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ENGLAND 1830-1914

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ENGLAND 1830-1914

✚ Laura Schwartz ✚

Manchester University Press
Manchester and New York

distributed in the United States exclusively by
Palgrave Macmillan

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Published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9NR, UK
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

Distributed in the United States exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan
175 Fifth Avenue, New York,
NY 10010, USA

Distributed in Canada exclusively by UBC Press
University of British Columbia, 2029 West Mall,
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 978 0 7190 8582 6 hardback

First published 2013

The publisher has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for any external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Typeset
by 4word Ltd, Bristol
Printed in Great Britain
by MPG Books Group, UK

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Infidel feminism

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Acknowledgements

I should like to thank the University of East London and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, for funding the PhD thesis upon which this book is based, and St Hugh's College, University of Oxford for the Career Development Fellowship which made it possible to transform it into a monograph. I am also very grateful to Kate Hodgkin and Maggie Humm, for reading and commenting on many early drafts; Anna Davin, Cath Fletcher and Jane Garnett, for their thoughts and encouragement; Kathryn Gleadle, Deborah Lavin, Phyllis Mack, Janette Martin, Helen Rogers, Marie Terrier, Will Van Reyk and Maureen Wright, for sharing their work in progress with me; and to Jane Miller, for kindly letting me to look at the Collet family papers. The History of Feminism Network provided a crucial intellectual forum throughout the research, so my special thanks to Madisson Brown, Marc Calvini Lefebvre, Esme Cleall, Erin Cullen, Daniel Grey, Angela Grainger and Naomi Hetherington for being such good friends and colleagues. One of my greatest debts is to my supervisor, Barbara Taylor, who was endlessly generous with her time, her advice, her support and her ideas. I was also lucky to have as examiners Lucy Bland and David Nash, whose insight and encouragement enabled my first venture into the twentieth century.

Infidel Feminism was originally conceived amidst protests against the Iraq war and the intense discussions on religion and gender that it generated. The book was finally completed in a moment of fundamental transformation in (and potential decimation of) Higher Education in Britain. Such events inevitably informed the questions this book asks about what it means to be a political actor, a feminist subject and a producer of knowledge. They also changed the kinds of relationships that could be expected to be forged during a period of research, so that staff at the Women's Library also became friends on a picket line, while the Bishopsgate Institute offered not only a wonderful archive but also much-needed space for collectives to meet and organise. A different kind of thanks should therefore go to Indy Bhullar, Gail Cameron and Dianne Shepherd at the WL and especially to Stefan Dickers at the BI. This book is dedicated with love to all those involved in Feminist Fightback, XTalk and *The Paper*, who taught me that reading and writing is best done together.

LAURA SCHWARTZ
London, 2011

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Introduction

In the spring of 1869 Mrs Harriet Law climbed onto a platform in Newcastle upon Tyne to defend Eve's rebellion against God. Law informed her audience that, instead of 'cursing' our Biblical mother for bringing about the Fall of Mankind, she in fact deserved our 'reverence'. For Eve's 'partaking of the forbidden fruit' had brought knowledge into the world against the will of an authoritarian God.¹ For Harriet Law, Eve's refusal to remain in ignorance was inspiration for a growing number of Victorian women, who, like Law herself, had rejected the authority of religion as part of their struggle for emancipation. Law's deliberately provocative speech was typical of a longstanding tradition of 'Freethinking feminists' who combined their campaigning for women's rights with a militant and antagonistic renunciation of Christianity. Such women often proudly referred themselves 'infidels' – reclaiming a title initially employed as a term of abuse by their Christian opponents. Such a name implied a refusal of faith and a betrayal of God's law – acts which Freethinking feminists believed to be essential to ending the subjugation of their sex.² For them, religion, particularly Christianity, was the primary cause of women's oppression.

The question of 'religion' versus 'secularism' and which offers a better guarantee of women's rights has a long history. As currently discussed by twenty-first-century feminists, religious leaders and world governments such concerns are, of course, the product of a post-9/11 world, but they are far from being new. In fact, the issue of women's rights was integral to the creation of modern definitions of 'religion' and 'secularism' in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when feminists and anti-feminists, Christians and Freethinkers battled over who had women's best interests at heart. Such contests were fundamental to the development of feminist thought in England, but have been almost entirely passed over in the historiography of the women's movement. This book examines these

debates and offers the first ever in-depth study of 'Freethinking feminism' – a distinctive brand of women's rights discourse that emerged out of the Secularist movement during this period.³

The Secularist or Freethought movement, as it was also known, was dedicated to ridding society of false and repressive belief-systems through the critique of orthodox religion. This book looks at the lives and work of a number of female activists associated with organised Secularism, and at how their rejection of religion encouraged and shaped their support for women's rights. These self-proclaimed 'infidel' feminists championed moral autonomy, free speech, and the democratic dissemination of knowledge. Alongside their rejection of God-given notions of sexual difference and a critique of the Christian institution of marriage, such Freethinking principles provided powerful intellectual tools with which to challenge dominant and oppressive constructions of womanhood.

Infidel Feminism traces this current of Freethinking women's rights advocacy from the 1830s through to the beginning of the First World War; and in doing so raises a number of important questions for our understanding of the chronology and intellectual trajectories of first wave feminism. A fuller understanding of the important role played by infidel feminists enables us to identify a more continuous women's rights tradition throughout the century, connecting the 'radical' Owenite feminists of the 1830s and 1840s with the 'respectable' post-1850 women's movement. Freethinking feminists kept alive the Owenites' libertarian critique of traditional sexual morality in the middle decades of the century, when many in the women's movement were unwilling to countenance any form of sexual expression outside marriage. They can therefore be viewed as a 'missing link', connecting early nineteenth-century feminist visions of greater sexual freedom with the re-emergence of discussions of Free Love and sexuality at the *fin de siècle*.

An anti-religious intellectual culture was profoundly important to the development of women's rights discourses during this period. Although nineteenth and early twentieth-century feminism was predominantly Christian, it was built around religious controversy and contestation rather than a unified adherence to a particular set of religious values. This study looks in detail at the extensive discussions that took place between Freethinking feminists and their Christian sisters, and between Secularists and conservative Christians. It reveals the extent to which their respective ideological stances developed not only in opposition to, but also in dialogue with, each other. *Infidel Feminism* thus offers a re-thinking of the 'religious'/'secular' distinction, demonstrating the need for historians to view these categories as interdependent rather than merely oppositional.

The Freethinking roots of first wave feminism

The last three decades have witnessed a 'religious turn' in gender history, whereby accounts of both femininity and feminism have begun to open up to the many ways in which religion shaped women's 'private selves and public roles'.⁴ In the pioneering years of women's history, social and economic concerns often dominated over consideration of religious factors and Christianity tended to be analysed primarily in terms of its oppressive agenda.⁵ Since the 1980s, however, there has been a slowly expanding body of research into women's activity in the churches and the influence of religion in the lives of female public figures in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain.⁶ Christianity also began to be recognised as a key factor in the emergence of an organised women's rights movement post-1850. Historians noted how Victorian women's involvement in parish work expanded their activities outside the home, preparing the ground for feminist campaigns to participate more fully in the public sphere. They also pointed to the ambiguities of evangelical doctrines, especially the belief that women were socially subordinate but spiritually equal to men, and identified the potential for female self-assertion deriving from apparently reactionary teachings.⁷ Research has furthermore emphasised the importance of individual piety and inner faith in providing women with the sense of self-worth and moral justification necessary to challenging oppressive gender roles.⁸ Historians have also begun to look beyond evangelical Christianity, to highlight, for example, the role of Unitarianism in shaping women's rights discourses during this period.⁹ Recent edited collections spanning topics from female theological cultures to Christian sex manuals have nevertheless demonstrated that there is still some way to go in assessing the breadth and depth of encounters between gender and religion in modern British history.¹⁰

Infidel Feminism positions itself as part of this broader move in gender history towards taking religion seriously. Yet it also marks a departure from much existing work in that it points to the anti-religious or Freethinking roots of feminism. Freethought has never received more than a brief mention in histories of the post-1850 women's movement.¹¹ The freethinking views of prominent figures have sometimes been noted, though without positioning them as part of a wider trend among feminists during this period.¹² Likewise, histories of feminist debates on sexuality have noted the presence of Freethinkers in campaigns around marriage and prostitution, but the possibility of a broader and more sustained Freethinking feminist tradition has not yet been explored in the historiography of the post-1850 women's movement.¹³

The centrality of heterodox thought to the emergence of radical debates on women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (the period prior to the emergence of a large scale and organised women's movement) has been more widely recognised. Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, was part of a critical freethinking tradition, ceasing at the age of twenty-eight to attend the Anglican Church in which she had been raised. Although she never adopted the atheism of her husband William Godwin she came to practise a form of religion that was, according to Godwin, 'almost entirely of her own creation'. Wollstonecraft drew on a powerful pro-woman dimension of the Christian tradition while at the same time rejecting what she believed to be overly emotional evangelical extremism in favour of 'rational religious impulses'. Her emphasis on the inner authority of the individual believer was celebrated by the Rational Dissenters of her radical London circle but was also at the heart of more explicitly Secularist forms of Freethought in the nineteenth century.¹⁴

Wollstonecraft and the other pro-women thinkers in her radical coterie were part of an English radical Enlightenment which celebrated, even if it did not fully endorse, the attacks on orthodox religion made by European *philosophes* and the French Revolutionaries.¹⁵ They can be linked to a longer tradition of 'enlightened libertinage' that stretched back to seventeenth-century Freethinkers such as Pierre Bayle, and which combined a critique of religion with an equally 'free' approach to traditional sexual morality. Wollstonecraft herself notoriously entered into 'free unions' and bore her first child out of wedlock, while William Godwin and fellow atheist Percy Shelley were vocal critics of the institution of marriage.¹⁶ Nineteenth-century Freethinkers strongly identified with these freethinking radicals and their combination of religious and sexual unorthodoxies. Wollstonecraft was anachronistically claimed as an out and out Freethinker¹⁷, while Shelley's attitudes to marriage were discussed and championed in Freethought publications.¹⁸

The revolutionary enthusiasm of Mary Wollstonecraft's circle died out in the late 1790s, partly in response to the terror in France, partly as a result of government repression. Feminist ideas re-merged within British radicalism in the 1820s, again closely tied to Freethought, as part of Richard Carlile's anti-Christian Zetetic movement. In the 1830s and 1840s the Utopian Socialist Owenite movement provided a freethinking environment in which feminism was able to thrive.¹⁹ Barbara Taylor's work on Owenism established it as one of the key forerunners of first wave feminism, yet posited a break between this more radical form of feminism and the respectable post-1850 women's movement. She argued that, with the collapse of Owenism from 1845 onwards, the link between

class emancipation and women's freedom disintegrated so that the feminism of the second half of the nineteenth century emerged as a far more middle-class and reformist movement.²⁰ While it is true that the political location of feminism shifted around mid-century, in fact the Owenite feminists' more radical and unrespectable brand of women's rights advocacy did continue as a minority current (which this book terms Freethinking or 'infidel' feminism) based, after 1850, in the Secularist movement.

Organised Freethought, 1830–1914

If histories of feminism have tended to overlook the part played by anti-religious ideas, the role of women and feminism has also been neglected in Freethought historiography. In part, this reflects the very low numbers of women involved in the movement. Estimates suggest that, nationwide, women made up no more than a quarter of the total audience at Secularist public meetings.²¹ An in-depth study of Leicester Secular Society revealed a similar pattern at a local level: women made up only 12 per cent of the membership between 1881 and 1891, and almost half of these were wives or daughters of male members.²² The importance of feminism to Freethought was noted by its foremost historian Edward Royle, who simultaneously acknowledged the paucity of existing research in this area.²³ Women are also neglected in the extensive literature that exists on the Victorian 'crisis of faith', which has tended to focus on a handful of 'great men' – George Eliot being a rare exception.²⁴ For Freethinking women themselves, however, the emancipation of the female sex was at the heart of their Secularist worldview. When Harriet Law, for example, took over a national Freethought newspaper, she devoted a large section of her first editorial to arguing that social progress was impossible without the full emancipation of women.²⁵ Even if the number of women involved was small, feminism was a vibrant and important current within the Freethought movement.

The nineteenth century witnessed a significant rise in the number and outspokenness of Freethinkers – the term applied to those who questioned religious assumptions about the ordering of the world and who, as a result, tended to reject all forms of organised religion. During the latter half of the century such Freethought sentiment found organisational expression in the Secularist movement, which campaigned for the separation of political, cultural and moral life from religion. The term 'Secularist' will be used here to describe the self-identified local societies and national organisations after the formation of the first Central Secular

Society in 1851, while 'secular' implies the general concept of secularity. 'Freethinker' and 'Freethought' is used to refer to those who actively identified with an organised anti-religious movement both prior to and during the establishment of Secular societies. The term 'Freethinker', in lower case, will be applied to those individuals who held unorthodox religious beliefs but who did not identify with the organised movement. Secularism did not simply denote support for the separation of Church and State based upon a neutral disregard for religious faith. The Secularist movement had its roots in a far more partisan and embattled debate, which was concerned not only with the role of religion in politics, but also with whether religion – specifically Christianity – could be considered both true and morally just.

The crucial distinction between organised Freethinkers and the more affluent 'honest doubters' normally associated with the Victorian 'crisis of faith', was that Freethinkers 'were political as well as intellectual radicals, and their agitation was organised as a political movement.'²⁶ Popular irreligion had been an important part of the radical unrest that erupted in Britain in response to the French Revolution of 1789 and it continued to play a role in nineteenth-century radicalism. In the 1790s Thomas Paine gave birth to a more politicised form of Freethought by disseminating Enlightenment critiques of religion to a large and popular audience, and nineteenth-century Freethinkers continued in this mode.²⁷ In the 1820s and 1830s the notorious Freethinker Richard Carlile published Paine's *Age of Reason* along with other 'blasphemous' works from his own pen. He was imprisoned three times between 1817 and 1831 and on the second occasion his wife and sister (and his children with them) were sent to join him for continuing to distribute dangerous literature. Such persecution provoked nationwide agitation and for the rest of the century the Freethought movement was to take a leading role in campaigns for a free press. Carlile also found support for his Freethinking ideas among some British radicals, who in the 1820s formed themselves into infidel Zetetic societies dedicated to 'seeking after truth',²⁸ Carlile also held feminist views, particularly on questions of marriage and sexuality, and women played a particularly important role in his successive campaigns against the religious establishment.²⁹

The next wave of Freethought occurred within the Owenite movement.³⁰ As early as 1814, Robert Owen had argued that religion should be opposed for rational and moral reasons, but it was not until after 1828, against a backdrop of economic depression and mounting popular unrest, that his views came to be seen as pernicious 'infidelism'.³¹ Between 1835 and 1845 the critique of orthodox religion became one of the most vocal,

widely printed and publicly prominent aspects of Owenite doctrine.³² Owenism did not preach a single uniform religious position but included millenarian, quasi-Christian and atheist viewpoints. These ranged from belief in a messianic 'man-woman power'³³ to the idea that Socialism was the embodiment of 'True' or 'Primitive Christianity' – the practical implementation on earth of Christ's original message of Christian brotherhood.³⁴ However, from the late 1830s onwards, the Owenite leadership began to disassociate the 'religious' critique of the Christian churches from the more extreme atheism of some members. In 1839, when the Owenite Universal Community Society of Rational Religionists was formed, the Central Board was at pains to stress that individuals did not have to relinquish their belief in God in order to join the Society or to support the Socialist project. Robert Owen's pre-conference *Address* declared that 'Provision must be made ... for all individuals to worship the Supreme Power of the Universe, according to their consciences.'³⁵ Religion was defined in broad and largely positive terms as 'whatever unites men, restrains their inordinate selfishness, or promotes their well-being ... [and] the practice of goodness'.³⁶ Condemnation of particular churches or clergy was discouraged. Robert Owen informed the Society that, because of the need to appear open to members of all religions, '[i]t consequently becomes necessary that your missionaries forbear all future public contests on mere localised religious subjects'.³⁷ In 1840 the leadership also began to permit, and even encourage, Owenite lecturers to take the dissenting preachers' oath in order to avoid prosecution for taking money at non-religious events on the Sabbath.³⁸

Anyone who continued to champion an intransigent defence of outright atheism soon came into conflict with the Owenite leadership. Owen's advice to forego all public confrontation with the churches was greatly at odds with the lecturing style of Owenite 'social missionaries' (paid itinerant lecturers) such as Emma Martin and Charles Southwell, who frequently challenged their opponents to debate and sometimes invaded churches and Christian meetings to harangue the presiding clergymen.³⁹ Martin's continued commitment to public and deliberately controversial debate eventually jeopardised her career as a social missionary. In 1845 she was forced to defend herself to fellow members of the Owenite executive, who had criticised her for continuing to confront local clergy during her tour of Scotland. Martin's defence told of a powerful sense of betrayal:

some of the branches had made use of her as a tool to help fill their purses – as she had suffered much, even imprisonment, in enabling her to do so, she thought it too bad that delegates from these branches

should turn round at the Congress table and say she had been the means of doing them no good.⁴⁰

Later that year her career as a social missionary ended.

Charles Southwell, similarly frustrated with the Central Board's increasingly 'religious' tone, resigned his position as a social missionary in 1841 and began editing the hard-line atheist journal the *Oracle of Reason*. The journal's commitment to an outspoken championing of atheism led to the imprisonment of successive editors, including Southwell and George Jacob Holyoake, for blasphemous libel. The *New Moral World* failed to fully condemn these attacks on the free speech of their fellow Owenites. In 1841, an editorial commenting on Southwell's imprisonment hastened to add that 'We are no admirers of the spirit which prompts too violent attacks upon the opinions of our fellow-beings, for we know that they cannot avoid having these impressed upon their minds...'⁴¹ In response to the leadership's inaction, the Anti-Persecution Union (APU) was established in 1842, by advocates of Southwell and Holyoake's position, to support those charged under the blasphemy laws.⁴² Leading Freethinking feminists Emma Martin and Margaret Chappellsmith also supported the APU. The *Oracle of Reason* attacked 'the milk-and-water, namby pamby infidelity' of certain sections of the Owenite movement, claiming that 'Deists are only the more contemptible, because they affect the *language*, while they ruthlessly sacrifice the only admissible *principles*, of philosophy.' Its editors clearly positioned themselves as the enemies of more moderate Owenites: 'We say then to those reformers who seek to establish political justice, without striving or caring to destroy every vestige of superstition – *you must fail*.'⁴³ Martin also defied her Owenite critics, refusing to renounce the title of 'infidel'.⁴⁴

The more militant Freethought commitment to cleansing society of religion survived the collapse of the Owenite movement after 1845. As editor of *The Movement* and then *The Reasoner*, Holyoake began to develop his idea of 'Secularism', which sought to abandon the old adversarial and negative connotations of the term 'infidel' and to argue instead for Secularism as a positive agenda and alternative value system, independent of religion.⁴⁵ Secularism was to teach 'the law of humanity, the conditions of human progress, and the nature of human duty': 'The term Secularism expresses this object ... The term freethinking expresses *how* we think – Secularism *why* we think. Our object is to promote personal morality.'⁴⁶ In 1851 Holyoake organised the first meeting of the Central Secular Society, which declared its commitment to science and reason and opposition to the arbitrary authority of religion. Over the next

fifteen years, the Secularist movement took the form of a loose network of local societies (many of which had existed in a previous incarnation as local Owenite branches), sustained by branch activities and sporadic lecture tours by national Freethought figures.

This period also witnessed the rise of Charles Bradlaugh as a leading champion of Secularism. In 1866 he organised the first conference of the National Secular Society (NSS), which promptly elected him president. The founding statement of the NSS declared:

That human improvement and happiness cannot be effectively promoted without civil and religious liberty; and that, therefore, it is the duty of every individual ... to actively attack all barriers to equal freedom of thought and utterance for all, upon Political and Theological subjects.⁴⁷

Over the next few years the majority of local Secular societies were incorporated into this national structure. For the rest of the century Secularism was dominated at a national level by the exploits of the charismatic Bradlaugh and, from 1874, the equally compelling Annie Besant, another Freethinking feminist. These included their trial for the publication of a birth control pamphlet in 1877 and Bradlaugh's bids to become the MP for Northampton from 1868 onwards. He was elected as the official Liberal candidate in 1880, after which he was forced to run a long campaign to win his right to take his seat in parliament against those who ruled that as an atheist he was permitted neither to take the Judeo-Christian oath, nor to swear a secular affirmation.⁴⁸

Such events brought Secularism onto the national stage and attracted new members. Yet not everyone in the movement approved of Bradlaugh's ascendancy, nor of his tactics. The rivalry between the movement's two most prominent figures, Charles Bradlaugh and George Jacob Holyoake, was both personal and ideological. As mentioned, Holyoake wished to work towards a society independent of, though not necessarily in conflict with, religion. Although he did not personally believe in any form of divine being, he preferred Secularism to rest on the agnostic principle that, since it was impossible to know whether or not God existed, it was better simply to focus on 'this-worldism' and to avoid theological controversy.⁴⁹ Bradlaugh, in contrast, revived the more adversarial infidel spirit and argued that Secularism should actively proclaim a 'positive' atheism in opposition to the untruths spread by religion.⁵⁰ This difference in outlook informed tensions in Secularism throughout the century. Yet it should not be overstated as a fundamental division within the movement. Some individuals moved from one 'camp'