

Traditions of Unbelief in England

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One of the tasks of the Secretariat for Non-believers is to study the diverse forms of atheism. It has not been easy to do this in Britain for lack of studies which map out the field. Now with *Varieties of Unbelief*¹ Dr. Susan Budd has filled the gap. A literate sociologist, she has put us all in her debt by examining the minute-books and records of the various secularist societies. Her work is another contribution to the 'sociology of the past' which is indispensable if we are to understand the present. It occupies, as she puts it, the wasteland 'between the tilled and fertile plantations of the sociology of collective behaviour and the history of ideas' (p. 1). Such is her almost superhuman objectivity that it is quite impossible to determine from the book where she stands: her story takes her down some fascinating by-ways of English eccentricity (thus Annie Besant managed to remain a secularist and a theosophist to the bafflement of everyone except herself), but she stays resolutely cool and tries to resist the temptations of irony. Though she is prepared gently to chide her secularists for their repeated attacks on citadels long abandoned by the religious, she clearly admires them for their independence of mind and rejection of compromise, and can speak of them as 'heirs to a great tradition, to the continued vitality of a radical culture which exists outside established methods of thought' (p.80). But her tone is so very different from the propagandists of secularism whose account of the 'great tradition' tends to enrol Erasmus (a Catholic) and Voltaire (a deist) and indeed anyone who has in any way contributed to human progress. To the secularist, the world is full of 'anonymous secularists' who would reveal themselves if only they knew better.

The last-quoted remark is interesting in another way. When a Christian enters into dialogue with a contemporary unbeliever, he is not speaking with someone who has recently appeared on the scene without antecedents: his conversation will also be with a 'tradition', more or less embodied in his partner in dialogue. Unless, then, we have some understanding of the tradition we will literally not know with whom we are talking. Dr. Budd brings out very clearly the three strands of English unbelief: the secularist, the ethical and the rationalist. Though there has been much overlapping and borrowing, these three strands found expression in three movements: the National Secular Society, the Ethical

¹ *Varieties of Unbelief, Atheists and Agnostics in English Society 1850-1960*. Heinemann, 1977. pp. 307, £9.50. Unfortunately *Varieties of Unbelief* also happens to be the title of a book by Martin E. Marty published in America by Holt, Rinehart & Winston Inc. in 1964.

Union and the Rationalist Association. It should be noted that none of these bodies, which are Victorian in origin, used the term 'humanist' currently favoured today. And yet in some sense it sums up previous movements: the British Humanist Association was founded in 1962 from the fusion of the Rationalist Association and the Ethical Union (p. 172); and though the Rationalists withdrew in 1965, the Ethical Union retained the new name.

One has to lay stress, then, on the varieties of unbelief and trace the shifting eddies of history. We are not dealing with a monolith. The enduring difficulties of self-definition can be studied in the fortunes of a single building. The site at South Place, Holborn, was continuously dedicated to secularist purposes for over a century. The movements it has housed have been named, successively, the Philadelphians, The Universalists, the Society of Religious Dissenters, South Place Unitarian Society, South Place Society, the Free Religious Society, and the South Place Ethical Society. The reviews which have defended the secularist case have had significant names. Here is a sample: *The Oracle of Reason* (1842-43), *The Reasoner* (1846-61), *The Freethinker* (1881 - the present), *The National Reformer* (1860-90), *Agnostic Annual* (1885: from 1926 *The Rationalist Annual* and from 1968 *Question*), *Watt's Literary Guide* 1885: (became *The Humanist* in 1956 and *The New Humanist* in 1972). These hesitations and transmutations reflect a perpetual quest for self-definition: they are the echo of endless discussions about identity. Should the secularists (I'll use this term provisionally as the most comprehensive) regard themselves as agnostics or atheists? Was someone who declared himself an agnostic merely a timid form of atheist who stopped half-way along an inevitable road? As Dr. Budd remarks: 'The search for the right word to describe themselves was partly a search for the bond which united them' (p. 31).

It has never been easy for secularists to organise themselves. The movement has been rent by sectarian divisions, clashes of personality, battles of ideas. Dr. Budd explains why: 'The very stiff-necked individualism which has driven their members out of conventional wisdom and associations makes them suspicious of any organisational curtailment of perfect liberty' (p.34). One does not bother to revolt against organisational tyranny and obscurantist leadership in order to submit to different forms of the same thing. Dr. Budd makes the point that secularism has been most successful and most united whenever the whole movement could rally round some evidently just cause. Thus the persecution of Bradlaugh, who spent between 1880 and 1886 fighting law-suit after law-suit in an effort to take up his seat in the House of Commons, rallied the troops splendidly and provided the nineteenth century high-point of the movement. But once the spectacular defence of individual liberty—in this case the right to affirm rather than to

take an oath—had achieved its goal, the luxury of fissiparous tendencies could once more be afforded. Opposition—especially when clerically led and unjust—strengthened the secularist movement: success weakened it by making it redundant.

A series of inter-related dilemmas have racked the secularist movement. Should it go for militancy and risk remaining a pure-minded but ineffectual elite, or should it aim for respectability and a mass audience and so risk dilution? One argument for ‘respectability’ and conducting arguments with politeness was that the ‘image’ of the secularist was one of ‘immorality’. Dostoevsky’s remark to the effect that ‘If God did not exist, everything would be permitted’, was firmly imprinted in the popular mind. It behoved secularists, therefore, to prove that it was false, and to demonstrate in their lives the strict independence of morality from religion. Some secularists, non-smoking and teetotal, equalled the Non-conformists in the austerity and conventionality of their life-style, and in their frock coats their leaders frequently reminded observers of clergymen. But to other secularists, this desire for respectability seemed pusillanimous: they had not abandoned doctrinal orthodoxy simply to fall back into its moral mesh. After all, they defended doctrines such as Neo-Malthusianism (the euphemism for birth-control) and held that morality was man-made. Some might actually have been ‘immoral’ or at least non-respectable. Why should they conform, and thus lose at a stroke the advantage of emancipation?

Another version of the dilemma, and it is still with us, was precisely how anti-religious the movement should be. Most of the great Victorian secularists had a religious background, sometimes an intensely religious background. Bradlaugh himself as a young man had asked questions about religious matters only to be denounced by the local vicar who spoke to his father about his ‘atheistical tendencies’ (p.40). Once again, indiscreet zeal stoked the fires of atheism. This is almost a law: ‘Secularist bodies were founded as a reaction to the zeal of clergymen who attacked groups of workmen who discussed religion too freely’ (p.21). Individual biographies give a typical picture of a working-class Sunday School teacher who, thumbing through his Bible to prepare his classes, becomes aware of the contradictions, inconsistencies and—more gravely still—of the ‘immorality’ of the Bible. Exposing such errors became an urgent task for the secularist. But then they ran the risk, noted by Marx, of seeming to be preoccupied with what they had rejected: ‘To be obsessed with religion,’ he remarks in his Fourth Thesis on Feuerbach, ‘is to fall into the error of the religious.’ But the typical secularist did not heed this warning and the religion he had abandoned hung like an albatross about his neck. Orators who prepared for street-corner meetings at the London Hall of Science in the 1870s had to pass an anti-theological

examination. A typical question asked: 'How would you meet the argument that the long legs of the stag, the spatulate diggers of the mole, the thickening of the fur of animals in winter, etc. are marks of the divine?' In fairness to the secularists, one should add that the conditions of the debate were to a great extent imposed on them by the spirit of the age: it was a time when every scientific advance or philosophical argument was scrutinised for its implications for natural theology. There was no neutrality on these questions, and science was not yet irremediably specialised.

A third version of the dilemma was summed up in the debate about 'negative' and 'positive' secularism. The two positions may be represented by George Jacob Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh. Holyoake defended positive secularism: the movement would make no headway unless it had an 'inner life' and offered a substitute for religious rites. It needed secular hymns and sermons if it were ever to be more than a male-dominated affair of recent converts: rites and secular worship would bring in the women and enable the message to be passed on to the next generation. Sporadic efforts were made in this direction. Failsworth and Leicester had secular Sunday Schools; Stalybridge had *rites de passage* and sang hymns. Bradlaugh, however, opposed this tendency to turn secularism into a new religion, denied the possibility of a 'divine service on non-supernatural lines' and deplored the singing of 'human hymns'. Despite his intransigence, Bradlaugh paradoxically found himself acting as a sort of bishop of secularism, and was frequently invited to preside at namings, marriage and funerals.² The dilemma here was that if secularism had a 'positive' content, if it were to be something more than the rejection of religion, then this content ought to be capable of ritual expression. Alternatively, if all ritual expression were refused, how could secularism provide any emotional satisfaction for its adherents? Were they to be a debating club or a community?

Bradlaugh was, according to G. B. Shaw, a fine orator, 'the heavy-weight champion of the platform' (p.43). But his dominance in the movement became an embarrassment to some secularists in the 1880s when they felt drawn to socialism. For Bradlaugh's secularism was liberal and individualistic. He believed in *laissez-faire* capitalism and self-help. This was the setting which had enabled him and many others to make their painful way upwards. Not that he was indifferent to what was known at the time as 'the social question', but he saw the answer in birth-control which would relieve the poor of the burden of having children

² Funerals were especially important since Christian apologists exploited the trump card of death and recounted stories of horrible agonies and death-bed conversions. To counter such propaganda, secularists made much of obituaries in which the unbeliever remained calm and unfaithful to the end.

they could not support, and so break the cycle of deprivation. But the socialists—who saw a straight-line movement from secularism to socialism—had a ‘collective’ view of salvation: at this date they rejected birth-control as a mere palliative, an individual solution which did not begin to touch the real problems caused by the economic organisation of society. There was an even deeper reason for conflict: for Bradlaugh, morality was firmly based on a belief-system. His task was to replace the erroneous belief-system propounded by religion with an alternative belief-system, roughly utilitarianism, which would lead to social progress. He wanted a different version of the same thing. In other words, he had a strong sense of the invincible power of the right *ideas*. He was thus fatally bound to collide with the socialists who held that ideas were the product of economic and social systems. They rejected Bradlaugh as an idealist. His reluctance to entertain socialism helped to isolate the secularist movement from the mainstream of English life and at the same time to prepare the ground for that ‘differentiation’ of religion and politics of which we are still heirs.³ They are regarded as two non-competing spheres.

The second tributary to the stream of English unbelief was the Ethical movement. Strictly speaking it was not an instance of unbelief so much as of adjusted belief: it was characterised by the conviction that what was needed was a new religion with a new ritual to express it. Its particular relevance here is, as we have noted, that the British Humanist Association grew out of a fusion between the Ethical Union and the Rationalist Association. H. J. Blackham, later to become President of the BHA, had been an ‘assistant minister’ at the Ethical Church in Queensway. The intense moral earnestness of many Humanists owes something to this heritage.

But in the nineteenth century the ethical movement was in competition with both the secularists and the rationalists. It was founded by Richard Congreve, a Wadham history don. He went to Paris in 1849 and the ‘Father of positivism’ enthusiastically nominated him as ‘the spontaneous leader’ of English positivism (p. 192). Congreve believed that the ‘religion of humanity’ would take over the role previously held by the Church of England; and the ethical movement represented the next stage to which the churches must inevitably move. It had its links with socialism and provided the background to the Fabian movement. Its most interesting aspect, and the one on which most scorn has been poured, was its sense of

³ The geographical qualification should be noted. In Latin America the distinction between religion and politics is being deliberately challenged. Dr. Budd’s description of John Trevor’s Labour Churches of the 1890s could be an account of liberation theology: ‘Previously, it seemed to him, God had worked through the Churches to do good in the world, but in the 1890s the only body which was trying to relieve misery and bring about the peaceable kingdom was the Labour movement’ (p. 73).

the importance of ritual. Hymns and ritual seemed appropriate to celebrate the Good, the True and the Beautiful (a secular trinity which recurs), but prayer remained a poser. The Minutes of the South Place Chapel movingly record the difficulty.

With the views now generally entertained at South Place as to the attributes of the deity—as an All Wise and All Loving Father who could not change one iota of his wise and perfect love for all the prayers of the universe—it became very difficult to shape a prayer, especially a public one, in such a manner as would be reconcilable with these beliefs in every particular (p.221).

It is too easy to mock the ethicists for their doomed attempt to cling to the trappings of religion while rejecting its content: the real interest of the movement is that it brought out the paradox involved in creating a new ritual. There may be lessons here for all liturgical reformers.

Stanton Coit (*sic*) who dominated the ethical movement from 1894 to about 1930 was described as at once 'the most secular and the most spiritual of men' (p.224). He had a passion for ritual. He devised a form of service which was called an 'ethical high Anglicanism', and some observers remarked that his services made one feel 'quite like being at church without actually being an Anglican' (p.196). This would not have distressed Coit who, inspired by idealist philosophy and current anthropological work, believed that society was an 'organic whole' and needed some liturgical shaping to hold it together. His socialism was combined with intense nationalism, and eventually conflicted with it. The ethical movement saw itself as a sort of extension of Broad Church Anglicanism which was capable of embracing both agnostics and Jews. But the enterprise of devising a satisfactory ritual to reconcile such diversity could not succeed. It was bound to fail because, as Dr. Budd remarks, 'men met from different religious traditions: united by the fact that they had ceased to believe in them, they were none the less divided by their warring ghosts' (p.240). Ritual cannot bear with such incoherent and disconcerting juxtapositions. The ethical movement contributed to Humanism the feeling that to do good is self-evidently the highest duty of man.

But if the Ethical Union added a few grace-notes, it was the rationalist movement that provided the intellectual stiffening of Humanism. Its hero was Herbert Spencer. Its faith was in science and the very latest form of knowledge. Its strategy was not the open-air meeting favoured by the secularists but the book, the pamphlet and the tract—often, according to the recommended policy, to be casually left in railway carriages. It left Bible-bashing to the secularists and aimed at the cultivated middle class elite which, it hoped, would carry along the rest of the nation. Its problem from the start was that its ideology differed so little from that

of the ordinary half-committed Englishman that few could see the point of joining the movement. It also laboured under the handicap that it commended 'a way of looking at the world' rather than a set of specific proposals.

True to their late-Victorian origins, the Rationalists tended to deify or mythologise science. Science was as yet not so clearly differentiated and had not become the *chasse-gardée* of unintelligible specialists. But the myth of science depends very much on *which* branch of science is granted privileged status. Biology performed this role for the Rationalists. They were crudely Panglossian and optimistic. Evolution provided the key to the moral interpretation of the universe. It was seen as a law-like process leading inevitably to social and moral progress. This was not at all what Darwin, for one, had intended, nor was it what he believed. But the confusion of 'facts' with 'values', what is now known as the 'naturalistic fallacy', was cheerfully perpetrated by C. A. Watts who was the dominant figure in the Rationalist Association. (He may even be said to have founded a dynasty, for his son, Frederick, succeeded him as managing director and survived until 1953). Evolution had moral implications. What they were was not always very clear. Some were tempted to justify imperialism as the contemporary form of 'the survival of the fittest'. Others were drawn to Eugenics as a way of hastening on the demise of the unfit. The Rationalist movement was greatly influenced by Ernst Haeckel whose *Riddle of the Universe* went through many editions. Haeckel fused Darwinism with a kind of Hegelian theory about the upward movement of humanity. His short-lived *Monistenbund* proposed, yet again, to worship the Good, the True and the Beautiful. The scientist was seen as the ultimate stoic, resolutely facing the truths before which lesser men quailed.

Unfortunately for the movement, eminent scholars of 'advanced' opinions (with the exception of John Stuart Mill) would have nothing to do with it. Their reasons were not always creditable. Darwin, for example, believed that his ideas would have pernicious results if adopted by the unsophisticated (p.129). But it was the era of the populariser, the middleman, who could spell out what he believed to be the moral consequences of science for a wider public. It was the last period in English history when the 'man of letters' could confidently pronounce on scientific questions and expect to be believed.⁴ It was also, incidentally, the last period when Christian apologists could be equally omnivorous. But the decline of rationalism was contained in its dependence on the popular myth of science, as Dr. Budd shows in an engaging chapter called 'Things Fall Apart'.

⁴ Cf. John Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, London, 1969. But if the 'man of letters' has disappeared, part of his role has been taken over by the TV-pundit.

They began to disintegrate because while the Rationalists were on principle committed to embrace the very latest form of knowledge—unlike despised religious obscurantists—the very latest forms of knowledge did not always support their optimistic claims for the powers of reason. The process began after the first World War. Freud posed the first series of problems. His account of man broke with the lucid, reasonable, self-conscious image presented by the Rationalists. They responded by calling it a pseudo-science and objecting to its ‘muck-raking’. But even more disturbing were new developments in physics which by the 1930s had replaced biology as the dominant science. It was more abstract and therefore less capable of popularisation; it dealt in probabilities and partial judgments rather than the dogmatic synthesis favoured by rationalism. Moreover, when scientists like Jeans and Eddington wrote popular works they seemed, without being precisely Christian, to leave room for a conception of God as the Great Mathematician of the universe. More generally, Rationalists had shared the general outlook of the period in which they arose: all was one, and would eventually be explained as the frontiers of knowledge were rolled back. But contemporary science is reluctant to generalise, and has boxed off areas of knowledge which do not relate to each other still less to ‘morality’. Thus the Rationalist became an isolated figure with a musty feel, a hangover from an earlier period, with only an eccentric relationship to contemporary society and scholarship.

There were other threats to Rationalism. In the 1930s it lost ground to the Marxists: the Left Book Club borrowed its techniques and by 1939 had 60,000 members (ten times as many as the Rationalist Association had ever mustered). From a different point of view, its belief in progress seemed to be either naive or to be the bastard offspring of a Christian world-view. It seemed that the Rationalists could not win. A dissident student movement launched a magazine, *Free Mind*, which pitilessly satirised the *Old Guard* in an article on ‘The Psycho-pathology of Rationalism’. J. A. C. Brown summarised the unconscious motivation of the Rationalists in this way:

Those essentially religious who felt uneasily impelled to joke about God; those terrified by emotion who defended themselves against uncertainty and feeling by the use of reason; the close-minded and hard-headed materialist, opposed to psychology, psycho-analysis, telepathy or anything which introduced uncertainty into a safe closed universe. (p.173).

The severity and accuracy of this indictment should not blind us to the honesty to which it bears witness. Believers have been much more reluctant to admit the mixed nature of their motives, and the other functions which religion fulfils besides its ostensible ones.

Another line of attack on the Rationalists suggested that they were cold, unfeeling and superficial. The man with the strawberry mark in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* conforms to this type. The Rationalist response to these charges was to be found in Julian Huxley's *Religion without Revelation* (popular reprint in 1940) which celebrated the joy to be derived from the contemplation of the spectacle of evolution. The incompatibility between scientific explanations and God did not rule out 'religion' in some quixotic sense. 'Religion of the highest kind,' declared Huxley, 'can coexist with a complete absence of belief in revelation ... and a personal God.'⁵ Despite this gallant attempt to rebuild a system, contemporary intellectual life has taken another path. It has preferred an intellectual *smörgåsbord* in which the individual chooses according to taste rather than a complete metaphysical meal (p.180). This principle, if true, ought to work equally against religion and against rationalism; but it is more damaging to rationalism which has always presented itself as science rather than faith, and thus cannot elude questions by claiming to be 'on another level'.

Although belief and unbelief are evidently opposed to each other, Dr. Budd reminds us that in the nineteenth century 'the secularist movements ... and the Churches were locked in mutually sustaining systems of antagonisms. The existence of each was a service to the other' (p.99). They propped each other up like the two sides of a gothic arch. Argument and counter-argument ran along well-worn grooves. Secularists have subsequently claimed victory and suggested that the 'decline of religion' is attributable to their own efforts. Secularisation, admittedly only a label clapped on an historical process we do not very well understand, not only robs the free-thinkers of the credit but also leaves them without much of a role: for if combatting religious authoritarianism is the goal, and if religious authoritarianism is in serious decline, then the secularist has nothing to work on.

If secularists need the Churches to be relatively strong, the converse proposition is also true: they will themselves decline as the Churches decline, and lose their original *raison d'être*. Secularisation undermines rationalism as well as religion. As Dr. Budd remarks, 'it is increasingly difficult to say where the views of the (Rationalist) Association end, and those of an educated twentieth century Englishman of vaguely progressive inclinations begin' (p.124). What distinguishes the secularist/rationalist/humanist from anyone else is not so much what he believes as the articulate-

⁵ One can only speculate why Huxley wished to call this position religion. Dr. Budd's tart observation does not seem to apply here: 'Religion was generally called for at points where something unpalatable had to be swallowed, or something desirable relinquished' (p. 154). I suspect that Huxley associated the 'religious' with the 'uplifting'.

ness, forcefulness and confidence with which he holds and proounds his views.

If Rationalism mirrors the religion which it opposes, we should expect, further, that there will be a correspondence between the form of religion which is rejected and the type of secularism which is adopted. Dr. Budd finds some evidence for this. In the nineteenth century the majority of secularists had been brought up in the Nonconformist tradition. They were able to carry over many of their previous attitudes into their new situation: like the Nonconformists they attacked the Established Church with zest, fought for civil rights and human freedom, and (perhaps above all) could continue to identify 'religion' with a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. Revivalist campaigns in South Wales regularly produced a fresh crop of recruits for the secularist movement (p.121). But after the first World War, the religious background to the secularists tends to change: ex-Roman Catholics begin to predominate, and hence Catholicism becomes the target. Instead of the Sunday School teacher finding inconsistencies in the Bible, the typical member was a Catholic who 'finds himself in revolt against the Church and the priesthood because they tell him things he knows scientists to have disproved, prevent his reading science or politics prejudicial to their views, or justify unfairness or hypocrisy by reference to religion' (p.121).⁶ The next generation of secularists—by now known as Humanists—is less conscious of religious oppression and more interested in developments in philosophy, political theory and psychology (p.182). Teachers and doctors are liable to be drawn into the movement because both are professions in which the ethic of freedom of opinion and judgment by one's peers can easily conflict with authority structures enshrining religious ideas (p.183). Medicine and education are the likely battlegrounds of the future.

On the Christian side, theology both reflects and shapes attitudes. In the nineteenth century it was assumed that the unbeliever was on the road to perdition. Attempting to explain why some infidels, although not possessing the grace of God, nevertheless appeared to be virtuous, one vicar suggested that since Satan already had them in his grip, he did not need to tempt them (p.89). They were already lost. The notion of 'worthy infidel' or 'good pagan', despite its rooting in tradition, was seen as a contradiction in terms. In muscular Glasgow the unbelievers were stoned by pious Christians as they emerged from the Hall of Science. Expecting to see the sons of Belial, the Christians were disappointed to find that they had neither horns nor tail, but their theology licenced them to go on stoning. The reason given by Dr. Budd for this un-

⁶ The evidence for this is in a series of letters and reports in *The Freethinker* for the year 1962. Slender, no doubt, but not negligible.

compromising attitude is that Christians could not conceive of a form of morality not based on religion, and were therefore convinced that secularists were of necessity immoralists. One could perhaps add that the sense of apostasy as a heinous sin would exclude sympathy and understanding; and in the nineteenth century most secularists were ex-believers. Despite this, Stuart Headlam, a perceptive East End vicar who engaged in disputations with Bradlaugh between 1875 and 1883, was able to remark: 'How much nearer to the Kingdom of Heaven are these men in the Hall of Science than the followers of Moody and Sankey' (p.87). His bishop did not agree.

A different theology will result in different attitudes. The Directory of the Secretariat for Non-believers recommends a policy of dialogue in which both sides may be expected to learn from each other. This can be as disconcerting for secularists as for Christians, both accustomed to going through their set routines. Dr. Budd's book will enable both sides to make a lucid and intelligent start. Reviewing it in *The Observer*, Philip Toynbee said that 'any fair-minded reader ... must conclude that these passionate non-believers of the last hundred years have been one of the best and most useful elements in our society.' Despite their occasional dottiness and naiveté, it is difficult not to agree.

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