

Farnham Group

History of Freethought in Britain

First a definition of freethought: I take it to mean unbelief of various kinds, especially in a deity, an afterlife, a creator; a sceptical view towards the world in ideas and practice; a belief in the secularism of separation of church and state; an understanding of the process of science as an important aspect of acquiring knowledge; a belief that ethical values in human communities are separate from religion. I would also add that vague human concepts such as love and beauty and awe are important for human life.

I can't give a detailed account in the time, but I will do my best to give a summary.

I will look at the scepticism of the renaissance, the deism and plea for tolerance of the late 17th and early 18th century, at those influenced by the European Enlightenment, at the popular and intellectual freethought which developed in the nineteenth century, at the development of the NSS, the SPES, the RPA and the BHA and some of their differences (although I see them as all part of the same movement).

EARLY SCEPTICISM

The humanism of the Renaissance was different from the secular humanism we talk about now -- but there was an emphasis on the human and the here and now which was new in Shakespeare for instance -- although it is impossible to know what his own views were, so deeply was his imagination embedded in histories and characters -- who laid a great emphasis on the variety and diversity of human behaviour, and in phrases such as 'What a piece of work is man'. He set out a tendency to concentrate on the human which has developed into secular humanism.

More clear in his views was Christopher Marlow, whose plays contain definite anti religious themes: His lines

I count religion but a childish toy
And hold there is no sin but ignorance

were probably express his own views. He was murdered, possibly for being a spy or being a homosexual.

Sir Walter Raleigh, although likely to be a believer, was accused of atheism and wrote a book *The Skeptick*. The visibility of freethought was affected by the oppression of the church and politicians -- so our knowledge of it often comes from accusations rather than affirmations.

Two seventeenth century thinkers contained ideas that were precursors of freethought. Thomas Hobbes in the *Leviathan* included hostility to religion and the clergy, but he never claimed to be an atheist. Anti clericalism can be found in religious people. John Locke wrote a classic work *A Treatise on Toleration*, whose tendency and importance to freethought is clear from the title. (It influenced Voltaire.)

DEISTIC THOUGHT

A step towards secular humanism was the belief in a deity who did not play a controlling influence in the life of the world and humanity. This was the famous concept of God as a watchmaker that wound up the

mechanism and left it to work on its own. Important deists (little known today) were the Irish John Toland, whose book *Christianity not Mysterious* examined the bible critically and gave a naturalistic view of the world. Other deists were Anthony Collins who wrote *Discourse of Freethinking* and Matthew Tindall who wrote *Christianity as Old as Creation*.

ENLIGHTENMENT

The European enlightenment of Voltaire and Diderot and the Encyclopedie is well known. There was also a Scottish enlightenment and the philosopher David Hume was one of the glories of that group. He particularly attempted to undermine the idea of God as a first cause and he also wrote about the unlikelihood of miracles. His *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* were published posthumously -- interestingly, he did not feel free to publish it during his lifetime

Another freethinker the enlightenment was Edward Gibbon whose masterpiece is *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He wrote history where the role of God had been removed. He wrote in his autobiography: 'The present is a fleeting moment, the past is no more, and our prospect of futurity is dark and doubtful'. Although it often happens, it is not essential to link freethought with optimism and progress.

Another thinker and more of an activist was Thomas Paine. He took part in the American war for independence and played a part in writing the constitution; he also played a part in the French revolution and only narrowly escaped the guillotine for his trouble. His book *The Age of Reason* was a devastating criticism of the Bible -- and biblical criticism was to become an important part of freethought.

POPULAR AND INTELLECTUAL FREETHOUGHT

Freethought in the nineteenth century became divided between popular working class secularism and the more intellectual middle class development of rationalism.

Richard Carlile printed copies of *The Age of Reason* and was imprisoned for doing so. The struggle for a free press was an important part of early 19th century freethought.

Philosophers were also important; Jeremy Bentham, his friend James Mill and Mill's son John Stuart Mill were all important thinkers. Bentham's ideas, centring round utilitarianism, originated the phrase 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' and was part of the process of separating morality from religion. John Stuart Mill was a very important thinker. His *Three Essays on Religion* were published posthumously and considered the utility of religion rather than its truth. His essay *On Liberty* is still read today as a classic statement of the philosophy of liberty.

The development of the counter theology of biblical criticism came thick and fast in the 19th century, especially being influenced by German writers. *Leben Jesu* (Life of Christ) by David Friedrich Strauss wrote of Jesus's life from a historical rather than a hagiographic point of view. It was translated by Marian Evans, better known as George Eliot -- whose novels are an important part of the history of freethought, especially the masterpiece *Middlemarch*.

SCIENCE

Freethinkers tended to be interested in science or scientists themselves. Charles Darwin was probably the scientist who most influenced thought in the 19th century. He was seen as someone who had destroyed the

need of an idea of God to understand the development of the world. The struggle is still raging -- although not amongst scientists. T. H. Huxley did much to present Darwin's ideas to society as a whole. He is also interesting as the man who coined the word agnostic to put beside atheist: that is a - without - gnosis knowledge. Generally meant someone who thinks they cannot be certain whether there is a God or not. The title of a book by a Dr Draper sums up a 19th century struggle: *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*. Many Christians today would not see that as a conflict.

POPULAR FREETHOUGHT

Early popular secularism was to be found in Robert Owen's utopianism and co-operative movement. He abandoned all religion and replaced it with a sense of 'universal charity'. Early secularists such as G J Holyoake were very influenced by the Owenite movement. Owen believed that upbringing and environment could change people and society. Do we believe that today?

The foundation of the National Secular Society in 1866 was a key moment in the development of overt and largely working class freethought. Charles Bradlaugh was its first President and dominated the Society until the 1890s. He was a man of enormous force as an orator and of great strength in his determination to stand up for atheists. He edited the journal the *National Reformer* which became virtually a record of his life as a freethinker.

A notable part of his career was his struggle to enter Parliament. He was elected for a seat in Northampton, but when he came to enter the House of Commons and asked to affirm, was told he couldn't: he then offered to swear on the Bible, but was told he could not do that since he was not a believer. A six year struggle ensued in which he was imprisoned in the tower of Big Ben, physically elected from Parliament, organised mass support, was even given support from intellectuals, and eventually when the government changed from Liberal to Tory was allowed to swear.

He was active in work for the poor, in actions for freedom, in republicanism, in the Indian struggle against colonial rule, in the right to promote birth control methods.

Another noted freethinker of this period was G. W. Foote. He founded the *Freethinker* in 1881: he was determined to be provocative and published anti-religious cartoons -- of a kind which would seem harmless today (though what about new law against incitement to religious hatred). A famous cartoon was Moses getting a back view of God, depicted as a large behind in a baggy pair of trousers, giving off wind. He was tried for blasphemy, convicted and given a sentence of one year in prison. There was an uproar at the severity of the sentence. During his imprisonment for the first few months he was only allowed one book for reading matter -- the Bible. He always claimed that the best remedy for believing the Bible was reading the Bible. He went on editing the *Freethinker* until 1915 and it continues to this day. (still very anti religious).

The fight against blasphemy law continues and indeed, there was a blasphemy trial in 1977 against the paper *Gay News* for publishing a poem suggesting that Jesus was homosexual. The editor was given a fine and suspended prison sentence.

At the end of the 20th century secularism was overtaken by socialism as a popular movement. The development of leisure activities also affected support for secularism.

Another very different freethought society was the South Place Ethical Society, which had started as a non-conformist chapel, became a Unitarian church and slowly shed its religion. A major leader was the American

Moncure Conway. The emphasis was on intellectual debate and religion was seen either as a myth or a cultural phenomenon. Sunday morning meetings became less and less religious -- but not disrespectful-- and the Sunday morning meetings in Conway Hall remain to this day

TWENTIETH CENTURY

The intellectual roots of twentieth century secular humanism are widespread. In fact the mainstream of literature and science and intellectual debate and publishing has been secular. Perhaps because of this the active campaigning secular humanist organisations have been small minorities -- although belief in religion has declined enormously. Whether it was Freud or Einstein or Bertrand Russell, or James Joyce or Virginia Woolf or H. G. Wells the central ideas were humanist.

Three more organisations should be mentioned: the Rationalist Press Association, the British Humanist Association, and the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association.

The RPA was founded in 1899 primarily as a publishing organisation. The publication *The Literary Guide* (still going today as the *New Humanist*) was already in existence. It published cheap reprints of freethought classics, which sold very well. Then in the thirties and forties came the Thinker's Library, which carried out the function of popular education as well as spreading rationalist ideas. I have always been impressed by those earlier freethinkers, who had little formal education, but whose self-education was remarkable. I suppose self education is the best kind of education. Science was included in these books, Haldane and Einstein, for instance. I have met people all over the world who have told me they came to secular humanism through the Thinker's Library. There has always had a very distinguished list of Honorary Associates from A. J. Ayer to Dr Needham, from Sigmund Freud to Julian Huxley, from Zola to Arnold Bennett to E. M. Forster.

The British Humanist Association was founded in 1963 and emerged out of the Union of Ethical Societies founded in 1896. The starting point was a dinner at the House of Commons at which A. J. Ayer and Julian Huxley spoke. In its early years it was led by Harold Blackham (now 102) The BHA has been very concerned with education, especially getting humanism taught in schools, with support of local groups, with a concern with the media, with non-religious funerals and weddings. Like all the secular humanist groups, it has been concerned with the tendency since Reith and still evident to push religion in broadcasting. There has also been concern with wide social and moral issues, such as abortion, capital punishment, gay rights, censorship, race relations and so on. (One other humanist groups must not be forgotten -- the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association founded 26 years ago.)

This sketch -- you could do a six weeks course on the subject -- leaves many questions: now that religion has declined in Europe is there any need for secularist groups? How do we combat the widespread indifference to religion and humanism? Can unbelief replace religious belief? Should it? What is the role of secular humanism in the face of the rise of Islam round the world? Will the widespread evangelical Christian extremism in the US have a harmful effect beyond the US? Another point of discussion is: how anti-religious should humanism be?

To conclude I offer two quotes from a famous 20th century secular humanist:

Bertrand Russell wrote in his autobiography, *A Free Man's Worship*:

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown

me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair....

Let us learn, then, that energy of faith which enables us to live constantly in the vision of the good; and let us descend, in action, into the world of fact, with that vision always before us.

Here we find pessimism and optimism -- and it is my view that secular humanism throughout its history and today can be both pessimistic or optimistic.

[Return to Events Page](#)