

The Atheist Bunyan: *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Organized Freethought in Victorian Britain

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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THE ATHEIST BUNYAN: *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Organized Freethought in Victorian Britain

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how freethinkers received John Bunyan and read his works in Victorian Britain. An analysis of freethinking periodicals, letters to editors, lectures, essays, and autobiography reveals a vexed relationship that was anything but monolithic. There emerged two distinct reading communities within organized freethought. Some freethinkers, especially in the early nineteenth century, rejected Bunyan as another representation of irrational religious faith that was a hindrance to societal reform. However, other freethinkers appropriated his works and used him as a valuable resource for understanding their own experiences with religion as well as for communicating their message. I demonstrate that these contrasting positions resulted from interpretive strategies that stem from fundamental assumptions regarding how the project of secularism ought to interact with Britain's predominantly Christian culture. It corresponds to an ongoing negotiation of meaning within organized freethought that reflects internal fissures, as well as a rapidly changing British society.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, j'explore la réception, dans la Grande-Bretagne de l'époque victorienne, de l'œuvre de John Bunyan par les libres penseurs. Une analyse de périodiques, de lettres aux journaux, de conférences, de dissertations et d'autobiographies associés au courant de la libre pensée révèle un rapport problématique qui était tout sauf monolithique. Deux communautés de lecture distinctes émergèrent au sein du mouvement. Certains libres penseurs, surtout au commencement du XIX^e siècle, rejetèrent Bunyan, qui incarnait pour eux une foi religieuse irrationnelle constituant une entrave aux réformes sociétales; d'autres, au contraire, s'approprièrent ses œuvres, qui faisaient écho à leur propre expérience du religieux et se révélaient utiles pour communiquer leur message. Je soutiendrai que ces positions opposées résultaient de stratégies d'interprétation émanant d'hypothèses fondamentales quant à la manière de concilier une laïcité éventuelle avec la culture principalement chrétienne de la Grande-Bretagne. Cette opposition

est en phase avec la négociation continuelle dont faisait l'objet la notion de signification au sein du courant organisé de la libre pensée, en plus d'être le reflet de fissures internes dans le mouvement ainsi que d'une société britannique en pleine mutation.

In a moment that can only be described as Victorian, the Anglican clergyman and spiritualist Charles Maurice Davies resolved to delay a scheduled phrenology appointment so that he could take in a public lecture on John Bunyan.¹ Why the mysteries of his “craniological condition” were hardly as interesting as a tinker from the seventeenth century is a question in its own right. After all, Davies had admitted to have experienced Bunyan in “every shape possible” during weeks past. He was not alone, either. Bunyan was commonplace in Victorian society. *The Pilgrim's Progress* alone went through over 1,000 editions between its first printing and the start of World War I.² Bunyan's works were regularly adapted into artistic and educational forms including poetry, musical arrangements, and school lessons. They served as popular Sunday school prizes and remained among those relatively few texts, apart from the Bible, that passed uncensored into the stricter of Nonconformist homes. Thus, it was to Davies a completely “strange and unexpected combination” when he passed the lecture hall and saw that George Jacob Holyoake, the agnostic and leader of the freethought³ movement, was about to inform his listeners of precisely why John Bunyan was a genius. On Davies's account, the presentation of a “man of unbounded faith in the light of utter skepticism” was worth the price of remaining ignorant of his own mental composition.⁴

Davies's surprise stems from his assumption that freethinkers would surely criticize Bunyan as a religious fanatic, or that they would simply ignore him altogether for the same reason. It may be expected that a freethinker's reception of Bunyan, if it did not fit Davies's assumption, could only be of an aesthetic appreciation. Following Coleridge, scholarship on the Victorian reception of Bunyan has tended to distinguish between the Bunyan of Parnassus and the Bunyan of the Conventicle. This dichotomy is supplemented with an acute awareness that Bunyan's literary value increased in the nineteenth century and it came at the expense of his long-standing authority as a Christian author. These characterizations are certainly helpful for how we might understand some of the ways that atheists and agnostics

read and received Bunyan. Yet, remaining satisfied with such a description ignores a vexed relationship that developed within the freethought movement's reception of Bunyan and his works. Bunyan regularly appeared in freethinking periodicals, autobiographical sketches, literary essays, book chapters, and public lectures. The nature of these presentations of Bunyan was anything but monolithic. Certainly, militant freethinkers rejected Bunyan and, if they drew upon him at all, they did so to illustrate the dangers of religious belief. This view dominated characterizations of Bunyan within freethought early on in its history as an organized movement, and it continued throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. However, particularly after 1850, there appeared more diverse readings of Bunyan and opinions of his historical person. Freethinkers began to appropriate Bunyan's works into their own experiences of de-Christianization. He was characterized as a symbol of dissent against the establishment, a genius whose literary merits trump his religious attitudes, or even as an essential cog in the secularizing forces of society. On one level, it may be true, as Barbara Johnson has contended, that for readers of Bunyan "there are as many truths as there are readers."⁵ However, a systematic analysis of how members of the freethought movement read and received Bunyan reveals two distinct reading strategies; one of resolute rejection, the other, of compromising appropriation. The first section of this article examines those freethinkers who rejected Bunyan as a viable literary resource. It shows how their characterization of Bunyan was guided by a belief in the necessary connection between atheism and societal reform. The second section then describes the changing reception of Bunyan and attempts to explain why the shift occurred. Freethinkers were certainly united by a common foe in Christianity. But as the following analysis of their reading of Bunyan attempts to demonstrate, an ambivalence emerged as to how they should interact with, not only Christianity in their contemporary context, but also the Christian literary inheritance that pervaded British culture.

Bunyan and "Loads of Holy Trash"

E. P. Thompson has been cited many times over by Bunyan scholars when he stated, "*Pilgrim's Progress* is, with *Rights of Man*, one of the two foundational texts of the English working-class movement."⁶ Thompson showed that Bunyan's famous allegory provided much of the imagery and

intellectual backbone for radical politics in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Readers discovered in its pages ideals of liberty and enlightenment, as well as religious tropes easily applied to a this-worldly context. Exiting the wicket gate, battling Apollyon, falling into a slough of despond, and striving to enter the Celestial City served as ready metaphors to communicate working-class experience and to disseminate their message of political reform. We may be reminded of the Chartist Thomas Cooper⁷ who called *The Pilgrim's Progress* his “book of books” or of John James Bezer who identified with Bunyan “the Rebel” while serving his prison sentence. Likewise, as Ian Haywood has argued, the noteworthy success of Thomas Doubleday’s *Political Pilgrim's Progress* (1839) can be explained by its use of a narrative structure and metaphors easily identified by radical readers.⁸

It is significant, then, that organized freethought in Britain has roots in working-class radicalism. Prior to the 1820s, freethought was not yet an organized movement. Terms like “secularism” and “agnosticism” would not become coined for use in public discourse until 1851 and 1869, respectively. British atheism was mainly expressed as a heterogeneous phenomenon among a select few of the intellectual elite.⁹ It was with Richard Carlile that there emerged an organized community of freethought in Britain. His publications, and especially his newspapers and periodicals, provided a common forum where radicals could entertain and participate in open discussion of current events and ideas. As working-class radicals pressed towards republicanism, they recognized political and social hierarchies as obstacles to their own freedom.¹⁰ Carlile’s periodical *The Gauntlet* (1833–1834), for example, was a derisive commentary on the everyday activities of Parliament. In such printed forums, many radicals linked their political discontent with the Christian doctrine and theistic belief they held as equal partners in perpetuating social inequality.

Early freethought periodicals such as *The Gauntlet* contain rather few references to Bunyan. Why might have this been the case if, indeed, Bunyan was so important to working-class radicalism? On a superficial level, the emphasis on contemporary political issues simply meant little page space was allocated for the discussion of literature. Additionally, radical newspapers and periodicals did not pay the stamp tax on principle, which, due to risk of fines and imprisonment, often resulted in very short printing runs. However, there may be more to these absences than what page space

and run time may indicate. In *The Republican* (1819–1826), for example, Thomas Paine’s name and works are cited many times over each year, and always as an authority or in a positive light. By contrast, Bunyan and his works, including *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, are rarely mentioned in Carlile’s periodicals. The same is true of other freethinking periodicals during the early years of the movement. In fact, of all the freethought periodicals examined in this study that appeared between in the 1820s and 1830s, only *The Republican* mentions Bunyan.¹¹ And this despite Bunyan’s canonical status and contribution to “the stock of ideas and attitudes which make up the raw material of the [working-class] movement.”¹² It is likely that the close association between working-class radicalism and atheistic belief led to a subtle, yet profound, dismissal of Bunyan on account of the religious overtones present in his works. It had been, after all, a key tenet of radicalism that the rejection of religious belief was a prerequisite for lasting societal change.¹³ Reading strategies often derive from larger concerns, and it would appear that Bunyan’s religious content compromised his potential as a resource for reasonable courses of political action. Thus, when N. H. Keeble argued that nineteenth-century British writers could use Bunyan’s works “as a matter of course and without apology,” he did not take into account working-class atheists.¹⁴ Indeed, in each of the references of Bunyan in *The Republican*, Bunyan is set apart as an example of irrational religious belief. That, at least, is how this contributor saw it:

If we must deviate from nature and wander on this subtle ground [of spirituality and metaphysics], we must forget that we are reasonable beings, and let our fancies, whims, and vagaries draw us from the broad and open path of natural reality. We must believe that the philosophers are fools, that the learning of schools is not knowledge, but nescient and darkening ignorance; that Locke was made, and Voltaire crazy, and that *none are in right senses but such fanatics as Bunyan*.¹⁵

Note the implication that following “such fanatics as Bunyan” is akin to abandoning reason and then falling into ignorance. Likewise, in an open letter to Judge Bailey, Richard Carlile argued that morality was essentially separate from Christianity. In his critique of Matthew 7:13, he used Bunyan to illustrate the unreasonableness of following its admonitions: “The fault is not so much in those who miss the narrow way and straight gate, as in him who so ordered it. This nonsense is only suited to those who read John

Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.”¹⁶ Carlile's sentence structure suggests it could be taken for granted that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was not worth its salt and ought to be read only by those who trust in Scriptural authority. The same type of characterization is present when Bunyanesque imagery was recast into atheistic discourse. Thus, in an editorial on the dangers and hypocrisies of Methodism, Carlile wrote, “[A Methodist's] mind is always in pursuit of a phantom that eludes every fancied grasp, and he plunges into the ‘slough of despond,’ heedless of his path, his prospects, or his life.”¹⁷ Bunyan had intended his boggy image to illustrate the state of hopelessness into which the Christian might sink under the weight of guilt sin. For Carlile and those contributors to *The Republican*, however, the burden is ironically appropriated into that of having faith in a deity and belonging to an organized religious body. Similarly, one subscriber self-identified as “one who is nearly through the slough of despond by the help of Carlile and Paine.”¹⁸ Bunyan was not a source for these individuals' “stock” of ideas, but they certainly used his phraseology to discuss their rejection of the ideals Bunyan represented. The continuation of similar interpretations of Bunyan throughout organized freethought suggests a distinct reading community with a common interpretive strategy.

Like Carlile's characterization of the heedless Methodist, other commentators linked Bunyan with melancholia or some other sort of mental ailment. Writing an article entitled “Religious Fanaticism” for Robert Cooper's *The London Investigator* (1854–1857), the freethinker James Hay saw Bunyan as someone showing signs of “nothing less than insanity.” Here, he argued, was a man “tortured in mind and body,” “shaken continually . . . by the hot and cold fits of a spiritual ague” and delirious to a “state of excitement in which its own shapings became vivid as realities, and affected him more forcibly than impressions from the external world.” These symptoms, Hays contended, “illustrate to what lengths and absurdities the terrors of theology can push its devotees.”¹⁹ Hay continued that despair was a “natural concomitant” to religious faith. John M. Robertson advanced the same argument in fewer words in a piece published in *The University Magazine and Free Review* (1893–1900): “Reason without faith never brought any man to ‘despair and denial of life’; though faith without reason may have done so, in the fashion of Bunyan.”²⁰

The criticism that Bunyan was “insane” and represented a faith that drove its adherents to despair was closely associated with the autodidactic culture that resided at the heart of both the working-class movement and the organized freethought that grew out of it.²¹ *The Pilgrim’s Progress* was deemed a “shabby copy” of literature and served as the “one enthralling fiction” for Calvinist youths, which, by implication, prohibited self-improvement.²² A writer for the *Reasoner* lamented that individuals were content reading only “the Bible and ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’ when they could have imbibed “Byron’s works and French novels.”²³ How could freethinkers possibly stimulate self-improvement if the only books the public read were believed to do the opposite?

J.W.T. Osmotherley offered an answer. In a letter for the *Reasoner*, he described the novel method of simply quoting to them passages from Bunyan’s works as an argument in itself for the lunacy of Christianity.²⁴ If for Osmotherley the wrongheadedness of Christianity was as obvious as reading parts of its literary canon, the opposite was true for Robert Cooper. He expressed annoyance that the freethinking reader is continually “surrounded by superstitious agencies. He cannot walk ten yards without beholding a church. He cannot pass a dozen people without meeting a priest. He cannot go to his library but he finds the ‘Holy Bible,’ ‘Wesley’s Sermons,’ ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ and ‘Watt’s Hymns.’”²⁵ The prevalence of religious literature and institutions was considered an impasse to freethinking reform. What he saw as improving literature, thus, became a form of gospel message for freethinkers in its ability to offer an alternative to the predominately Christian culture. Cooper took up the role of a freethought missionary of sorts, and traveled throughout England promoting freedom from religion. On one such proselytizing tour of England’s industrial northwest, Cooper reiterated the common freethought argument that the progress of society depended on improving literature, and that decidedly religious authors, such as Bunyan, were worthless because they perpetuated superstition and ignorance:

My main mission at Bradford was mainly to contrast Orthodox Reform with Social Reform. I showed that the cause of the evils of society lay much deeper than the popular mind conjectured. I proved that they did not arise, as orthodoxy insinuated, from a want of faith in mystical dogmas, but a want of intelligence upon these great social, political, and educational problems upon

which the prosperity, freedom, and civilisation of nations depend. I exhorted the people *to study* these invaluable text-books, Robert Owen's "Book of the New Moral World," Thomas Paine's "Rights of Man," William Thompson's "Production and Distribution of Wealth," Godwin's "Political Justice," etc., instead of nodding over the "Pilgrim's Progress," "Saints' Rest," "Call to the Unconverted," and loads of holy trash.²⁶

It would seem Cooper had as much a difficulty convincing people to read such "invaluable text-books" as he did avoiding the "superstitious agencies" that so pervaded Victorian Britain. Cooper's linking of the text with the continuation of working-class inequality reflects his like-mindedness with Carlile in his reading strategies, first employed early in history of organized freethought. Thomas Doubleday's 1839 adaptation of *The Pilgrim's Progress* confirms Bunyan's association with working-class freedom and political improvement. Given Robert Cooper's working-class roots, he was likely aware of these associations. But the reading strategies he employed directed his interpretation to bifurcate Bunyan with working-class reform. The religious elements of the text demanded it, according to the reading strategies he adopted.

This categorical rejection of Bunyan is also present in atheist autobiography. Frederick James Gould, when reflecting on his own crisis of faith, described the zealousness of his youth. He learned chapters of the Bible by heart, regularly attended prayer meetings, gave money to African missions and expressed heartfelt repentance after sinning. The cumulative experience was best illustrated by quoting at length a passage from Bunyan's own autobiography, *Grace Abounding*. Like Bunyan, Gould had lived in a "most fearful state" and, because of his guilt, believed himself unworthy to enjoy the beauty of nature.²⁷ But that was in the past and Bunyan's usefulness remained only to illustrate the faith Gould had denounced. Gould declared that "The Puritan movement, from which I was a sufferer, is now all but dead."²⁸ It is significant, then, that Gould delivered a public lecture entitled "The New Pilgrim's Progress: From Christianity to Secularism."²⁹ The content and structure of the piece seem to anticipate Gould's autobiographical description of his own de-conversion from Christianity, but in terms that ironically re-appropriate Bunyan's allegory into a secular framework. Instead of Bunyan's protagonist heading to the Celestial City,

Gould describes the journey of “Doubting Christian” and his struggle towards the “kingdom of Secularism.” The narrative tells how Christian’s questioning of the existence of hell, sin, and the atonement, is followed by scepticism about the power of prayer, before finally reaching an impasse at the problem of evil.³⁰ True to Bunyan’s style, Doubting Christian meets and converses with a personified character, “Theology,” whom Gould used to illustrate the familiar argument that faith prevents self-improvement and engenders only the prolongation of an oppressed state. Along the way, Gould’s pilgrim comes face to face with modern ministers and those who would reverse his lingering doubts. But at the end, the character’s final transition from Christianity to Secularism is told with imagery that echoes Bunyan’s. Doubting Christian asks himself in a moment of realization

‘Shall I cross the river of denial which forms the border between the land of Christianity and the kingdom of Secularism? Dare I take the courageous plunge, and, casting my Bible into the dark waters of Limbo, struggle across the opposite bank, where no man ever bows the knee to deity or savior?’ . . . So saying, our friend, doubting no more, Christian no more, turns his back upon Christianity. He fixes his eye upon the sunny plains of Hope that lie beyond. He steps into the stream. There are hands outstretched to welcome him; there are cheery voices calling welcome. ‘Welcome, pilgrim; once Christian, now Secularist: thou hast manfully trodden the way of Truth. With faith and courage, we will march on to yet greater victories.’³¹

Gould’s rhetorical imitation is hardly grounded in flattery. It is a replacement. Gould formulated a *New Pilgrim’s Progress* precisely because, as his autobiography would indicate later, Bunyan’s classic allegory remained with the Puritan faith he believed was “all but dead.”

Gould seemed fairly keen on keeping Bunyan’s relevance in the distant past, but the distant memory was not all bad. Writing for *The Literary Guide and Rationalist Review* (1894–1956), he saw Bunyan as a pivotal figure in the secularizing forces of society. Together with Milton,

Bunyan performed a work the importance of which has, I believe, never been adequately appreciated either by the orthodoxists or the Rationalists: They began the transfiguration of Christian “history” into a true Christian

mythology when they treated the Biblical material as the dream-stuff of their art.³²

Bunyan is not lauded; Gould still rejected him as an irrational figure. Despite that rejection, however, he attributed to Bunyan significant historic value by placing him at the centre of three important narratives. In the past, Bunyan helped to mythologize Scripture and pave the way for freethought; in Gould's time, it helped only to illustrate the faith he rejected that was now "all but dead"; finally, it served as a template for *The New Pilgrim's Progress* that replaced its outdated counterpart. It mapped out the journey to the kingdom of Secularism, which was as a pre-requisite to achieving the "greater victories" of organized freethought.

It was this final conclusion that conformed to a common principle among organized freethought that atheism was a necessary component to societal reform. Critiquing the established order meant rejecting the established church as well as its teachings. This position continued throughout organized freethought, represented by figures such as Richard Carlile, Robert Cooper, Charles Bradlaugh, and Frederick Gould. A common interpretation emerges within the periodicals they edited, the lectures they delivered, and the books they wrote. The common guiding principle about atheism and reform shaped the way these thinkers, as well as those who followed suit, read and received Bunyan. For the most part, Bunyan was ignored in the freethought press during the formative years of the movement. And the few references this community did make were employed as a backhanded aside—almost functioning as a proof-text of sorts, or appearing within a larger list of anathema authors. Bunyanesque imagery was sparingly used and it was employed ironically to undermine Bunyan's authority or demonstrate his uselessness. Only rarely does Bunyan or one of his texts receive concentrated discussion, and in those cases, the conclusions remain the same.

Re-Reading and Re-framing Bunyan within Freethought

Freethinkers continued to reject Bunyan throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, but it would be a mistake to think that characterized the movement as a whole. Freethought was not a homogenous phenomenon and the growing diversity within its ranks shaped alternative

reading strategies. As Shirley Mullen has demonstrated, freethought was divided by personality conflicts as well as competing interpretations of how the movement ought to advance and interact with Victorian society. The association between atheism and working-class reform became weaker as the nineteenth century progressed.³³ G. J. Holyoake is a case in point. He remains important not only as a signal of this shift, but also as one who promoted it with “a certain sobriety, steadiness, moderation and respectability” that was less of a priority for those like Robert Cooper.³⁴ Holyoake was committed to a more militant freethought, and was even imprisoned for it in 1843.³⁵ But he grew dissatisfied with the movement’s inability to find compromise with established social and political structures. He coined the term “Secularism” in 1851 as a “general test of principles of conduct” that he hoped would make the freethought movement more palatable, and thus, more convincing.³⁶ These “principles of conduct” were more like an attitude adjustment that, contrary to Cooper and Bradlaugh, did not feel it necessary to eradicate Christianity in order to achieve secular reform. Holyoake was motivated by securing, first and foremost, a moral course of action towards a general reformation of society. The difference was that Holyoake, while still rejecting Christianity and theism, no longer believed atheism was a necessary pre-requisite towards that goal. Holyoake was aware of a two-pronged problem that faced the freethought movement in the 1850s. In the first place, atheism was commonly associated with immorality and infidelity. Secondly, the working-class movement was losing momentum, which, because of freethought’s connections to the movement, spelt difficulty for actualizing a truly secular society. These competing strategies materialized in a debate between Holyoake and Bradlaugh on two propositions: 1) “The principles of Secularism do not include Atheism” and 2) “Secular criticism does not involve Scepticism.”³⁷ Holyoake defended the propositions; Bradlaugh dissented. The debate did little to draw the two sides together and did more to perpetuate existing conflicts between Holyoake and “Iconoclast.”³⁸ But just as Bradlaugh defended the very principles that in turn had guided the reading strategies of freethinkers such as Carlile and Cooper, Holyoake’s restructuring of his atheism as Secularism, and again later as Agnosticism, similarly acted as a guide for how he and likeminded freethinkers interpreted Bunyan.

This change in attitude that advocated secular reform without a necessary commitment to atheistic principles inaugurated a cultural mood for

freethinkers to engage and interact constructively with Christian literature. This much is made apparent by tracing the frequency of references made about Bunyan in the freethought periodical press, which increased significantly after c. 1850. This may partly be attributed to Holyoake, whose influence on the movement was greatly boosted by his role as publisher. According to his bibliographer, Holyoake edited thirty newspapers and periodicals between 1842 and 1892.³⁹ This is in addition to numerous others of his essays, books, lectures, published letters, and contributions that gave a united voice to freethought in Britain. A greater diversity of interpretations of Bunyan correlated with these internal disagreements within freethought. To be sure, both types of interpretation still rejected Bunyan's faith and authority as a Christian thinker. Nevertheless, Holyoake's constructive strategy of engaging society helps to explain why readers began to interpret Bunyan with a different spirit.

It is ironic that what appears to be the first concentrated discussion of Bunyan in the freethought press, which goes beyond that only of a passing reference, was born of provocation from a Congregational clergyman. It was not long after Holyoake began advocating Secularism that the Reverend Brewin Grant voiced public opposition to the movement. By the 1850s, the Rev. Grant was a seasoned apologist, having spent years of his youth debating with Owenite socialists. Grant led a campaign against Holyoake and Secularism in which he debated many of freethought's major leaders, including Charles Bradlaugh and Charles Watts. He debated with Holyoake on two occasions, in 1853 and again in 1854. In both cases, the debate centred on the relative merits of Christianity and Secularism.⁴⁰ In tandem with public debate, Grant also commenced a lecturing tour across Britain where he sought to demonstrate the dangers of Secularism. The lectures were structured partly in response to the recent publication of *The History of the Last Trial by Jury for Atheism*, which was Holyoake's autobiographical account of his trial for blasphemy. According to Edward Royle, the debates and lectures Grant organized, rather than impeding, actually served to launch Secularism to the height of its influence as an organized movement with freethought. However, they also inaugurated a discussion within organized freethought when Grant drew a parallel between Holyoake and Bunyan to prove a point. Grant had attempted to discredit the martyr status Holyoake earned among freethinkers after serving his prison sentence in 1843. To that end, Grant contrasted the eleven years that Bunyan had

served in prison with the six months Holyoake endured. Grant accused Holyoake of being unable to tolerate his time in prison and said that his “conduct in the gaol . . . constituted a miserable illustration of infidel principles.” In contrast, Bunyan remained “the freest man in all of England” because “you may imprison an Infidel, but you cannot imprison a Christian!”⁴¹ Grant had used Bunyan as an unimpeachable authority by which to contrast his perceived bankruptcy of Holyoake’s position. It served a rhetorical purpose for Grant, but it would appear that freethinkers took some offense at the parallel and were determined to set the record straight.

During the lecture tour, an anonymous attendee published a four-part rebuttal entitled *Strictures on the Lectures Delivered by the Rev. Brewin Grant*. The author was a self-avowed freethinker emboldened to defend Holyoake and the Secularist movement. The second installment of his counterargument was a concerted attack on the parallel Grant drew between Bunyan and Holyoake. The main purpose of the *Strictures* was to show that Grant was a hypocrite whose parallel, as he constructed it, did not match reality. Thus, while Grant wanted to show the virtues of Christianity in the person of Bunyan and the evils of Secularism in the character of Holyoake, the *Strictures* painted an alternative parallel, which depicted Bunyan as a troubled and divided person, whose attitudes and actions were, in truth, less laudable than Holyoake’s. Both prisoners had flirted with committing suicide, but according to the *Strictures*, Bunyan would rather recant his faith or commit suicide “than [to] remain in prison.” On the other hand, Holyoake more nobly believed that taking his life would spite the authorities by not allowing them “to unseat his reason, by their professed divine treatment.”⁴² Allegedly, the motivation behind Holyoake’s resolution was an act of heroic defiance of authorities and commitment to his cause, while Bunyan’s two possible courses of action were merely means to escape the discomfort of prison. The major criticism of the *Strictures*, however, was not directed at Bunyan, but at Grant. In fact, the author was careful to show that his rebuttal was not intended as a blight on Bunyan’s memory:

Do no blame me, gentle reader, for speaking freely upon Mr. Bunyan's opinions. I believe Mr. Bunyan had some excellent traits in his character. I believe no man hath spoken out his feelings more freely than he hath. What he wrote, I believe it was his opinion *at the time* he wrote it; and I can respect the man who commits the greatest of blunders, if only I am satisfied that he is honest to his

own convictions. It is this which enables me to speak highly of Mr. Holyoake, and to respect him; but I think as highly, and I respect as sincerely, vast numbers who would tremble at the idea of embracing Mr. Holyoake's opinions.⁴³

No attempt is made to reject the parallel between Holyoake and Bunyan, but there is the move to redefine what that parallel meant. They are both seen as sincere and honest men committed to their beliefs, without any regard to whether or not those beliefs were correct. But since the author of the *Strictures* sided with Holyoake, he felt some need to explain Bunyan's character. At a fundamental level, the author believed a distinction ought to be made between "the spiritual John Bunyan, and the natural John Bunyan."⁴⁴ The former had faith driven by a "fear of God" and not a "love of God," which "caused [him] to subdue those sacred feelings which are such essential guides to human safety and happiness." The author argued that it was Calvinist dogma that had pushed Bunyan to his unstable mental condition. Richard Cooper had taken up a similar argument outlining Bunyan's "insanity," but what distinguishes the *Strictures* from previous labelling is its attempt to place Bunyan in a positive light and not as a foolish representative of religious belief. Indeed, Bunyan becomes lauded for his reasoning capacity despite, and not because of, his religious commitments. As this author saw it, religious faith was really the result of people "being children of their own parents," and evidently should not be interpreted as fully representative of their character.⁴⁵ The author continues

Though [Bunyan] appears to have believed the damnable doctrine of predestination, yet his own reasoning oftentimes explored it; and had he not submitted to his reason in preference to those scripture passages and the creeds taught, confirmatory of such a doctrine, he would evidently have died in despair.⁴⁶

Thus, the "spiritual" Bunyan remained in conflict with the "natural" Bunyan. But this freethinker could tell the difference. The "natural" Bunyan was able to resist dogmatic influences, thereby allowing his "humanity" at times to "manifest itself in spite of his creeds."⁴⁷ Analyzing Bunyan with such an interpretive lens allowed for a display of admiration for a Christian that freethinkers once held in contempt. Compared with early characterizations of Bunyan in organized freethought, the *Strictures* offers a

resuscitation of his image. It reflects the attitude Holyoake prescribed for Secularism by isolating positive characteristics in Bunyan despite his faith, which compromised his integrity for those of the militant sub-culture within freethought.

Acknowledging a distinction between the “natural” and “spiritual” Bunyan allowed proponents of freethought to use him as a valuable literary resource. There appeared in the *Reasoner* an anonymous letter telling of a classic de-conversion narrative, entitled “The Experience of an Old Methodist.” The narrative included Bunyan as the voice he heard as he experienced a crisis of faith. The writer had been a Methodist for the first forty years of his life when he began to doubt predestination, total depravity, the atonement, and most importantly, Biblical inspiration. A passage from *Grace Abounding* kept re-occurring in his mind throughout these doubts. He writes

Being always a reader, and, in some sort, a thinker too, I was far from ever being satisfied with the evidences of Scripture inspiration. Thousands of times I referred, mentally, to the temptation of poor John Bunyan, wherein the devil whispered the query – ‘How do you know but the followers of Mahomet have as good evidence of the miraculous nature of their prophet, as you have concerning Christ’s.’²⁴⁸

In the case of this “Old Methodist,” it is worth bearing in mind its autobiographical nature. It is quite possible he did not think about the devil’s question thousands of times, as he seemed to remember it. What becomes important is that this secularist writer believed reading and contemplating this work by Bunyan were crucial to his journey from Christianity to Secularism. The meaning of a process that took over forty years is retroactively ascribed to a religious text that served to frame the experience of a faith in crisis.

The use of Bunyan and *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as means for understanding personal experience, and particularly for describing personal struggles from Christianity to Secularism, was a recognized theme among freethinkers. In an article for the *Reasoner*, a writer under the pseudonym “Eugene” argued that human dignity existed apart from a religious framework, an argument similar to the one Richard Carlile had advanced regarding morality years before. Eugene described dignity deontologically and believed that Christian

hope was too much guided by a “fear of annihilation.”⁴⁹ Dignity consisted in aligning oneself to truth and acting in accordance with duty, no matter the consequence. Eugene communicated this idea by employing a rhetorical parallel with *The Pilgrim’s Progress* to demonstrate one’s duty to truth as a life-long journey. The message was structured as a conversation between “A great man” and “Hopeful” Eugene writes

Does “Hopeful” dare take Truth by the hand and make with her a Pilgrim’s Progress through whatsoever valleys of the shadow of death, and whatsoever dangers and temptations he may encounter? Will he march without blanching? That is what every infidel should gird up his loins to do. Every great man does do so. It is duty, it is the dignity of man.⁵⁰

Constructions of Victorian masculinity combine with imagery from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* to construct a moral imperative for freethinkers seeking the highest good in life. The masculinization of the working-class radicalism is a well-documented theme; here, it passed onto freethought conceptions of the self and with it the Bunyanesque language to communicate it.⁵¹

Reappropriating the text into a lesson about progress towards Secularism is similar to the way F. J. Gould used Bunyan throughout his lifetime. The key difference here is that Eugene’s use of the text recognizes a Christian literary heritage that had modern relevance. He does not attempt to distance his argument about duty from Bunyan; on the contrary, he integrated Bunyan’s character “Hopeful” into a secularized framework. The conversation between “A great man” and “Hopeful” includes the former convincing the latter of the reality of human dignity. “Truth” became personified and made to be a more honourable goal for life than passage to the Celestial City. Quite significantly, Gould offers his readers a replacement of Bunyan’s famous allegory in the form of *The New Pilgrim’s Progress*. Bunyan’s usefulness for Gould is compartmentalized to illustrate the faith of his childhood, the faith of his past. The pseudonymous author Eugene, on the contrary, was comfortable borrowing from Bunyan to illustrate quite immediate concerns. Indeed, the ideas of struggle and pilgrimage so prevalent in Bunyan’s works, and particularly *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, could be adopted by anyone sympathetic with freethought reform. According to the *Agnostic Annual* (1884–1907), “The Pilgrim’s Progress has lightened many a moral struggle, though its Slough of Despond was a nightmare, and its Delectable

Mountains a mirage.”⁵² The moral struggle was not necessarily one to atheism or Secularism, as it had been with Eugene’s essay. Rather it was a struggle to an improved life, full of hope and joy in the immanent frame. That goal was not peculiar to freethinkers, but its appearance in an agnostic periodical illustrates the wide variety of uses for which Bunyan could be summoned.

The prominent freethinking lecturer Robert Blatchford expressed similar sentiments about *The Pilgrim’s Progress*—a text he counted among his favourite books.⁵³ He believed it connected with readers across time because it spoke to the hardships of the human condition. Blatchford asked,

Which of us has not soiled his garments in the Slough of Despond? Which of us has not, as Christian did, taken hands to help his feet up the steep sides of Hill of Difficulty? Which of us has not turned from the little wicket in hopes to sneak round by a flowery and level way? Which of us has not drowsed in the enchanted ground; listened to blasphemies of the devil, and thought them our own sin?⁵⁴

Blatchford used religious categories to describe the normal experiences of human life and believed Bunyan did the same. Blatchford did not dismiss the spiritual intentions of Bunyan, but he drew meaning from it in material terms by focusing on the characters and places from Bunyan’s own life. This negotiation of meaning was mediated through Blatchford’s commitments to atheistic freethought. He still interpreted the allegory as the “old good fight of faith,” but that fight remained in the immanent frame, unbound to Bunyan’s transcendent intentions.⁵⁵ Blatchford praised Bunyan’s characters because they were “so *human*.” They continually are “stumbling, erring, wavering, and falling into scrapes.”⁵⁶ Just as the pseudonymous author had advanced before, Blatchford interpreted Christian’s overcoming of difficulties as a prime example of virility: “He fights Apollyon with sterling courage, and, though his faith and his valour are both almost drowned out of him in the black River of Death, he finally struggles through like a *man*.”⁵⁷ Bunyan’s intended meaning was more likely to signify overcoming worldly desires and the continuation of a journey towards heaven. But for Blatchford, the fight represented the testing trials of the immanent frame, and the pressing onward to victory in heroic fashion. Gritty steadfastness and perseverance become the hallmark of Bunyan’s value. Blatchford

appreciated Bunyan because he showed himself to be fallible. He was “a man, and not a hero, a creature strong and frail, timid and brave.”⁵⁸

Holyoake was of the same mind as Blatchford. Holyoake believed the characters Bunyan constructed were recurring archetypes within human existence, and that was what helped to explain the text’s appeal:

That is why succeeding ages have read the *Pilgrim's Progress*, because the same people who met that extraordinary traveller are always turning up in the way of every man who has a high purpose and is bent upon carrying it out. Manners change, but humanity has still its old ways. It is because Bunyan painted these that his writing endures in repute like a picture by one of the old masters who painted for all time.⁵⁹

In an anaphoric flourish at the close of his lecture, Holyoake elaborated on this point by telling the audience they each had met every character from *The Pilgrim's Progress* in their own lives. Thus, Holyoake held Bunyan to be “the great teacher of us all,” because he articulated the rough fundamentals of human existence that persisted throughout time and space. On Blatchford’s account, these timeless truths of human character were mediated by individually lived experience. When *The Pilgrim's Progress* was read, it was no longer Bunyan’s words, but the reader’s, who constructed meaning by juxtaposing Bunyan’s images with lived experience. The locations of *The Pilgrim's Progress* are imagined

from the pictures in our memories. It is no small wonder, then, that these places are real to us. They *are* places we know, but they are *our* places, not Bunyan’s, and real as they are to me, and real as they are to others, they are not the *same* to any two of us.
. . . Each of us paints his own picture, puts it into Bunyan’s frame, and cries out ‘wonderful.’⁶⁰

However, Blatchford did not discredit the author’s hand in the negotiation of meaning, and it reveals a key difference between those freethinkers who rejected Bunyan and those who did not. For Blatchford, “Bunyan’s frame” of mind was produced by the ontological reality of his having lived during a tumultuous time of English history: civil war, imprisonment, and the “dread shadow of the gloomy and fearful Calvinist faith” acted as defining forces upon his character.⁶¹ Rather than viewing those influences as compromising

in their own right, or even as something that Bunyan overcame by virtue of his innate genius and humanity, as the author of the *Strictures* had argued, Blatchford contended the very opposite: “It was the surroundings of his life, the character of his contemporaries, the uproar and agitation of his times that made him what he was and his book what it is.”⁶² The explanation is really nothing more than tautology; yet, it remains significant because Blatchford, a prominent freethinker and proponent for secular reform, here values Bunyan because of, and not despite, the religious influences upon his thinking.

It has been shown so far that those freethinkers who saw Bunyan as a literary and historical resource did so for a number of closely related themes. Bunyan was a useful parallel to the trials and difficulties in their struggle for societal reform. He offered a psychological gateway to understanding human nature and his writings provided the metaphors to communicate one’s path from Christianity to freethought. But how did freethinkers interact with Bunyan’s growing status in the broader culture as part of the English literary canon? There has been much written on the changing status of Bunyan and *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in the Victorian era. Discussions have centered on its influence upon Victorian literature, whether and when it became recognized as a literary classic, and the degree to which that change in status was to the detriment of the spiritual significance of the author and text.⁶³ However, Mary Hammond has rightly shown that this predilection within Bunyan scholars have assumed something of an “essentialist notion of the book’s status” in their explorations of its legacy during the nineteenth century.⁶⁴ By paying attention to those who published Bunyan, she offers a correction that acknowledges a greater range of readership. A diversifying market resulted in a wider variety of editions to meet emerging sub-cultures, a reality that challenges simple generalizations about Victorian readers as a whole. I am unaware of any single edition of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* published specifically to meet demand within freethought. Nevertheless, as was shown above, the reading communities within freethought did not need a special edition to formulate diverse interpretations of Bunyan and his famous allegory. It may come as no surprise that freethinkers participated in the conversation about the status of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as a “literary classic.” However, within freethought, that conversation was mediated by generation-old concerns about the importance—or hazard—of Bunyan’s

religious faith. In this case, that question bore upon the relative influence of his faith upon his genius and literary abilities.

Some freethinkers who acknowledged Bunyan's literary genius believed that it existed despite his religious faith. In a report of a 1854 lecture at the Hall of Science on "The Life and Character of John Bunyan," F. R. Young admitted that Bunyan had a "strong and ardent" mind and that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was "a work of great imagination."⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Young spent the majority of his allotted time discussing "the baneful effects of hyper-Calvinism . . . and the agony of mind and body suffered by Bunyan." During the Q&A, Young suggested Bunyan's sanity was compromised by his "religious fears," which put him into a state of "monomania."⁶⁶ The hazard of Bunyan's Christian faith in relation to his literary quality is thus compartmentalized as a mental condition of a literary master who otherwise produced an excellent and imaginative book. Holyoake expressed similar thoughts when he assured his listeners that he would not discuss Bunyan's religious faith at all, but that he would only examine his literary ability. Separating Bunyan's literary quality from his religious faith shows an assumption that they were not intrinsically connected. Holyoake contended

[H]ad Bunyan only preached the gospel he would no more been remembered than thousands of preachers of his day who are gratefully forgotten. . . . But his literary genius lives when the preacher is dead. Bunyan had the eye of a poet. He saw with such vividness that the very passions and wayward moods of men stood apart and distinct in his sight, and he gave names to them, and endowed them with their natural speech.⁶⁷

Religion was not considered altogether important for honouring Bunyan's literary character. It was rather his "carnal genius" and "infinite wit" that saved him from his generally morose disposition. Indeed, Holyoake here constructed an image of Bunyan whose genius survived despite the times in which he lived, and in which "the most ignorant sectary believed himself infallible, when clergymen taught that faith was higher than learning, and when criticism was regarded as the latest form of sin."⁶⁸ While this context was part and parcel of religion's negative effects upon Bunyan's demeanor and self-conception, Holyoake still believed him to be "a king among writers."⁶⁹

Some freethinkers who believed Bunyan was a literary genius ascribed his faith a more central role. It would seem this interpretive lens draws some inspiration from a Romantic notion of “sincerity,” which helps to explain why some adopted Bunyan, faith and all, while other freethinkers did not. Bunyan’s appeals to transcendence were denied, but his self-expression as an act of sincerity was valued.⁷⁰ Robert Blatchford had said pointedly that it was Bunyan’s “sincerity and imagination” that lie at the core of his value, however much those qualities owed their formation to a religious culture. As Blatchford aptly put it, “just what his own pilgrimage had been his book became.”⁷¹ Others in the latter half of the nineteenth century would share Blatchford’s opinions, and it appears to be more common of freethought interpretations than categorical rejection. In an article aptly titled “A Secular Sermon” for *The Secular Review* (1877–1888), the pseudonymous author “X.Y.Z.” described Bunyan as “the greatest theological prose poet since the Reformation.”⁷² Bunyan had been granted status within freethought circles as an exemplar of the relationship between religion and poetry. In that way, readers were invited to imbibe a theologian’s works because of their literary value as a well for poetic truth.

“Lay My Book, Thy Head, and Heart Together”

Accepting Bunyan’s religious faith as essential to what made him worth reading is a far cry from the categorical rejection of him by freethinkers such as Carlile, Cooper, and Gould. What might account for this dramatic difference? My main concern in this article has been to isolate, define, and describe the different reading communities that emerged within organized freethought throughout the Victorian era. Using the reception of Bunyan as my case study, I have suggested these groups were principally of two types. First were those who believed atheism was essential to both individual and societal progress. Though Bunyan was part of the well of ideas that working-class radicalism drew from, the atheistic sub-culture within that political movement rejected Bunyan on account of the religious character of his works. Thus, we see that among freethought readers during those early years, Bunyan was either ignored altogether or written off as irrational. However, individuals such as G. J. Holyoake represented a new attitude that sought to avoid the negative connotations associated with Atheism—namely infidelity, immorality, and anarchy. In turn, freethinkers began to re-assess how to engage the predominantly Christian culture in which they lived, and

this change was not lost on those who read Christian literature. New reading strategies emerged from that ideological shift, and advocates of a more secularized Britain re-tapped Bunyan as a literary resource. He then became a figure with whom freethinkers could identify in the midst of societal struggles and as they wrestled with the inner conflict of experiencing a crisis of faith.

Freethought acceptance of Bunyan is thus not so easily pegged into the neat dichotomy between preferring the Bunyan of Parnassus or the Bunyan of the Conventicle. It is more complex than that, and the convention even escapes what we might—and Charles Davies did—expect. Freethinkers did not necessarily gravitate towards the Bunyan of the Parnassus. In many cases, they honoured the Bunyan of the Conventicle. But this was not because he went to prison for his faith, but because he went to prison for his convictions. At a fundamental level, the question freethinkers needed to answer was how they should interact with a text that simultaneously was an expression of the Christian faith, and yet was associated with secular meanings close to the heart of working-class, and, later, English identity. As Bunyan became increasingly recognized as a literary classic, opposing views regarding the source of his genius emerged within freethought. Did it exist because of or despite his religious faith? This question, in an interestingly circular fashion, brings the discussion right back to where it started: how should someone no longer adhering to the Christian faith interact with its cultural, social, and political forms? It was during the Victorian years that British freethinkers first engaged with these questions in an organized fashion within the public sphere, and Bunyan's works served as a medium for the progression of that activity.

It is not entirely satisfying to place the freethought reception of Bunyan neatly into a linear narrative of secularization in Britain. Any notion of a grand narrative has come under much scrutiny and the thesis itself has undergone many revisions in recent years.⁷³ It is perhaps more useful to think about these diverse readings of Bunyan within freethought as symptomatic of a larger project of secularism, which intended to divorce British political discourse from its religious underpinnings, rather than as an effect caused by an all-inclusive secularization of an entire society.⁷⁴ We can then avoid viewing Bunyan's works in essentialist terms, and instead consider the actual reading activities of particular sub-cultures who brought

specific reading strategies to bear on Bunyan's works. What I am suggesting here is that the greater political project of freethought—complete with competing opinions on how to interact with and transform society—had a normative effect upon the reading strategies of its participants. As E. P. Thompson described, the political discourse of the working classes was deeply indebted to Bunyan, and particularly to *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Freethinkers may not have held their political concerns in view while reading Bunyan, but, like all readers, they were committed to an ideological framework and set of assumptions that served to mediate the meaning created while reading the text. This is not to say that every freethinker's interpretation of Bunyan was a masked political agenda. But since it was primarily around politics that freethought organized itself, I do suggest that its ultimate concerns played a significant role on how its participants read Bunyan. Thus, it was not necessarily an "inexorable secularization of society" that dictated how Bunyan was read in the Victorian era as a whole.⁷⁵ Rather, distinct reading communities within organized freethought interacted with the text in ways that conformed to broader social concerns. In one case, there is Robert Cooper, who wrote off Bunyan as "holy trash." However, as with readers like Robert Blatchford, freethought contributed in meaningful ways to the project of seeking to reconcile the "divided self" of Victorian England into a complex whole during the Edwardian years.⁷⁶ Bunyan had been placed within the familiar tendentious binary of faith versus reason, and for many freethinkers, there he remained. But that is not the whole story. Others who actively promoted secular ideals in British society accepted Bunyan as "the great teacher of us all."⁷⁷

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Notes

¹ Charles Maurice Davis, “Secularism on Bunyan,” in *Mystic London; Or, Phases of the Occult Life in the Metropolis* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1875): 233.

² See Kathleen M. Swaim, *Pilgrim's Progress, Puritan Progress: Discourses and Contexts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 1.

³ For the present purposes, I have adopted Shirley Mullen’s definition of “freethought,” which refers to those who organized themselves into communities actively seeking to make Britain less governed by Christian theology and its institutions. I use freethought as an umbrella term for all those atheists, agnostics, and secularists who advanced that common cause. The present study is not concerned with those who happened to have religious doubts, but had no active role in the proselytization of British society. See Shirley Mullen, *Organized Freethought: The Religion of Unbelief in Britain* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 3.

⁴ Davies, “Secularism on Bunyan,” 241.

⁵ Barbara A. Johnson, *Reading Piers Plowman and The Pilgrim's Progress: Reception and the Protestant Reader* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 244.

⁶ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 34.

⁷ It is important to note that Thomas Cooper was a major proponent of freethought early in his life, but later had a “crisis of doubt,” and re-converted to Christianity. He spent the last years of his life lecturing on Christianity. See Timothy Larsen for a full study on this theme in Victorian England. *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford University Press, 2006). All of the references to Cooper in this study are from his years as a proponent of freethought.

⁸ Ian Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 149–54.

⁹ David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell* (London: Croon Helm, 1988), 201.

¹⁰ Mullen, *Organized Freethought*, 3–5.

¹¹ These include: *The Moralists* (1828), *The Republican* (1819–1826), *The Isis* (1832), *Devil's Pulpit* (1831–1832), *Gauntlet* (1833–1834), *Rationalist* (1833), *Bible of Reason* (1836), and the *New Moral World* (1834–1845).

¹² E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 31.

¹³ Berman, *A History of Atheism*, 205.

¹⁴ N. H. Keeble, “‘Of Him Thousands Daily Sing and Talk’: Bunyan and His Reputation,” in *John Bunyan Conventicle and Parnassus, Tercentenary Essays*, ed. N. H. Keeble (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 256.

¹⁵ Epicurus [pseud.], “Essay on the Deity and his Attributes, Written for ‘The Republican,’ and Inscribed as a Testimony of Respect to H. Boyle,” *The Republican* 8 (1823): 525. [Emphasis added].

¹⁶ Richard Carlile, “To the Christian Judge Bailey,” *The Republican* 10 (1824): 648.

¹⁷ Richard Carlile, “Materialism versus Methodism,” *The Republican* 13 (1823): 343.

¹⁸ Anon. “Subscriptions for Mr. Carlile,” *The Republican* 8 (1823): 118.

¹⁹ James Hay, “Religious Fanaticism,” *The London Investigator* 1, 7 (1854): 101–3.

²⁰ John M. Robertson, “Tolstoy and the Ethics of Jesus,” *The University Magazine and Free Review* 4 (April–September 1895): 219.

²¹ See Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

²² S. Britton, “The Praise of Books,” *Progress: A Monthly Magazine of Advanced Thought* 6 (August 1886): 341.

²³ “The Rev. Mr. Blandy on a Burning Mission,” *Reasoner* 10, no. 11 (1851): 224.

²⁴ J. W. T. Osmotherley, “Our Correspondent,” *Reasoner* 9, no. 16 (1850): 192.

²⁵ Robert Cooper, “Mr. Cooper’s Reply to ‘Doctor’ ‘T,’” *Reasoner* 9, no. 13 (1850): 155.

²⁶ Robert Cooper, “Report from Robert Cooper,” *Reasoner* 12, no. 24 (1852): 380.

²⁷ F. J. Gould, *The Life-Story of a Humanist* (London: Watts & Co., 1923), 29–30.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ F. J. Gould, *The New Pilgrim’s Progress: From Christianity to Secularism, a Lecture* (London: Watts & Co., n.d. [ca. 1885]). I must express my thanks to the staff at The National Library of Wales for making this item available to me.

³⁰ Fittingly, these are all questions that preoccupied Victorian theologians and intellectuals alike. See Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies Concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); James R. Moore, “Theodicy and Society: The Crisis of the Intelligentsia,” in *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*, eds. Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman (London: Macmillan Academic, 1990): 153–86.

³¹ Gould, *The New Pilgrim's Progress*, 15–16.

³² F. J. Gould, "The British Isles," *The Literary Guide and Rationalist Review* 234 (1 December 1915): 179.

³³ Mullen, *Organized Freethought*, 7.

³⁴ Berman, *A History of Atheism*, 212.

³⁵ See Joss Marsh, *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), ch. 2.

³⁶ George Jacob Holyoake, *The Origin and Nature of Secularism: Showing that where Freethought Commonly Ends Secularism Begins* (London: Watts & Co., 1896), 51.

³⁷ For a complete examination of this debate, see Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists, and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866–1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 109 ff.

³⁸ In 1862, Bradlaugh and Holyoake attempted to collaborate on Bradlaugh's flagship periodical the *National Reformer*, which failed for reasons similar to their inability to find common ground in their debate eight years later. See Edward Royle, *The Infidel Tradition from Paine to Bradlaugh* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1976), 66.

³⁹ Charles William F. Goss, *A Descriptive Bibliography of the Writings of George Jacob Holyoake: With a Brief Sketch of his Life* (London: Crowther & Goodman, 1908), 65–72.

⁴⁰ Royle, *The Infidel Tradition*, 64. See also Royle, *Radicals, Secularists, and Republicans*, 155. The published record of the 1853 debate is entitled *Christianity and Secularism: Report of a Public Discussion between the Rev. Brewin Grant, B.A., and George Jacob Holyoake, Esq. Held in the Royal British Institution, Cowpoer Street, London, On Six Successive Thursday Evenings, Commencing Jan. 20, and Ending Feb. 24, 1853* (London: Ward and Co., 1853). The 1854 debate is published similarly, *Christianity and Secularism: Report of a Public Discussion between the Rev. Brewin Grant, B.A., and George Jacob Holyoake, Esq. Held in the City Hall, Glasgow, On Monday and Thursday Evenings, Commencing October 2, and Ending October 19, 1854* (Glasgow: Robert Stark, 1854).

⁴¹ Reports of Grant's lecture tour contain some of the same quotations as the manuscript of each debate that Brewin and Holyoake held. Reports of Grant's lectures appear in many places. Here was cited "Sketch of the Rev. Brewin Grant, B.A.," *The Young Men's Magazine* (Glasgow: Robert Stark, 1854), 202–3.

⁴² "Strictures Continued, or, a Parallel between Mr. John Bunyan, & Mr. G. J. Holyoake," *Strictures on the Lectures Delivered by the Rev. Brewin Grant in the Primitive Methodist Chapel, Keighley* (Keighley: J. Rhodes, 1853), 26. I must express my thanks to the Interlibrary Loan staffs at Drew University and Columbia University for arranging the delivery of this item for me.

⁴³ *Strictures*, 19.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *Strictures*, 21.

⁴⁶ *Strictures*, 24.

⁴⁷ *Strictures*, 19.

⁴⁸ “The Experience of an Old Methodist,” *Reasoner* 11, no. 1 (1851): 5–6. This reference to Bunyan is drawn from Bunyan’s own spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding*: “The Tempter would also much assault me with this: How can you tell but that the Turks had as good Scriptures to prove their *Mabomet* the Saviour, as we have to prove our *Jesus* is.” See *Grace Abounding*, ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 31 (paragraph 97). My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for bringing this to the author’s attention.

⁴⁹ Eugene [pseud.], “The Dignity of Man,” *Reasoner* 1, no. 20 (1846): 260.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ See Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature*, 149 ff. Haywood notes that Doubleday’s *Political Pilgrim’s Progress* remasculinized political radicalism with the expectation of confronting state political power structures.

⁵² J. Allanson Picton, “‘The Man, Christ Jesus’: The Germ of the Christian Myth,” *The Agnostic Annual* 1/2 (1896): 30.

⁵³ Robert Blatchford, “The ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’” in *My Favorite Books* (London: The Clarion Office, 1900), 191–221.

⁵⁴ Blatchford, “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” 204.

⁵⁵ Blatchford, “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” 208. For a lengthy discussion of the “immanent frame,” see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), ch. 15.

⁵⁶ Blatchford, “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” 206.

⁵⁷ Blatchford, “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” 207.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Holyoake, “The Literary Genius of Bunyan,” 471.

⁶⁰ Blatchford, “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” 213–14.

⁶¹ Blatchford, “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” 201.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ In particular see Michael Davies, *Graceful Reading: Theology and Narrative in the Works of John Bunyan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); N. H. Keeble, “Bunyan and His Reputation,” 256–60; Emma Mason, “Victorians and Bunyan’s Legacy,” in *Cambridge Companion to Bunyan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 150–61; Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim’s Progress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 217–27; Barry V. Qualls, *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction: The Novel as Book of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); C. Stephen Finley, “Bunyan Among the Victorians: Macaulay, Froude, Ruskin,” *Journal of Literature & Theology* 3, no. 1 (March 1989): 77–94.

⁶⁴ Mary Hammond, “*The Pilgrim’s Progress* and its Nineteenth-Century Publishers,” in *Reception, Appropriation, Recollections: Bunyan’s ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’* eds. W. R. Owens and Stuart Sim (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007): 99–118.

⁶⁵ “London Secular Society,” *Reasoner* 1, no. 16 (1854): 346.

⁶⁶ “London Secular Society,” 347.

⁶⁷ Holyoake, “The Literary Genius of Bunyan,” 470.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 52.

⁷¹ Blatchford, “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” 201.

⁷² X.Y.Z. [pseud.], “Religion Considered in its Relation to Poetry: A Secular Sermon,” *The Secular Review* 1, no. 12 (1877): 178.

⁷³ The scholarship on secularization in Britain is vast. For a highly useful orientation to that discussion, and the expressed difficulties therein, see J. C. D. Clark, “Secularization and Modernization: The Failure of a ‘Grand Narrative,’” *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 1 (2012): 161–94; Jeremy Morris, “Secularization and Religious Experience: Arguments in the Historiography of Modern British Religion,” *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 1 (2012): 195–219.

⁷⁴ See Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, Introduction and chap. 1 and 6.

⁷⁵ Hammond, “*The Pilgrim’s Progress* and its Nineteenth-Century Publishers,” 100.

⁷⁶ See Jonathan Rose, *The Edwardian Temperament, 1895–1919* (Athens, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 1986), especially chap. 6.

⁷⁷ Holyoake, “The Literary Genius of Bunyan,” 471.

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