



BRILL

Historicising Paradox and Secularisation

Nineteenth Century Atheists and the Creation of Religious Paradox

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Abstract

This article argues that Joseph Blankholm's concept of paradox needs to be applied more widely in the historical study of religious/secular relations. Blankholm's study is useful but illuminates only a moment in the history of the secular (one representing a society where the expression of choice is encouraged by the absence of state religion). Examining the struggle between unbelievers and Christianity in 1880s/1890s Britain illuminates an entirely different moment in which a 'Christian paradox' is created by secular critics, commentators upon contemporary Christianity and by Christian modernisers. The Christian paradox emerged as a compulsion to leave behind, or downplay, unhelpful (unnecessary) religious doctrines. Yet the necessity of such doctrines/texts as fundamental to the morality and laws of the UK was enshrined in the claims of the established churches over their respective citizens. This meant their status as 'markers' was defended, whilst their explanatory power was melting away. Through an examination of arguments against Christianity, the religious paradox is examined alongside attempts to, alternately, both live with and end it. This emphasises that an individual paradox can ensnare and control both the secular AND the religious at different moments.

Keywords

unbelief – Bible criticism – paradox – moral education

Joseph Blankholm's, recent in-depth thought provoking study of contemporary American secularists/freethinkers, *The Secular Paradox*, brings to scholarly attention the ambiguities faced by unbelievers living in a 'legacy' quasi-religious society.¹ Essentially, Blankholm argues that, in modern America, Atheist/ Freethinking organisations and individuals invariably create organisations and mentalities that still have a close relationship and similarities with religion. Blankholm defines this as a paradox, rejecting religion creates further ways to embrace elements of it. As he argues—

The Secular Paradox is the tension between what secular people do not share and what they have in common—between avoiding religion and embracing something like it.²

Blankholm suggests many people extract important elements from Christianity to create some form of secular equivalence. One that still, nonetheless, draws upon the social and cultural capital of the religious, sometimes in unforeseen ways. In doing so, such people remain within Christianity's organising logic and its idioms. This does not amount to ways that secularise religion and religious culture, but instead becomes a process of unconscious (or sometimes consciously reluctant) borrowing, and acceptance of this status quo. This, according to Blankholm

perpetuates Christianity by another name ... They (secularists) reject the things that seem too religious, and they embrace the religion-like things they find important and useful, though sometimes ignoring their uncanny religiosity ... To be secular means to struggle, in ways big and small, with being not religious. None of the people I met during my field work—and no secular people in the rest of my life—have resolved this ambivalence.³

This condition of living with aspects of two opposing cultures creates, for Blankholm, the idea that paradox is the central component of this condition's underlying context. Essentially things are not as they should be, or are as we would expect, and we are perplexed. As Blankholm suggests, continuity and

1 Joseph Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious* (New York: New York University Press, 2022).

2 Ibid. p. 3.

3 Ibid. pp. 8 & 17.

acceptance of such paradox has profound impact upon modes of secular organisation, as well as the fluctuating concept of doctrinal ‘purity’ and community.

In engaging with Blankholm, and the applicability of his concept of paradox, this article argues two things. The first is that Blankholm’s particular study is especially useful for illuminating a moment in the history of the secular, one examining a society where the expression of choice is encouraged by the absence of state religion. As such, we find that we might get the most use out of Blankholm’s work by noting it is grounded precisely in the modern context of the American religious landscape he describes. He is emphatically not describing all secular situations in all historical periods, and further interrogation of the concept of paradox shows this. In other words, the Secular paradox exists in the ‘moment’ in which Blankholm sees it.

The second thing this article argues is that the concept of paradox and its creation of ‘moments’ means it describes ‘in between’ situations. These are snapshots where the religious and irreligious co-exist in the same context, something both belief systems could scarcely envisage when they sought purity and orthodoxy for such systems.⁴ As I also demonstrate this indicates the search (and research) for paradox in a series of ‘moments’, across religious and secularist history, might be especially useful, since its moment/snapshot narrative cuts across many of the standard idioms and narratives that versions of secularisation theory use. Thus, we by-pass ideas of process, end-times and irreversible change by accepting the value of the thick description paradox and its depiction of actual moments and situations encountered by actual individuals.

To make Joseph Blankholm’s book do this still more valuable analytical work, as a reflection of the moment, we must isolate what he has to say within the context he describes—modern America. This becomes one ‘moment’ of paradox that illuminates such discontinuity, but it is distinct from other ‘moments’. To make this point fundamental to developing paradox as an analytical tool another context is analysed. This is to show that ‘paradox’ can be an explanation of other situations. The example unpacked and demonstrated is that of secularists/freethinkers and atheists in Britain in the 19th century and their

4 It should be noted that some historical examples of individuals aware of the paradox of secular organisations behaving like religious ones do exist from the nineteenth century. Todd Weir noted Max Nordau, Wilhelm Liebknecht and Ernst Troeltsch all exhibiting amusement at the religious zeal of socialist freethinkers in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century. Todd H. Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession*. (Cambridge, CUP, 2014).

encounters with Christianity. Analysing their particular 'moment' shows us both its difference and the possible wider applicability of the concept of paradox, if we imagine beyond contemporary America. Just as Blankholm argues understanding the secular paradox creates a new understanding of secularism, it is hoped that widening its applicability creates a new understanding of religions and the complexities around how they evolve and survive.⁵

1 Blankholm and the Specific American Secular Paradox

Blankholm's America, and his analysis of its relationship with the secular and the religious, uncovers why paradox works within this specific context. Yet, this is certainly not universal. Perhaps, not surprisingly, the world described in Blankholm's book is somewhat locked into the ideas of modernity. It echoes elements of Norbert Elias' *Civilising Process* and its analysis of human relations and their growing complexity.⁶ Essentially, growing forms of interdependence eventually remove the combative and conflict-based experiences of previous historical periods. This makes the creation of mutually supportive communities a logical outcome of this. The *Civilising Process* is, indeed, under researched around religious conflict and religious tolerance, since its analysis potentially applies as much in this area as it does in analysing any other form of violence. We might, for example note how experiences of violence (such as the First World War) led to the resurgence of conservative forms of religion that rejected dialogue with the secular.⁷ In the more contemporary world we can equally observe that religion underpins some violence emanating from specific ethnic and nationalist groups. Likewise, some religious dialogues and narratives appear as elements that self-consciously reject lifestyles and cultures that obviously emanate from forms of modernity.

Blankholm argues that modern atheists/freethinkers all too readily replicate Christian forms of community. In an obvious sense Blankholm can detect such things more easily than individualist alternatives, because the manifestations of community are most visible. Indeed, we might ask how much conceptions of

⁵ Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox*, p. 3.

⁶ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Revised edition edited by Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennel. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2005).

⁷ Hugh McLeod and Todd H. Weir, 'Introduction: Defending the Faith: Global Histories of Apologetics and Politics in the Twentieth Century.' In eds. Hugh McLeod and Todd H. Weir, *Defending the Faith: Global Histories of Apologetics and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020) pp. 1–16, 8.

community are in the eye of the beholder. Community might equally be experienced as an imagined construct or perhaps one that is not central, or indeed a necessary template, for either Secularism or Christianity. The idea of Christianity as community (imagined or otherwise), it should be remembered, belongs to sections of the past—but not its totality.

Given this, a greater historicization of the idea of paradox has interesting things to say about the relevance of community, as Blankholm's study conceives of it. We might ask whether Blankholm has interrogated the idea of community deeply enough. For his context, community is synonymous with Christian forms which secularists strive to replace. This is because Christianity was the last to use such forms. But historically this has not always been the case. Many community manifestations of religion predate Christianity, just as individualism predates Secularism. We might here notice how archaeologists unconsciously foreground and highlight the concept of religious community. Almost every form of archaeological site where people gathered, or shared any experience, is described by default (and too easily) as a place of quasi-religious or ritualistic significance. It is important here to remember that unbelief or atheism leave nothing for the archaeologist—even iconoclasm is just as likely to have been perpetrated by the religious, or is instead forgotten in archaeological or museum reconstruction.⁸ Within this paradigm we might be wary of the suggestion that community is in any way a default form for Christianity. It thus could be argued that the idea that religion was here 'first', is really a quite big assumption. This enshrines the idea that the secular is always challenging, always catching up. It is somehow *always* a response and is thus, by definition, behind the curve. Even according to biblical chronology there were individual people in existence and flourishing before fully developed religion became formulated and institutionalised.

As we know Christianity has historically taken many forms, and indeed some of these are not shared community conceptions of belief and these are numerous. We have many examples of the isolated Christian somehow divorced from community. Numerous biblical prophets were effectively ostracised from their community, and indeed this was often the intrinsic message in such Old Testament books. Christ's own ministry was an exercise in individuality, and the pursuit of a singular vocational path to the fulfilment of religion's promise. Such singular vocations also embody the essence and purpose of the priesthood and the concept of Holy Orders. Beyond this, from late antiquity until

⁸ Eberhard Saur, *The Archaeology of Religious Hatred in the Roman and Early Medieval World*. (Stroud, UK: Allan Sutton, 2003).

the end of the Middle Ages, we have significant evidence of many individuals making the choice to interact with their beliefs and conception of God on their own.

Over this long period we have the example of the isolated ascetic, the hermit, the anchorite and the pilgrim. We also have the hybrid of monasticism, which is the 'paradox' concept of the community of individual vocations. There are also some historians, such as Larry Siedentop, who believe that the modern individual, alongside conceptions of human liberty and freedom, are heirs to the contribution that Christian thinking has made to the development of the individual in society.⁹ Over a long term perspective it looks uncannily like any belief or unbelief system is likely to use the tools at hand. Their previous use by an alternative group does not necessarily mean that the tools themselves are irretrievably tainted, or infected, with the essence of their most recent user.

Such evidence of ideological individualism is also evident in the rise of atheism and freethought in England. We have to remember that this is a different context to contemporary America, since it has the 'monolithic' church and aristocracy noted by Siedentop. Individual non-believers are now starting to emerge from early modern historical investigation. Likewise, the better known history that has so far come down to us indicates the existence of isolated individual deist opinion in the 17th and 18th century.¹⁰

Despite some of these qualifications the idea of paradox, essentially focussing the tensions that exist in the ongoing history of the religious and the secular, has genuine potential as a fundamentally useful tool of historical analysis. Blankholm's examination of a 'moment' of paradox highlights that the systematic study of such moments helps when studying other religious contexts in both the past and the present. As such, Its alternative value lies in the chance to use it in contexts that yield some different results. By showing paradox as confined to context, this article shows that the concept of paradox needs

9 Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (London, UK: Allen Lane, 2014). Siedentop's ideas have interesting things to say about the contemporary religious scene in America. He uses a vocabulary of natural symbiosis rather than 'paradox' to describe the exceptionalism of contemporary American Secular/Christian relations. He argues "The absence of both a monolithic church and aristocracy in the United States meant that Americans instinctively grasped the moral symmetry between secularism, with its prized civil liberty and Christianity, accepting that secularism identifies a necessary condition of authentic belief." pp. 362. This is a suggestion which confirms Blankholm's arguments about contemporary America, but it also points to its exceptionalism.

10 For more on this see Michael Hunter, *Atheists and Atheism Before the Enlightenment: The English and Scottish Experience* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

to be applied more widely in the historical study of religious/secular relations. Such an application has a valuable part to play in explaining an ongoing struggle or symbiosis model governing the religious and the secular—one which further qualifies conventional secularisation paradigms.¹¹

Investigating how 19th century atheists in Britain engaged with religion is especially useful for uncovering the roots of how this relationship developed, and how paradox is a two-way street within such a relationship. In early Nineteenth century Britain the concept of Secularism (here deliberately capitalised) was defined by George Jacob Holyoake as a species of defence in the early 1850s. This was intended to protect the rights and consciences of individuals against the perceived aggression of religion, stemming from the state protection it enjoyed—something which actively encouraged opponents. This Secularism denied that discussion of a future life was relevant to our interactions in this life, largely on the grounds that it was unknowable.¹² This particular attitude promoted the defence of free speech and freedom of conscience, even offering this to Christians abroad who were oppressed by different state versions of religion. This even handedness was the intention behind Holyoake's organisation the Anti-persecution Union. As such this attitude made Christianity, when supported by the state, into something of a monolith.¹³ A defensive stance easily painted the Christian religion as all powerful, entirely coherent and unshakable for its believers—as well as difficult for the sceptic to confront. Doctrines, enshrined in 'codes' such as the 39 Articles or the Catholic catechism seemed promulgated as unimpeachable truth with a significant cultural power and legal legacy.

The Bible was similarly enshrined as the unequivocal word of God and as such it served as an account of Christ's Ministry, a powerful moral primer and ongoing 'contract' whereby humankind was offered salvation in an afterlife. In 19th century England this suggestion was enhanced by the state which protected the Church of England as the Church established by law. This state Church thus had its own status protected by prohibitions, oaths and laws against offences such as blasphemy and sacrilege. Whilst Christianity was de

11 For more on this see especially David Nash, *Christian Ideals in British Culture: Stories of Belief in the Twentieth Century*. (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

12 The central accounts of this are Edward Royle *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans 1866–1915* (Manchester, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980); David Nash, *Secularism Art and Freedom* (London, UK, Pinter Press, 1992) and Michael Rectenwald, *Nineteenth Century British Secularism*, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

13 The role of the 19th century state in defending both faith and religion has been highlighted in a number of recent works. E.G. McLeod and Weir, 'Introduction: Defending the Faith: Global Histories of Apologetics and Politics in the Twentieth Century.' Pp. 6.

facto in control of the world of belief, it became almost natural for opponents to be on the defensive. Provincial organised Secular Societies, on the Holyoake model, were inward looking and eschewed confrontation, likewise individuals may equally have been quietist about their unbelief. The newspaper sources we have indicate reading and the consumption of ideas through responses to journalistic copy and a number of lecture circuits. Together these demonstrate a viable secular culture of '... self-organizing networks and associations that engaged in a high degree of self-reflection', as outlined by Weir for the Germany of a slightly later date.¹⁴

Such a situation protected individuals, but some had growing ambitions for unbelief which provoked searching questions. Was it enough to simply create space for secularists to be themselves without harassment? Or should secularists seek a wider and deeper change in society? What would this mean for religion? Was the intention to completely put it asunder, or to modify, improve and persuade it to modernise? Would there be an end time when such work was accomplished? Or would there be stages of change and development that could be actively noticed and measured? How would secularists react to any evidence of success, and what were they to make of a Christianity that was prepared to move from its monolithic status to an alternative? One that was less threatening and more accommodating to ideas emanating from the secular. It needed to discover what chinks lay in religion's armour and how it could evaluate religion's apparent retreat. Likewise, if it ever was to see religion defeated what would the appropriate forms of relationship between the religious, the secular and the state be like afterwards? McLeod and Weir, notably have called for more histories in this area that '... chase down the interactions between antagonists operating in the zone of conflict.'¹⁵ McLeod and Weir also remind us that we need to see the political and religious as equals in the creation of an 'apologetics' that sees them reflect 'centuries of ecclesiastical reflection and institution building—a sentiment that equally reflects the trajectory of Blankholm's thinking.'¹⁶

14 Todd H. Weir, *Red Secularism: Socialism and Secularist Culture in Germany 1890–1933*. Cambridge, CUP, 2024 pp. 7–8.

15 See *Ibid.* p. 6.

16 *Ibid.* Pp. 6, 10 & 16. Weir terms this an 'apologetic theatre.' Note also that in the UK in the 20th century Liberal Christians sometimes sided with secular arguments over attitudes to abortion and sexuality in defiance of more conservative Christi views. Similarly, Christians and Secularists are noted to have shared misgivings about Islam.

2 Questioning Elements of Christian Doctrine

Certainly, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century much of secularist thinking had become more assertive and combative. Many, especially inspired by the unequivocal militance of Charles Bradlaugh, actively sought to confront Christianity.¹⁷ The Christianity of the late 1880s and 1890s in Britain (seen through the eyes of commentators in the periodicals the *National Reformer*, the *Secular Review* the *Freethinker* and elsewhere) was deemed to be in obvious retreat. But equally, such a view was anxious to portray any apparent deviation from orthodoxy as dilution and surrender.¹⁸

Secularists conducted war upon a number of fronts. Of greatest visibility was an enduring critique of the church state relationship, the latter characterised by the operation of the blasphemy laws. Although codified into statute in 1698 (9 & 10 William c35) it was the Common Law of Blasphemous Libel which was more frequently used in England. Of particular significance was that the law protected religious belief as 'part and parcel' of the law of the land.¹⁹ By the 1880s one influential section of secularist opinion believed the work of actively blaspheming was an essential part of the campaigning agenda. Charles Bradlaugh even spoke and wrote on what he described as the 'necessity' of blasphemy.²⁰ Some fellow travellers with Bradlaugh, such as George William Foote waged a campaign of scurrilous publishing which pushed the law beyond its limits, seeking to actively incite court cases. Their textual content ridiculed Christian doctrine whilst illustrations highlighted humorous, or apparently ridiculous and immoral elements within biblical episodes. This assault angered the Home Secretary (Sir William Harcourt), resulting in the prosecution of the *Freethinker* and the imprisonment of its editorial/publishing team in 1883–

17 There is a considerable literature on Charles Bradlaugh as Secularist leader and thinker. His papers are available at a number of Libraries having been microfilmed in the early 1980s.

18 See Todd H. Weir 'The apologetics of modern culture wars: The case of Weimar Germany' In eds. Hugh McLeod and Todd H. Weir, *Defending the Faith: Global Histories of Apologetics and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020) pp. 19–36, pp. 36.

19 For an account of the history of Blasphemy in Britain see David Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain*. (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1999). The 'part and parcel' phrase comes from a judgement by Sir Matthew Hale in 1676. This indicated the law and religion were linked and criticism of religion was thus a matter of state security and the maintenance of respect for the law.

20 Charles Bradlaugh, *Heresy, its Utility and Morality: A Plea and a Justification*. (London. UK: Austin and Company, 1870).

1884.²¹ This illuminated the first stage of the christian paradox 19th century freethinkers wished to establish. They argued that the Anglican Church, established by law, had protection from that law and could (and did) simply render outspoken contrary opinion illegal. It had previously done this to oppress other Christian groups (in the form of heresy laws and disabling acts). Yet, in the 19th century it scarcely represented the whole population any more, despite claims to the contrary. Thus, it justified a confessional supremacy over opinion that its status did not warrant, because it had legally permitted other opinion to exist. This was a paradox, but there were others contributing to a sustained and overarching Christian paradox.

Throughout the last third of the nineteenth century secularist writers attacked a considerable range of Christian beliefs and dogma. This critique could range over many disparate Christian ideas, but it is worth noting that there came to be a particular focus upon specific issues. The centre of criticism was upon the offer of eternal life, the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins, the Atonement, the Resurrection and the problem of evil.

The Christian doctrine of the Atonement, portrayed by Christians as central to God's plan for humankind, seemed an especially harsh, and even poorly conceived part of Christianity. Criticism was less vociferous in the early part of the period after 1850. Gradually its vehemence and frequency intensified. In 1866 an anonymous writer in the *National Reformer* declared that if Christians cannot answer questions about this doctrine '... then it must be conceded that the doctrines of the Fall and the Atonement—the very Alpha and Omega of Christianity—are inconsistent with at least one part of our nature, and the highest and noblest—reason'²² In the same Newspaper in 1869 George Reddalls described the Atonement as 'false in principle and degrading in its influence.'²³ In 1877 Kate Watts noted that the atonement was grossly unacceptable as a religious doctrine. She further asked why it was necessary to atone for things that were God's making anyway. Why was Adam cursed and why was it necessary to curse the ground the tree of knowledge grew from. She concluded that the instigator of this whole scheme was 'a very unreasonable being, this God of the Christians.'²⁴ In October 1886 James Mazzini Wheeler found himself appalled enough to declare:

21 Nash, *Blasphemy in Britain*. Chapter 4.

22 *National Reformer* 7 January 1866, page 13.

23 *National Reformer* 28, November 1869, page 350. Report of a lecture given at the Birmingham Secular Club and Institute.

24 *Secular Review*, 8 September 1877, page 210.

... more pernicious absurdities than the whole theory involves were never found outside theology ... It is founded on savage notions of escaping punishment by propitiation; it depicts God as dooming all his creatures to unending misery for the sin of their first parents, and as only appeased by the blood of an innocent victim.²⁵

In considering the idea of heaven and eternal life many such critics despised the mercenary motives of those who accepted this bargain, seeing it as damaging the independence of human morality. Others thought the concept of heaven itself as somehow absurd, with little guidance as to what to expect there. What age would individuals be in heaven? Equally, how would the serially married fair in such circumstances? Others asked why an omnipotent, all seeing benevolent God, who was supposedly the fount of all goodness, had seen fit to create a species of people destined solely for damnation. The morality and the good behaviour it inspired in man, in the most cynically instrumental of ways, seemed to be yet another paradox.

The doctrine of forgiveness seemed to circumvent notions of simple justice and was a form of moral bribery perpetrated upon human kind. In 1870 Joseph Barker was enraged by the idea of the forgiveness of sins, and the related idea that it would enable the greatest sinner to love God more.²⁶ In 1882 William Heaford attacked the doctrine of sin and forgiveness which he suggested created a 'pious toadyism towards God'. This meant that people rushed for forgiveness after 'lives of debauchery or religious indifference'. Thus such a doctrine was '... a sort of moral leprosy with which God poisoned the springs of human nature in order to render man almost as wicked as himself'.²⁷ In another nuanced take upon this an unknown writer in 1883 pointed out that the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins encouraged crime.²⁸

The doctrine of the Devil, and his purpose within the overall plan of a benevolent creator was also fertile ground within which to nurture cutting criticism of Christian doctrine. Harriet Law was forthright in noticing an apparent flaw in the role the Devil played in Christianity, giving this critique a feminist slant. Her inference from the Bible was that the Devil was more powerful than God, since without him the Fall and Atonement would not have happened. Therefore to her female audience 'It was conclusively shown, to the special delight

25 *Freethinker*, 3 October 1886, page 314.

26 *National Reformer* 29 May 1870, page 341.

27 *The Freethinker*, 26 February 1882 page 66.

28 *Secular Review*, 20 October, 1883. Page 250.

of the ladies, that evil could not have been introduced into the world by Eve eating the apple, but by the Devil'.²⁹ George Chainey writing in 1881 'declared that Christianity had frightened children to death with its horrible hobgoblin of a devil and lake of eternal fire.'³⁰ Likewise, in 1890 Arthur Moss saw theological flaws in the concept of the Devil. He asked how can man have free will 'If God is infinite in power how can man resist his desire? And if an omnipotent God cannot conquer the Devil how can man be expected to triumph over him?'³¹

Perhaps of greatest enduring power for secularists were the almost endless varieties of expression of the fundamental problem of evil. How and why God created evil, or sometimes instead, permitted evil to exist and flourish upon the earth had a two-fold purpose. If one still perceived of God this became one way of conceiving him to be either a thoroughly malevolent being, or if one was more charitable a relatively powerless half deity. Alternatively, it was easier to accept evil as simply part of a universe without a transcendent element or direction to it. Many regular expressions of this idea related responses to national and international events and disasters. Some chose closer and more personal narratives to pursue this idea. Nonetheless, correspondents and journalists developed some interesting variants. In 1874 JCS, a correspondent writing into the *National Reformer* argued why God had not prevented evil happening to man 'by making him in the first instance, like himself—perfect, incapable of sin? This would have saved a world of trouble, and misery, and death.'³² In 1882 W.J. Aspinall asked if God is all wise and omnipotent why did he not make better choices? Why did he not suppress the Devil rather than create him? Why was man not created in a manner better able to conform to God's will without other coercion?³³ Writing in 1893 'Lucianus' asked '... why would an all wise God devise forms of rapine and cruelty that animals have to suffer at the hands of other animals. If one accepts a deity this point must be accepted how can anyone know the purpose of the universe.'³⁴

This sense of paradox was further enforced by the trajectory of the Bible and its history during the second half of the nineteenth century. Earlier generations of secularists were deeply involved in the systematic discredit of the Bible. Joseph Blankholm's *The Secular Paradox* has little coverage of the Bible in his

29 *National Reformer*, 29 April, 1866, page 269.

30 *Secular Review*, 2 July 1882, page 8.

31 *Freethinker*, 6 April 1890, page 166.

32 *National Reformer*, 12 July 1874, page 28.

33 *Secular Review*, 25 February 1882, page 125.

34 *Freethinker*, 7 May, 1893, page 310.

narrative. It is salutary that modern secularists go to the Bible quite late in their journey as final confirmation of things they suspected, and now find that they actively disbelieve. As such, his modern American secularists are profoundly different from those in 19th century England, where the Bible was frequently the starting point for criticism.

As a result Christianity's control over the unimpeachable nature of the Bible, as the immutable word of God, was questioned and found wanting. Beyond Foote's blasphemy there were more conventional forms of criticism. Although it can be traced in the 1840s to individuals such as George Jacob Holyoake, Charles Southwell and Emma Martin, the secularist press had begun criticising the Bible as a whole, in a significant number of instances, from the 1840s onwards.³⁵ This article only has room to mention a small number of typical examples selected from many others spread out across the period. Writing in the *National Reformer* in 1866 a correspondent styling himself 'A Working Man' argued that if the Bible was necessary to Salvation why did not God invent printing earlier so that man could reap the benefit of consulting the Bible.³⁶ In 1874, Charles Watts, a regular writer for the secularist cause in many secularist papers, suggested the fatal challenge to the Bible posed by Science was 'beyond doubt'. Whilst, in the same year, George Jacob Holyoake's brother Austin argued that the Bible cannot be claimed to be the word of an infallible deity, and yet be admitted to having incorporated human errors. Therefore, the Bible must be like any other literary production and claiming infallibility for it by now should have become laughable.³⁷

Beyond criticising the Bible as a whole, a vast number of secular critics focussed in on specific parts of it, largely to deny its authenticity or inspired authorship. Occasionally specific texts and books were targeted. The truth of the Gospels, and other aspects of their nature, were prime targets since destabilising these undermined the power and meaning of Christ's ministry. In May 1868 an anonymous writer in the *National Reformer* attacked the Gospels as 'an entirely human product and not inspired.'³⁸ Amos Waters writing in the *Secular Review* in 1883 argued 'The Christ of the Gospels is an impossibility and contra-

35 In 1843 Holyoake denounced the Bible as full of immoralities and was ostensibly a 'dangerous guide of life'. *The Anti-Persecution Gazette*, Volume 1, page 129. & 253. In the same year Emma Martin denounced the Bible as a 'silly, cruel, bad book' which displayed no evidence of God at work in nature. *The Anti-Persecution Gazette*, Volume 1, page 206.

36 *National Reformer*, 14 January 1866, page 27.

37 *National Reformer*, 11 January, 1874, page 17; *National Reformer*, 18 January 1874. Page 42.

38 *National Reformer*, 31 May 1868, page 340.

dictory creation of the human mind.³⁹ In 1892 James Mazzini Wheeler argued in the *Freethinker* that the Gospels merely had status as a literary production and, citing J.A. Froude as an authority, argued that it was copied from earlier documents and sometimes translated. Wheeler also noted that Froude had cowardly shied away from the admission that there had been collusion between the authors of the respective gospels to produce 'the same expressions'.⁴⁰ During the late 1890s a journalist, with the nom de plume 'Abracadabra', wrote a lengthy series of articles which undermined various sections of the Bible in a sustained attack. Such an attack took in allegations that the nativity narrative was manufactured long after the events described, as was the story of John the Baptist. The anointment of Jesus at Bethany was declared a fabrication and Gospel accounts of the Holy Ghost were inconsistent with one another.⁴¹

Specific works in the Old Testament were targeted with attempts to show they contained absurdities, or in some cases were clearly derivative of stories present in other cultures, thus rendering them neither original, nor the inspired word of the Christian God. Running several arguments together one anonymous journalist argued that the Bible was—'A collection of eastern semi-historic, semi mythological books'. Thus it was '... a book sent into the world for the purpose of teaching young people immorality, and confusing men's ideas of right and wrong.'⁴²

Beyond denying the Bible was a stable text, many writers criticised the actions contained within the Bible, the behaviour of most of its protagonists and the moral character of God himself. W.P. Ball, writing in 1884, noted that God appeared to commit numerous crimes in the Old Testament without comment. Moreover, he highlighted that this scarcely provided an uplifting moral example, since many murderers brought to justice were pious Christians—citing Guiteau who assassinated President Garfield and the actions of the outlaw Jesse James.⁴³ Someone who styled himself 'a Fatalist' argued God's actions in the Old Testament were fundamentally immoral. He was responsible for creating the tree of knowledge, for creating woman as weak, and instigating the Fall which effectively cursed humankind forever. 'Fatalist' finished his tirade with the declaration that 'a Creator, whose salvation scheme requires his own

39 *Secular Review*, 17 February 1883, page 100.

40 *Freethinker*, 27 March, 1892, page 194.

41 *Freethinker*, 5 September 1897, page 570; 12 September 1870, page 578; 3 October 1897, 17 October 1897 page 659 and 28 November 1897, page 762.

42 *Freethinker*, 2 December 1883, page 382.

43 *Freethinker*, 29 June, 1884.

chosen people to be wicked enough to crucify a man or God, that future generations of believers only in this blood sacrifice may sin with impunity, is not even a just God.⁴⁴

However, from the late 1880s the secular press began to note that many Christians had begun to retreat from biblical literalism and some Christian doctrine. As early as 1882 the *Freethinker* contained lengthy articles on 'Godism's Retreat' and 'The Decay of Faith'.⁴⁵ Two years later in 'Christianity Breaking Up' Foote likened the dissolution of the Bible and religious doctrine to a receding force of nature 'Like a polar ice-field, it was once whole and rigid; but the increasing warmth of discussion has slowly broken it up into floes (*sic*) and bergs; and these melt away as they float down to the great sea of knowledge.'⁴⁶ Writing in the *Freethinker* in 1890, in an article entitled 'Crumbling Creeds', Foote noted that waning religious belief did not equate with a waning power. 'You cannot read a sermon, or scan a religious paper, without seeing that the Churches are all aware of the terrible foe that is winding about them like an invisible serpent.'⁴⁷ James Mazzini Wheeler in 1892 noted that correspondents to the *Daily Chronicle* indicated that Christianity was shedding its dogmatic elements. This was mainly happening within Protestantism, but even Catholics were '... turning down the temperature of hell.'

Christianity is anything, or rather nothing, unless it denotes, as historically it does denote, those dogmatic beliefs which have come down the ages embodied in the Church. Those who have discarded these have virtually discarded Christianity. The discussion in the *Daily Chronicle* 'Is Christianity Played Out' '... are among signs that the Freethought assault on Christian superstition has not been made in vain.'⁴⁸

Writing in 1893 Arthur Moss noted that Christianity was fragmenting into other religions as no two Christians could agree any more about what Christianity was;

One by one the old positions of the Christian have been abandoned. The doctrine of the Fall of Man has become an allegory; original sin an evidence of man's lowly origin; demoniac possession has been transformed

44 *Secular Review*, 30 September 1882, page 221.

45 *Freethinker*, 16 April 1882, 13 August 1882.

46 *Freethinker* 14 September 1884 p. 290.

47 *Freethinker*, 27 August 1890, page 349.

48 *Freethinker*, 29 January 1893, page 74.

into 'fits'; the Bible Devil relegated to a back seat; and last of all, a Catholic scientist has put forth, as a 'feeler' a new view of the doctrine of eternal punishment, wherein he claims that for the sinner there is happiness even in hell.⁴⁹

The secular response at this time can be demonstrated historically to be simultaneously pleased and immensely wrong footed. Secularism wanted this change, but at the same time feared it.⁵⁰ Effectively, it created a narrative of Christianity's ignominious retreat. Yet some secularists in turn demanded that it somehow should 'come back and fight'—essentially arguing that a belief should not be diluted, but in all cases rigorously defended. In England Christian beliefs had been degraded and had visibly shrunk within the public sphere. It was a sustained paradox that despite this their power over institutions of law, education and the state remained substantially intact and surprisingly potent. Challenging this power brought the secularist lobby into the world of the political with its trailblazer Charles Bradlaugh straddling both worlds.⁵¹ Although Bradlaugh would secure some concessions the fundamentals of the Christian paradox remained firmly rooted in English culture.

49 *Freethinker* 1 January 1893 pages 13–14.

50 We might contrast this attitude with that produced by German secularists during the Kulturkampf of 1871–1878 who were more obviously confident of moving rationalism forward, effectively increasing their anti-clericalism when at least partial Social Democratic state support for their aims seemed evident. This state supported Kulturkampf and its laws that freed individuals from church obligations was important in creating secularism as a 'fourth confession' within late nineteenth century Germany, even if liberal Protestantism was to break with secularism. Eventually secular versus religious struggles would result in a species of pillarisation where groups guarded their access to 'confessional goods'. Such alliances, however temporary, between secularism and the state effectively did not happen in England. See Todd Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession*. (Cambridge, CUP, 2014). P 191, 193, 198 & 254.

51 It is worth comparing this quest for rights as more closely linked to individualist liberalism than a number of freethinking movements in Germany, which were more closely aligned with the aims of political parties, many of which were generally further to the Left. Together these initially constituted what Todd Weir has called 'the secularist political imaginary'. Eventually splits within these organisations were a prelude to their 'dispersal to the right and left' by 1870, although 'the secularist political imaginary' would reappear 'with heretical potential' within subsequent episodes of German radical politics. The fate of England's secularism joining with radical politics in a united 'dissidence' depended on Bradlaugh and his appeal which did not last after his death into the 1890s. This also occurred in a culture that was more stridently anti-clerical than England's was. See Todd Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany*. Pp. 136–144, 159, 171–172. See also David S. Nash 'The Many Chameleon Destinations of Republicanism. Charles

But other smaller paradoxes contributed to the overarching sense of paradox created by secular campaigning. Publicising the precarious instability of the Bible could be counted as one of the secular movement's major achievements over the course of the 19th century. Although this proposition had created a singularly enduring paradox, a disgraced and degraded religious book still held sway over the minds and institutions of society. The paradox grew larger still when the issue of a truly national educational system raised its head. Public opinion, steered by secularist rhetoric, had made the Bible into a moveable feast of the metaphorical, mythical and considerably less than credible. It was now being reimposed under the guise of national morality.

Here was the significantly larger Christian paradox at work. Agents of a modern national system of education wanted the Bible routinely used to teach religion and morality in all Board Schools after the 1870 Education Act. This new argument was an essential problem, or indeed paradox that secularists could see reaching into the years and generations of the future, rendering their biblical destabilisation work as null and void.⁵² The crucial problem that secularists identified was that those who demanded that the Bible be used in schools appeared to do so because it was a religious book. Such demands meant that arguments that it was a sound guide to public morals, with which to raise the coming generations, were clearly beyond secondary. As Charles Watts argued in 1899 the Bible contained individuals whose actions were at considerable variance with upright and laudable morality. He did not argue religion was not moral, but carefully noted it was not, and should not, be so linked with morality in the minds of the young. All the requirements of instilling the impulse for good conduct could be had without religious teaching. Morality stood on its own as '... essential to personal excellence, to societarian welfare, and to progress in all that is useful to the highest development of the community'.⁵³

Bradlaugh and India.' in *Republicanism in Victorian Society* Eds. D.S. Nash and A. Taylor (Sutton Publishing 2000) pp. 106–124. Bradlaugh's Liberalism, Republicanism and Secularism were seen by the early Indian Nationalist Movement as complimentary, making him a pivotal figure until the movement became less liberal and more religiously sectarian.

52 For an account of the rise of secular and secularist attitudes to religious and moral education see Susannah Wright, *Morality and Citizenship in English Schools: Secular Approaches 1897–1944*. (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

53 *Freethinker*, 3 December 1899 page 771.

3 Conclusion: Completing the Paradox

So, as we have hopefully observed, the attitude of secularists in 19th century England, whether intentionally or not, created a Christian paradox. This emerged from several lesser component paradoxes that converged to complete the larger central paradox. Christianity had been destabilised and its doctrines shown to be based on forms of falsehood. Central doctrines such as the Atonement, the Resurrection, the doctrine of forgiveness and salvation had been damaged by searing criticism and caustic (sometimes blasphemous) examination. The unimpeachable Bible, supposedly the word of God and guide for all time contained deeply questionable narratives about morality, the nature of the universe and the personality of the supreme being described in its books and pages.

Perhaps a most fundamental point is to consider that paradox is central, not only to the state that an individual group finds themselves within. Joseph Blankholm eloquently described the realisation amongst contemporary American secularists of living within structures formulated by religion and its idioms. Perhaps we can now realise that paradox is at the centre of how religious and unbelief groups describe their opponents, and the world they create for themselves through their actions. Hopefully, I have shown how nineteenth century English secularists pointed to the paradox of a bankrupt, discredited state religion which still claimed and implemented moral sovereignty over all British subjects. Such a paradox seemed still stronger when Anglican Christianity, and Christians, were observed to be abandoning the literal truth of the Bible, and backtracking on the absolute certainty of other Christian doctrines.

We note how Joseph Blankholm describes the paradox of living with the remnants of religion and its many forms. Yet, describing the paradox of opponents and their particular situations still exists within the modern world. In Britain contemporary debates over assisted dying suggest religious opinions on this create a paradox in an era of free choice and medical discourse. Likewise, for modern secularists and humanists the hangover religion's former place in society lingers in the realm of education. The state's acceptance of funded faith schools re-erects the paradox of religious privilege and 'special case' status for belief systems, ones eschewed by the majority in a society considered secular. As secularists ask, why is it that specific religious life stances are allowed funded separate development, whereas others that equally involve choice and life stance are not?

And while we are at it, as far as paradox being a mechanism that can be used to describe the situations of opponents, modern religion (but particularly

Christianity in the West) could be seen to be creating and describing a new form of secular paradox. It has scarcely escaped the notice of the religious that the secular world that atheists wanted and worked for (since the 19th century) has not produced victory but a deep ambivalence. Individuals do not grow up with instinctive dislike or hatred of religion any more. Nor do they, of necessity, escape it's early personal and institutional influence from childhood. Nor do they simply throw it aside as a matter of personal choice. Increasingly, western Christianity, and groups within it, might ask whether the push for the secular belongs only to a transition stage between religious belief and what comes next. Indeed, the critique and questioning of religion might actually be an historical artifact and curiosity, one all could envisage belongs to specific generations in the past and perhaps (only episodically) the present. Groups that struggle against religion, have either already been consigned to the historical past, or can be expected to soon enter the twilight.

The outcome is not the wholly secular society that secularists envisaged, but one where the status of the without religion (the nones) predominates. To the religious, this must seem like a secular paradox—all the work to 'remove' religion has not created institutionalised and default hostility, but instead indifference to the religious. Identifying this particular secular paradox may well have distinct advantages for the religious as they engage with 'nones'. The opportunity to fine tune religious messages to reach new audiences becomes a possibility. Through new training and new idioms, feelings of transcendence and unlocated spirituality can be steered towards identifying a creator, and renewed possibility of religion in 'modern' transfigured forms.

As we now enter a period seemingly dominated by the 'nones', this provides both the religious and the atheist/secular with new forms of paradox to confront. The religious might consider themselves exasperated by the failure of nones to realise most western morality, and how much of western history and heritage have a religious origin or connection. It might seem as though the current generation of 'nones' have stepped into a pre-formed world that supports Christianity as a benign anachronistic myth, one that has left cosy traces ripe for the experience of imagining past epochs. As such the myth can only be drawn upon by those who wish to do so, and it has no ability to impose responsibilities or commitments upon individuals.

The Secular/Atheist end of this equation may well lament that 'nones' enter a world where they clearly benefit from the advances of science and technology. They also inherit a considerable swathe of extensive and inalienable human rights that they don't value as much as they should. Nor do they appreciate where (and when) the battles to win these rights were fought, or the array of false and deniable beliefs and doctrines that were discarded. Without such an

appreciation, 'nones' are far more vulnerable to the creeping language of the 'spiritual' and the 'transcendent'. The atheist can theorise this as entrapment, stepping into a slippery world that blurs religion and science, one belonging to a darker past age they did not expect to be revisited.

In this way, and others, engaging with paradox is a resonant and powerful tool for describing the relationship between the religious and the secular.

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