity's metaphysical convictions, the secular began a process of differentiation from within the religious sphere. With Secularism, Freethought no longer contended for metaphysical sovereignty precisely on the grounds of theology itself. Or to put it another way, with mid-century Secularism, some Freethinkers began to understand secularity differently. Rather than positing the category of the secular as the mere negation or absence of religion and belief, thus keeping it securely within the religious ambit, secularity (called Secularism by Holyoake and company) was understood and described as a distinct development, a new stage resulting in an overarching *condition* that embraced unbelief and belief, the secular and the religious, and not the negation of one by the other.

Laura Schwartz puts it thusly for the benefit of contemporary historiography:

Once secularism is approached as a substantive rather than a negative category – as something more than simply an absence of religion – it becomes possible to see how religion may indeed play a role within a secular worldview without simply collapsing secularism into the wider category of religion (Schwartz 2013, 20).

Schwartz is of course speaking to *our* understanding of secularity, invoking Charles Taylor's rejection of and alternative to the standard secularization thesis – of secularization as continual “subtraction” (Taylor 2007) – and applying this new conception to the period. However, this understanding of secularity should not only guide our research but also should be recognized as precisely the conception that was dawning on Holyoake by the late-1840s, and what he consciously understood as developing with Secularism. This was in fact how Holyoake had envisaged Secularism proper at mid-century.

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