

The Seismic Growth of Atheism and Blasphemy in Nineteenth Century Literature

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Abstract : This paper explores the intertwined evolution of atheism and blasphemy in nineteenth-century British literature, situating it within the broader sociopolitical and religious transformations of the era. It examines how growing secular movements challenged the hegemony of Christianity, particularly through influential figures like Thomas Paine, Richard Carlile, and Charles Bradlaugh. The paper analyses the philosophical roots of atheism—including the English mechanick tradition, nonconformist dissent, and the impact of the French Revolution—and how these traditions found literary expression in a growing body of freethought literature. It also investigates the role of personal disillusionment with religion, particularly through the lens of figures like Percy Shelley. Furthermore, the study addresses the legal and cultural consequences of these ideological shifts, highlighting the prosecutions for blasphemy as both a mechanism of suppression and a catalyst for reform. Drawing on a wide array of primary and secondary sources, the paper argues that literature not only mirrored the secularising tendencies of the century but also served as a powerful tool in challenging religious orthodoxy and reshaping public discourse. Ultimately, it reveals how literature became both a battleground and a beacon for the secular imagination.

Keywords: Atheism, Blasphemy, Nineteenth-Century Literature, Secularism, Victorian Britain, Freethought, Charles Bradlaugh, Thomas Paine, Religious Dissent, Legal History, Radicalism, Percy Shelley, Church-State Relations, Literary Criticism, Freedom of Expression.

Introduction - Literature and religion have always been closely intertwined across various cultures and regions. Both have been mutually dependent on one another as some of the earliest classic literary works also happen to be revered religious scriptures and stories. One of the similarities across all these cultures had been the suppression of ideas that disparaged said literary works. It was no different in the United Kingdom, and indeed most of Europe, where religious bodies enjoyed total dominance with severe repercussions for those that dared challenge its authority.

However, things did start to change as the ever growing scientific discoveries challenged the religious status quo. The nineteenth century in Europe was marked by higher levels of religious tolerance than in all the previous centuries. It was heralded by atheistic and blasphemous movements, characterised by numerous campaigns against the Churches and religion. Within its existing laws, Britain established legislation to respect belief and personal principles. The Tolerance Act of 1688 was expanded in 1813 to allow Unitarians into the Parliament, Romans Catholics in 1832, and the Jews in 1858 (Conrad 1).

Atheism, which has been an anomaly until the last few decades, is in its simplest form, a lack of belief in the

existence of deities. Despite not being widespread in antiquity, the idea of atheism has been around for several centuries. The origin of the word itself has pejorative connotations as it was used in a derogatory sense in ancient Greece. Primary and secondary literature have attempted to offer metanarrative description of the philosophical and theological origins and growth of the century's atheism. One of the earliest primary atheistic literature was Thomas Paine's Age of Reason which established the basis of nineteenth century atheism. The publication formed an inspiration to people who seek to challenge the church's authority and religion at large. By the 1820s, Richard Carlile rekindled banned atheist books such as Wooler's Black Dwarf and works of William Hone (Nash 80-83). In the 1860s, Charles Bradlaugh became the most successful Victorian atheist (Ilardo 29). He was elected to the parliament in 1880 and became Britain's first openly atheist Member of Parliament. Edward Rolye is perhaps the most notable nineteenth century historian of freethought and atheism. His two publications Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement 1791-1866 and Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866-1915 gives an introduction to atheism and the actors in the movement. He also gives a narrative of

obstacles such as blasphemy-related prosecutions.

Despite the growing religious tolerance, most Western countries, including the UK, had long-established laws that indicated anyone who spoke or wrote against Christianity was punishable by the common law of blasphemy. In the early nineteenth century, the authorities used blasphemy laws as part of their arsenal against atheists, especially working and low-class citizens (De Lubac 53). Another important publication is *The London Heretics* by Warren Sylvester Smith which gives an account of the events in the nineteenth century and players that characterised atheism. David Berman details the growth of atheism and blasphemy in his book *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes and Russell* focusing on the reasons for disbelief against atheism. These publications are just a few examples of the wide array of British literature that describes the growth of atheism and blasphemy in the nineteenth century.

The Origin of Atheism : As early as the seventh century, most Western countries were religious states, with religion being the first pillar of custom (Mary 50). For example, in Britain, the culture was monotheism, a faith system claiming to possess the absolute truth and denies all other creeds (Robson 219). They, therefore, incorporated suppression strategies to other faiths in their doctrine. In this case, Christianity was the core doctrine of the British culture, thus creating a country that used the law to enforce religion. In other words, Western countries had formalised rules against different creeds, with freethinkers being punished for heresy and blasphemy (Robilliard 45). Empirical research has comprehensively described the origins of atheism and how it spread to different contexts.

David Nash, in his article *The (Long) Nineteenth-Century*, suggested that the lineage of atheism in Western countries originated from four different sources: English mechanick tradition; growth of nonconformity; inheritance from English intellectual doubt; and the influence of French revolution and its effects (212, 213). He further claims the four sources reflect all the ideas, movements, and atheist actions of nineteenth-century atheism. The first and the oldest ideology is the English mechanick tradition that had begun in the seventeenth century due to drastic religious and political disruptions. The upheavals were a consequence of the authorisation of the vernacular Bible, which enabled broad and private study and interpretations (Hill 14a). The tradition rejected sectarian beliefs and instead insisted on individual interpretations of the Bible and other radical religious and political sources (Hill, 87b). While some researchers have argued quasi-panteists and neon-humanists existed as early as the sixteenth century, Hill (25a, 175a) confirms the mechanick tradition was a significant product of the seventeenth century. The consequences of the individualistic position became a fierce source of independence of thought and a motive to question religious dogmas and Christianity (Nash 213). Indeed, the strands of thinking became instrumental in the development

and growth of atheism.

The second ideology for the origin of atheism was the consistent growth of nonconformity. The like-minded believers had started clustering together, forming congregations that seek not to cooperate with orthodoxy and authority. Nash indicates the communities often shared occult theological ideas and shared disbelief in religion and God (213). Amphlett described how the local secular groups actively participated in nonconformist groupings, sharing many elements and outlooks (225). Besides, many early British atheists and freethinkers had inherited the English intellectual doubt. It was a norm to describe the debt atheist owed to Epicurean philosophers, both from ancient Greece and modern European history. Notable Epicureans and influencers of the nineteenth atheism include Charles Blount, Peter Annet, and Jacob Ilive, whose publications had been condemned and burned in 1753 per the common hangman laws (Nash 213). These descents of freethinkers formed the gravitas, intellectual capability, and cosmopolitanism to develop atheism in the nineteenth century.

The final source of atheism, according to Nash, was the French Revolution and its effects. In France, the revolution had produced less anti-religious ideal socialism (Royle 170,171). However, in Britain, the reactions to French Revolution were characterised by stringent definitions of loyalism and radicalism. Loyalism sought to defend the Crown and the Church of England, while radicalism drew from the ideologies of French philosophies mixed with the new idea of natural lights. Thomas Paine (1737-1809) was the earliest Britain atheist to champion radicalism and crystallised the opposition towards the role and privileges of the Church of England (Nash 214). Therefore, the French Revolution had a critical role in the emergence and spread of atheism in Britain. While Nash has explicitly described the sources of atheism in Britain, his argument fails to construct a clear structure of the succession of leaders and the spread of atheism ideologies across European countries, especially in the early nineteenth century. Nash only mentions the later-century atheism movement, which used lectures, portfolios in newspapers, and cheap editions of atheism to pass the freethinking ideology to the next generation (213). Therefore, there is a need for more research on the early century atheism leaders and the spread of individualistic religious and political thinking in the early nineteenth century, which contributed to the growth of atheism ideologies throughout the century.

In his book *History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell*, Berman David explains the role of negative personal experiences with Christianity in the development of atheism (178). Berman gives an account of Shelley, a vastly studied and well-known atheist of the early nineteenth century. By the time Shelley entered Oxford in 1810, he was a deist — a person who believes in the existence of God but does not believe in the absolute power of the

Church (Dulles 26). However, from an early age, he had developed a personal principle that “belief is an involuntary passion” (Berman 179). Unlike other early atheists who had individual interpretations of the religion, Shelley’s philosophy was particularly due to his early encounters with Christian radical values (Griffiths 25). In particular, the rejection by Harriet Grove — a woman he wanted to marry because he was a deist and not a Christian, deeply angered him. He uses the term ‘moral criminal’ to describe Harriet and her family (Jager 238). In December 1810, he began to declare his atheism in a letter to his friend Hogg, “Oh! I burn with impatience for the moment of Christianity’s dissolution, it has injured me; I swear on the altar of perjured love to revenge myself on the hated cause” (Berman 181). His ultimate questioning of God’s existence can be seen in a letter he wrote on 3 January 1811 where he declares, “Oh! Christianity when I pardon this last this severest of thy persecutions may God (if there be a God) blast me!” (Berman 181). In this case, Shelley’s negative encounters with Christianity led him to hate the dominant religion of Britain and his declaration there is no God — a core element of atheism. He would later be expelled from Oxford University for a treatise written by him about his atheism.

Blasphemous Ideologies in the Growth of Atheism :

The literature recognises several ideologies and atheists that influenced to the growth of atheism in the nineteenth century. On top of the epistemology is atheists’ belief that morality was a cultural production and based on external and unverifiable force (Conrad 21). They particularly questioned the morality of the Bible if it approved of immorality such as prostitution and slavery. Atheism leaders such as Charles Bradlaugh and G.J. Holyoake insisted and spread the idea that morality emerged from an individual’s desire for goodness. Historian F.B. Smith in his article *The Atheist Mission, 1840-1900* emphasises on the atheists’ claims that humans could not be moral by the religious commandment, but rather a person would be righteous if they sought goodness for their own sake (207). As a result, atheism placed humanity as the number one priority, so humans replaced God and religion at the centre of human values and morality (Quinault 325). Therefore, the concept of morality required individuals to be a practical atheists without the guidance of religious doctrines.

Moreover, the atheists spread the concept that Christians were immoral. Smith noted that the nineteenth British atheists had a strong belief that “Religion was immoral: it was destructive of personal happiness, intellectually false, anachronistic and in general socially pernicious” (Smith 207). Notable atheists such as Charles Bradlaugh campaigned against the realities of the American, French, and British societies, characterised by the suffering poor people and the rich who accumulated all the wealth and lived in comfort. For atheism, the inequalities in the culture served as evidence against God’s element of Providence and involvement in people’s lives. For instance,

in 1865, Bradlaugh wrote a booklet which stated that “....Thelabourer may pray, but, if work be scant and wages low, he pines to death while praying.... Prayer to the Unknown for aid gives no strength to the prayer” (Bradlaugh 1-8). Annie Besant stated similar thoughts in her 1885 essay *Is Christianity a Success*. For instance, Annie notes the “heavens can be won by a prayer, when the earth is lost” (Besant 280). Beviemphases Annie refers to a ‘lost earth’ due to the injustices in the world, such as inequality, as mentioned by Bradlaugh (72). The atheists, therefore, spread their ideologies to eliminate the belief in God as an obstacle to societal morality and progress.

The Growth of Atheists and Rise in Blasphemy : The description of the origin and growth of atheism in the nineteenth century is incomplete without analysing the succession of leaders who began and developed the concepts. Literature has often recognised atheists such as Thomas Paine, Richard Carlile, Robert Owen, Holyoake, and Charles Bradlaugh. These atheists played significant roles in the spread of atheism across Britain and represented different strands of atheism (Rectenwald 84). Arguably the most important pioneer of atheism was Thomas Paine, whose remarkable works and publications such as *Common Sense*, *The American Crisis*, *Rights of Man*, and *The Age of Reason* became incredibly influential to atheists and secular circles. In his analysis of Thomas Paine’s life in the *Rediscovering Thomas Paine*, Richard Bernstein noted that his followers from the United States, France, and Britain had celebrated him as a courageous pioneer of human liberty (875). He was a great freethinker who sought to liberate humans from tyranny and any forms of ignorance and superstition (875). David Nash recognises the *Age of Reason* as the most important writings of Paine in the English atheist circles. This is notably because the publication contained emotive, musical, and concise condemnations of religious doctrines and its adverse effects on humanity. However, despite the *Age of Reason* and other Paine’s being essential to the growth of atheism, the literature has a gap in analysing individual publications and elements in the works that contributed to the development and spread of atheism.

While the atheists played a critical role in the growth of atheism, they also led to the rise in blasphemy-related prosecutions. The law against blasphemy and blasphemous individuals in the West, especially England, Wales, and France, was a common-law offence for over three centuries (Hunter 68). However, the nineteenth century was at the height of the prosecutions. For instance, in the article *Thomas Paine “The Age of Reason” Revisited*, Prochaskanoted that Thomas Paine wrote the *Age of Reason* while in prison for his public condemnations of religious establishments (568). As early as 1814, brothers Daniel Eaton Houston and George Houston were put on trial under the blasphemy laws for publishing the rewritten version of Baron D’Holbach’s *Story of Jesus Christ*. Titled

Ecce Homo, the book portrayed Jesus as a mere historical figure (Walter 36). In his work *World Crimes*, Joss Marsh gives an account of Richard Carlile's life, including blasphemy-related prosecution for reprinting Thomas Paine's works (214). In 1818, the Society for the Suppression of Vice prosecuted Carlile for reading Paine's *Age of Reason* during his trial. He was convicted for blasphemy and spent six years in prison.

Historian JM Robertson analysed the case of Susannah Wright, a worker who helped run Richard Carlile's shop when he was in prison. She spent eighteen months in prison for publishing writings against the Christian religion (Robertson 37). However, the early prosecutions of atheists for blasphemy only caused more libel and public outrage. By the year 1825, the authorities in most Western countries gave up prosecuting atheists and released blasphemy prisoners. However, the reprieve proved temporary. In 1857, Thomas Pooley was prosecuted for blasphemy by clergyman Paul Bush (Toohey 320). In the 1860s, Charles Bradlaugh went into trial to defend his publication *National Reformer* (de Villiers 84). While the next decade offered a reprieve for the atheists, the prosecutions for blasphemy resumed in 1877, involving several court cases. Atheists such as Henry Cook, Charles Bradlaugh, WA Hunter, Annie Besant, and Edward Truelove were prosecuted and imprisoned for blasphemous publications and messages (Kaslem 79).

Conclusion: The literature suggests English mechanick tradition, the rise of nonconformity, Epicureans, and the French Revolution were the origins of atheism in most English countries and led to the development of different strands of atheism. The succession of atheism leaders from Thomas Paine to Charles Bradlaugh spread blasphemous messages such as immorality of Christianity, lack of rationality of the Bible, and non-existence of God. The blasphemous ideologies led to rising in trials and prosecutions of the atheists and their followers. In essence, the literature about the growth of atheism and blasphemy in the nineteenth century is comprehensive, with scholars giving reasonable attention to the subject.

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