

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

# THE EXPOSITOR.

---

## *SECULARISM.*

SECULARISM is, as I understand it, the system which proposes to waive all questions of man's origin and future destiny as either too speculative, or too insoluble, or both too speculative and too insoluble, for the purposes of practical life, and after giving these questions the go-by to make the best of the world we can see on principles intelligible to average understandings, without recourse to any assumptions outside the life of every day experience. So understood, secularism has a plausible air, only because it borrows a host of assumptions about every day life painfully established by centuries of spiritual discipline and supersensual teaching. Indeed secularism always reminds me of the sort of plausibility in that view of navigation which was taken by a clever skipper who objected to anything like mathematical acquirements in his mates. It set them above their work, he said, and was more likely than not to make them do the sums for finding their latitude at sea, wrong. For his part he thought it a pity that any one ever went behind the rules which every good seaman knew. You could sail a ship rightly by those rules, and you could not do any better, and might do much worse, if you pretended to go further than they took you. You knew the rules were right because they answered their purpose; and you could not find a better test of them than that, even if you cudgelled your brains till you did not know the difference between starboard and larboard. It did not occur to the skipper that unless you knew

the reason of the rules, the Nautical Almanack, without which he could not have applied them, could not be calculated at all; nor that if the rules ever needed correction, as in the process of the ages they certainly would, no one who did not know their reason could make the correction. The case of the secularists seems to me very similar. They can get along tolerably with people of their own way of thinking so long as they assume the use of a number of rules which mere secularists never would have made and never could have made, but which they justify as the skipper justified his rules for finding the latitude, by their practical success. But it was not experience of their success which originated either set of rules, but rather was it the belief in their intellectual or moral validity which at once foresaw and guaranteed their success. Where is the secularist who will not make it the first claim for his system that he insists, more even than religious society insists, on what everybody alike values, namely, on the sacredness of the family affections, and on the simplicity and purity of home life, and that he declines to fritter away human energy on an intangible coil of scruple and vow and ideal emotion? Granted: but where did we first get the sanctions for what he values so much? How, for example, did the horror of what breaks up the family first come into the world? Was the commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery" the result of a long line of statesmanlike observations on the deranging effect of licentiousness on family life? Or was it the oracle of a prophet who professed to receive the law direct from above? How will the secularist deal with any member of his class who, having accepted his dictum that questions piercing into the supersensual world are insoluble and misleading, proposes to try afresh by experience the worth of the principle which asserts the holiness of marriage and the sinfulness of even transient desires which go beyond its limits? Will he not be told that just in proportion as the transcendental charac-

ter of such obligations as these has been given up, in that proportion has the law of all modern States recognized the necessity of relaxing the marriage tie? and will he not be asked why the individual conscience need be guided by a higher sense of obligation than that embodied in the law of so many lands? The sceptical party in France not long ago proposed to make marriage dissoluble at the pleasure of the parties whenever the woman had passed the age at which childbearing was no longer to be expected. Is not that, as any secularist in favour of easy divorce may well ask, a very fair indication of the effect which is naturally produced on the estimate of moral obligations of this kind, by the disappearance of all supersensual sanctions for the moral law? How is the secularist who makes it his boast that he bases his rule of life on tangible and common-sense estimates of human good to take refuge in absolute assertions of the inherent sinfulness of any course of action apart from the test of experience, since such absoluteness implies in itself the existence of a source of knowledge higher and diviner than human experience? And if he admits the test of experience as final, to what experience can he appeal as proving that the law of marriage should overrule the sway of impulse, instead of, as the French sceptics hold, the sway of impulse overruling the law of marriage?

I observe with much interest that Mr. Frederic Harrison, who is reviewing our "Creeds Old and New" from the Positivist point of view in *The Nineteenth Century*, feels keenly this weak side of humanism, as he calls secularism, though as a Positivist he is himself nothing but a humanist with a crotchet of his own, which crotchet inclines him to attribute all the evil in humanism to what he inveighs against oddly enough under the name of Protestantism. In the October number of *The Nineteenth Century* he declares that Protestantism has had only a "dividing, anti-social, dehumanizing influence." "Wherever it appears," he says,

“the power of the mother and the woman, the perpetuity of marriage, generosity towards the weak, diminish. Its triumphs are towards divorce, personal lawlessness, industrial selfishness.”

Now whether that be true or false,—which it is not my business to discuss here,—one would like to know what breakwater the Positivist has to set up against this general tendency of the negative spirit to undermine the sanctity of marriage and the purity of domestic life. And it turns out that while scornfully repudiating Protestantism, most forms of which do however oppose both an absolute Divine prohibition and also the absolute moral condemnation of the religious conscience to this form of laxity, the Positivists want to take advantage, in the name of history alone, of all those habits of mind which have been inspired by the sacramental view of marriage, though without burdening themselves in any degree with any responsibility either for the Divine origin or for the intuitive moral authority of the sacrament itself. Mr. Frederic Harrison is evidently very deeply convinced that to throw off the more powerful of the moral restrictions on human passion which the old creeds have imposed would be fatal to the progress of men; and therefore, like his master, Auguste Comte, he makes desperate efforts to borrow those theological habits of mind in the name of sociology or history, while politely disclaiming on the part of philosophy the fiction of their theological parentage. I do not think, however, that he will succeed in persuading plain Englishmen to follow his example. If the creeds which inspired the belief in the Divine authority of marriage and the Divine condemnation of an impulsive licence, are all false,—if the supersensual life in the assumption of which those creeds are rooted be all a dream,—how is history or sociology to prove that the iron chains which those creeds have placed on human passion, are not, as the humanists say, inventions of a morbid monasticism which

it becomes a civilized age to ignore, or at all events very seriously to relax?

You might just as well expect a Protestant to justify, in the name of sociology or history, the adoration of the consecrated wafer, after he had ceased to believe in the transubstantiation of the elements, as expect a humanist who had given up all faith in the Divine origin and character of the restraints placed on human desires, to accept, on grounds of pure expediency, that stern interference with some of the most vehement impulses of man which Jew and Christian alike respect because they believe it a Divine discipline intended to train our feeble natures into some faint sympathy with the constancy of God. Of course the Positivists will say that the argument in favour of a strict law of marriage is the historical evidence indicating that, without it, the continuity and purity of family life are subject to the most terrible interruptions. But the party of licence always reply—and from their point of view plausibly enough—that it is not law, but love, which secures the continuity and purity of family life; and that they never in their wildest moments proposed to interfere with the natural and purely voluntary tie which love, while it lasts, creates. Nor is it possible, I think, to justify a stern interference with the most authoritative and impetuous of human emotions, except in the name of a supersensual morality, which presents such an interference as a Divine obligation acknowledged by the inmost heart. Now for those who will admit any morality of that kind, to disbelieve in God is impossible; for an inward yoke, mysteriously imposed with absolute authority on the inmost will and the inmost desires, itself witnesses to the real existence of an authority far beyond that of finite experience, and warns us that it is for the purpose of bringing us into sympathy with the Being who wields that authority, that this yoke is imposed. Thus the whole Jewish Scriptures insist with a strange and almost

mystical monotony on the close connection between the constancy required in marriage and the constancy which God demands in the spiritual relation of worship to Himself. Sometimes there appears to be almost a confusion between sins against the one kind of fidelity, and sins against the other, as if it were implied that he who is incapable of appreciating duly the sacredness of the human tie, will be necessarily incapable of appreciating the sacredness of that which is at once more awful and more intimate. It is clear that the Jewish prophets regarded constancy in the most intimate of all human relations, as a sort of initiation into the infinite constancy of God, and held that the most genuine love of which the heart is capable depends, in human relations as in Divine, not merely nor chiefly on the warmth or impetuosity of mere impulse, but on that spirit of willing and hearty self-sacrifice which concentrates in itself all the highest elements of human nature. So far as I can follow the meaning of the prophetic teaching as concerns the close connection between licence in the relations of the sexes, and licence in regard to idolatry, it was not the licentious character of almost all the Syrian idolatry of which the prophets were chiefly thinking, but rather of the primary necessity of recognizing and adoring a purely righteous and unbending law most of all in those relations of life which stir in our hearts the most vivid and exciting emotions. Does not the evidence of the conscience shew that the most intimate relations are the most dangerous and destructive unless the profoundest obedience to the law of righteousness be carried into the very core of all these relations? that as nothing is at once more fascinating and more dissipating than close human ties which are governed by emotions alone, so also nothing is more fascinating and more dissipating than a disposition to toy with strange religions which men only half believe, to make experiments as it were on the confines of

worship, and to submit the heart to the more awful aspects of a faith which the conscience has never accepted as Divine? The most intimate relations, whether with human or super-human love, must rest on the solid basis of a righteous law, or we shall squander on them all the richest part of the life of man, and yet leave the heart a wreck.

So much for the relaxation which a purely secularist creed is certain to introduce into the main bond of the family, the bond of marriage. But now let me go beyond this point, and consider how far the increased importance which the secularist proposes to attach to the family affections generally,—for which he hopes to gain a higher cultivation when he has dismissed from his mind what he regards as an unreal spiritual world,—can be realized. Now I will make three remarks on this. Our Lord has said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”; and I think even the secularist would admit that if your heart is habitually fixed where there is no conviction of the existence of any lasting treasure, where there is no conviction of the existence of anything of permanent and intrinsic value, the happiness of life will not be great. If we are to attach a much higher value than at present to human affections, will it not be necessary to hope more from them than we do at present, to regard them with greater awe and greater trust, to be more sure than we have been that they will outlive youth, that they will survive care, that they will defy death? And is it possible for those who regard the question of immortality as one of the perfectly insoluble problems of human destiny to be sure *at all* on any of these points, to say nothing of being even more sure than Christians have been?

That is my first remark. And the second is this: That if our human affections are to engross for the future all the attention which, as the secularist thinks, has been superfluously lavished on the spiritual world, they must at least be bestowed with as much regard to the standard of human



righteousness as that with which the religious affections have been bestowed on the Divine standard of all righteousness. You cannot make more than ever of the human affections, and yet make less than ever of their moral ideal. You cannot lose yourself in the love of man and yet ignore his faults, his caprices, his flimsinesses, his weaknesses, his sins. Every new step in disinterested love for others implies a new step in the knowledge of what you should desire for them, what type of character they should aim at, what will gain for them more of your affection, what must inevitably cost them much of it. Now if this be so—and I think even the severest secularist will admit it—how will your new devotion to human interests behave under the moral earthquake of the discovery that all our old ideals of character are everywhere penetrated by assumptions which the secularist repudiates? We have hitherto thought it the highest praise of a man to call him godly; the secularist says it is an unmeaning phrase. We have hitherto held it a Divine command to honour our father and our mother; the secularist tells us to honour them if they merit it, but not because they are our father and mother. We have held this to be a Divine command, “Those whom God has joined together let not man put asunder.” The secularist says you must have a better reason than that, for so far as he knows God has joined none together. We have held it a Divine command not to steal. The secularist may agree on grounds of experience, but if he is a socialist as well as a secularist, he will add that society has already violated the principle, and that you must undo on a great scale the stealing of the law. We have hitherto held it a Divine command not to covet for ourselves the possessions or enjoyments of others; the secularist will probably say that he is bound to discriminate; to consider the good of society as a whole, and to desire some (even if he magnanimously resigns others) of the redundant riches and pleasures of his

fellow men. Now with such a mine as this sprung under the moral ideal we have inherited from our fathers, how is it possible to define for yourself what you are to love and what to hate, in those human beings on whom for the future you are to lavish the affections formerly given to God? Just when the heavens are all clouded over, your compass itself has failed you; you cannot steer by the sun of righteousness, for it is hidden: and you have just discovered that the variations of your moral compass are so wild and wayward that it is more than perilous to steer by that. Will the human affections grow, will they wax more constant, just as your mind begins to be most doubtful what is worthy of love and what is unworthy of it? Will you live more surely than ever in the life of beneficence when you have just discovered that the old conceptions of beneficence are all vitiated by their theological foundation, and that you must start anew with your ideal of man, for the very reason that you have surrendered your belief in God?

And my third remark on the secularist ideal is this: That it must tend rather to weaken the personal affections by substituting the benevolent end of life, *i.e.* the object of adding generally to the gross total of human happiness, for the more individual cultivation of close personal ties. My reason is this: so long as we suppose our moral law to come from God and to lead us to God, we necessarily think of life as the mere instrument by which that type of character which we regard as the most holy character, is formed: we regard a holy character as the best issue of life, instead of regarding the degree in which it tends to the happiness of life, as the best test of character. And of course all our modes of thought are moulded by this belief. We regard no life as a failure, however little it has had of happiness, however little it has bestowed of happiness, which ends in a pure, devout, self-forgetful character; indeed we regard it as the best success. But how can the secularist adopt this view? He thinks the

origin of our moral instincts as much a problem as the end of them. He thinks it as probable as not that what seem to us our highest moral conceptions, are all astray. He thinks that there is no certainty of any character surviving death, and he is precluded therefore from attaching any value to the unseen future of a mind beyond the grave. With such views he is compelled to look for a standard of action independent of our present conscience, and independent of what we can hope for from an unseen life. But there is nothing to lay hold of, entirely independent of these two religious ideas, except the visible or ascertainable happiness of visible and existing societies of men. And this is found to be actually the standard to which secularists appeal. Professor Clifford, for instance, defined right and wrong as that which tends to increase or to diminish the coherence and stability of human society. In other words, a righteous character is the means of which the perfect organisation of human societies is the end. Nor do I remember any instance of a purely secularist view of life which does not deduce its standard of right and wrong from the supposed tendency of certain conduct to increase the sum total of verifiable human happiness, and of certain other conduct to diminish it. But if this be so, what is the necessary effect? It must be, I think, to diminish incalculably the sacredness of the individual and personal, to the advantage I suppose of the general and impersonal, affections. If the individual is to be regarded as the mere constituent atom of society, as not surviving his place in that society, and as finding his perfection only in ministering to the well-being of that society, it is idle, nay it is wrong, to lavish on an individual for his own sake that sort of affection which is only justifiable so far as it tends to the good of the whole. Thus the doubt as to individual immortality, and the doubt as to any final and absolute standard of individual morality, both tend most powerfully to the very same result, the weakening

of individual affections, and the aggrandizement of general social qualities at the expense of more exclusive personal ties.

I infer then that secularism, so far from concentrating on the family affections the power which it supposes to be now wasted on an imaginary spiritual world, would sap the intensity of those family affections in three more or less distinct, though closely connected, ways. It would weaken the *value* of personal affections by discouraging all confidence as to their durability, to say nothing of their eternity. It would confuse the standard of what is lovely and unlovely, which is essential to the clearness and intensity of personal love, by throwing doubts on half the accepted types of human virtue. And, finally, it would directly depreciate them by making it clear that the love to individuals should be wholly subordinated to the love of society; that it is the end of character and conduct to cement society, not the end of society to ennoble character and conduct.

The truth is that to a very great extent it is only Christianity which makes modern secularism look plausible. By long dwelling on the Christian type of character men have learnt to imagine that that type of character could stand alone, after all the beliefs which nourished and support it are gone. "Get rid," says secularism, "of this mystical religion of yours, and we accept your morality for its own sake with all our hearts. It is only your religion which prevents you from insisting as you ought to do on your morality." On the contrary, we reply, only get rid of what you call our mystical religion, and we do not believe that enough of the old morality would survive it to make your moral position in the least like that which you at present expect to hold. Sweep away the belief in the guidance of men by a Divine hand, and all the more mysterious and less commonplace of our moral intuitions will vanish into doubtful superstitions. Dispel the belief in a future life, and that

intensity of personal affection which we now revere, will become a folly. Convince yourselves that there is no law of God, and the law of human virtue will become suddenly questionable and hazy. Once assure yourselves that a holy character is not the end of life, and you will waver more and more as to what kind of life it is that should be the end of character. Secularism is strong and respectable only while it borrows its moral standard from the Gospels, even though it declines to acknowledge the assumptions on which the Gospels found it. Let this moral stem be only separated from its root, and half the moral virtues would seem first questionable and then absurd. Why should we value human constancy if there is no eternal constancy to adore, and the law of all human emotion is change? Why should we be reverent if the origin of all our life is in the earth below, and not in the God above? Why should we be courageous, calm, and trustful, if there be no Divine shield over us, and no Divine goal to which we can attain? Why should we be lowly in heart if there is no Being higher than ourselves? If secularism is justified, it disposes not only of the received religion but of the received morality as well. And yet it founds all its claims on the increased emphasis which it would give to our morality at the expense of our religion.

R. H. HUTTON.

---

### *THE TETRAGRAMMATON.*

EXODUS iii. 14.

It has often been observed that the great epochs in the history of the chosen and priestly race were marked, if not ushered in, by the introduction of a new name for God, a new verbal sign, or symbol, expressing some significant and momentous aspect of the Divine character. To the world's grey fathers, the men before the flood, He was mainly