

# ADVOCATING THE FREETHINKING FEMINIST PROJECT WITHIN THE SECULARIST MOVEMENT, BRITAIN 1851-1886



Benamer Hamza \*

Département d'Anglais, Université des Frères Mentouri  
Constantine 1 (Algeria),  
hamzabenamer15@gmail.com

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## *Abstract:*

This article proposes that the establishment of the Secularist movement by George Jacob Holyoake aimed to champion the Freethinking feminist project. This latter one included a rational critique of religion and support to fallen women's liberties. In fact, the Freethinkers who held similar radical views were powerfully attacked by the State and society, and their heritage was on the brink of demise. From 1915 through to 1942, the government charged some leading Freethinkers with blasphemous libel and put them in jail. In addition, the far more progressive views of Owen's schemes about free love unions were on the whole denied in society. Nevertheless, Holyoake's new articulation of 'respectability' within the Secularist movement had provided a way to a number of Freethinking feminists to promote a combination of anti-religious and far more progressive views on prostitution. The astonishing fact is that Freethinkers gained acceptance in society and were not subject to legal prosecutions. So, it could be inferred that the Secularist movement was fertile ground in which Freethinking feminism was able to thrive.

**key words:** Holyoake; Secularism; Freethinkers; support; project; criticism of religion; prostitutes' liberties

## **1. Introduction**

When analyzing the available sources documenting the history of Secularism in nineteenth-century Britain, it is easy to observe that historians tended always to link the establishment of the Secularist

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\* Corresponding Author

movement to the separation of religion from politics and human's life. More recently, historian Ray Argyle (2021) has adopted the articulation that Secularism was a rational thought that came to replace religious superstitions (p. 6). In addition, Michael Rectenwald (2016) used the word 'secular' to refer to the activists who maintained and lived an earthly life as opposed to the aspirations of religious life and or spiritual improvement (p. 4). While scholar Laura Schwartz (2010) has suggested in her article that the intent behind the establishment of the Secularist movement was to separate the political, moral, and cultural life entirely from religion (p. 777).

It could be said the British Secularist movement did not only call for the separation of religion from politics and human's life, but it was the platform through which the Freethinking feminist project developed and gained acceptance in society. In the early nineteenth century, Freethinkers could not express their views openly on the subjects of religion and free love unions due to the cultural and judicial bonds imposed upon them by the State and society. In 1851, George Jacob Holyoake coined the term 'Secularism' as a name to his movement, and he invited a number of Freethinkers, both male and female, to participate in the new Secular project. These activists gained prominence as public speakers, lecturers, and journalists. Furthermore, they continued to criticize religion and demanded to secure the prostitutes' liberties. The latter one was one of the demands that some Freethinkers within the Secularist movement called for, and it is originally attributed to Owen's schemes about free love unions. In fact, Holyoake's new articulation of 'respectability' made the Freethinkers at the forefront of his Secular project. As a result, the Freethinking feminist project had become a dominant feature in mid- nineteenth-century secular discourse.

## **2. An Overview about the Constraints Imposed upon the Freethinkers in the Early Victorian Times**

In the early nineteenth century, organised Freethought was home to a number of intellectual radicals such as Robert Owen, Richard Carlile, Joseph Barker, Charles Southwell, George Jacob Holyoake, Annie Besant, and Harriet Law. These individuals defended reason and science, critiqued religion, and they refused to accept that any aspect of it could be interpreted in rational terms. In addition, some of them had called for the replacement of the Christian marriages by flexible free love schemes. Both of the said variables form what this article refers to as "the Freethinking feminist project."

On the whole, the Freethinkers were viewed as extremists due to their views on religion. In fact, these progressively minded individuals were writing and circulating blasphemous works, which would be of a serious threat not only to the Established Church but also to the working classes. Following this line of thought, Freethinkers often used the public spaces, where ordinary people could attend and listen to the arguments of the lecturers, to debate the Christian opponents on the matters of religion, marriage, free love unions, and divorce. A dominant Owenite journal, *The New Moral World*, documented the following: when George Fleming lectured to his female audience on women's right to divorce in Great Yarmouth, "many women at the end "pressed forward to shake hands with the lecturer, and to wish him health and strength to spread his glorious tidings of emancipation, equality and justice to the poor, ill-used women" (Taylor, 1983, p. 192).

What had the government done to silence the Freethinkers? In 1815, the Liverpool administration had increased taxes on knowledge, which were primarily stamp duties on newspapers designed to penalize cheap newspapers spreading blasphemous and seditious ideas among the poor and working classes. As a result, most of London's radical republican periodicals were eliminated (Ledger, 2011, p. 110).

Among the remaining periodicals in circulation was Richard Carlile's *The Republican*. However, in April 1819, Carlile prints of Thomas Paine had attracted nine separate charges of blasphemous libel from the government, and an allied prosecuting body, the Evangelical Society for the Suppression of Vice. Two trials in November-December 1819 brought a sentence of three years' goal (Wiener, 1980, pp. 79-85).

Interestingly, criticizing religion at that time was a law-breaking that brought about judicial prosecutions and the imprisonment of some leading Freethinkers. Aside from Richard Carlile's trial, Charles Southwell was also accused for blasphemy on November 27, 1841, and was put in jail for 17 days while his bail was processed. In January 1842, he was put on trial, and he maintained his innocence. After being found guilty, Southwell received a £100 fine and a 12-month prison term (Mullen, 1992, pp. 150-158). In addition to Richard Carlile and Southwell, the founder and editor of a number of Freethought journals, including *Reasoner* and *Secular Review*, George Jacob Holyoake, was convicted to blasphemy and sentenced to six months in jail (Rectenwald, 2013, pp. 233-240).

Reconstructing the heterosexual relationships on the basis of equality was one of the major demands that Robert Owen and his

supporters were striving to achieve in reality. As many Owenites argued, the Christian institution of marriage was the source of human selfishness and the cause of female oppression (Gleadle, 1995, pp. 117-128). They had also viewed the Christian marriages as enhancing gender inequality and sexual repression, for they placed the wives' freedom under the authority of their husbands and fathers (Dixler, 1984, p. 316). From a critical point of view, not all the Owenites were Freethinkers, but their opposition to orthodox religion and openness to discussing new ways of organising heterosexual relationships made them in line with popular Freethought which also developed out of these two principles.

Some examples are put forward to demonstrate how married women suffered both subjection and discrimination in terms of law. As such, women in the presence of their husbands were invisible. That means, they had no freedom to make decisions on family issues and other political matters (Glen, 2004, p. 28). Women were not allowed to enter contracts, own property, and take control over her children, "whose guardianship passed from her husband to his nearest male relative at his death" (Martin, 1999, p. 115). Furthermore, middle-class women were the victims of a double standard morality which involved the imposition of a far stricter code of sexual behaviour upon them than upon men of the same class. For example, a wife who committed adultery lost all rights to maintenance and was liable to be abandoned on the basis of judicial separation. Whilst an adulterous husband suffered no penalty, could pursue a wife who left him on account of his infidelity and sue her harbourers and if he abandoned her he could only be made to provide support on the basis of court order establishing her need (Shanley, 1989, pp. 79-80). Finally, divorce was exclusively available to those who had the thousand pounds necessary to get a Private Member's Bill passed in the House of Commons dissolving their union; otherwise it was legally impossible; no woman had ever won a divorce in this way, although a number of men did (Kha, 2017, p. 37).

In the 1830s, Robert Owen had a proposal to replace the Christian marriages by free love unions. From this perspective, if a woman was living unhappy marriage, she had the right to leave her husband and form a union with another man. Victorians, and especially the clergymen, regarded these marriages as a form of sexual libertinage, debauchery and prostitution. It was permissible for the couples who were emotionally attracted to each other to form a union and declare their intention in one of the Owenites' Sunday assemblies. But, of course, their union should at least last about three months. After that, they would make a second

public declaration which, registered in the books of their society, would announce them officially as husband and wife. Over the course of twelve months, if the couples felt unsatisfied with the union, they should return home for a sentence of six months. If they were still unhappy, they would be given an immediate divorce (Cook, 1977, p. 44). In free love unions, unlike the traditional marriages, divorce was permissible for both partners, and there would be no legal restrictions to be imposed upon women.

Nevertheless, these liberal marriages were on the whole banned in Victorian society, for the clergymen asserted that chastity was a very precarious virtue maintained only under the strictest surveillance. For example, one clergyman made the following declaration:

It is marriage alone which makes a woman honored and honorable; and it is as a wife she alone can bring forth those true endearments and refinements that bind her near to our hearts, and make us value her as we do (Carpenter, 1972, p. 38).

In reply, Robert Owen asserted that the Christian marriages enslaved both men and women. The central argument that Owen put forward is that the Priesthood marriages enhanced the individual competition for wealth and ruled out the possibility of equality between the sexes.

Now it is much more important to the well-being and happiness of man, that the human organisation of any of the inferior animals should be thus made more perfect. The improvements of the organization of man, however, have been neglected and must be neglected, as long as the marriages devised by the priests and sanctioned by governments as a divine institution, and conducted on the principle of individual competition for individual wealth, shall remain the law of the land (Carpenter, 1972, p. 39)

It must be said that not all the Owenites were in agreement with these liberal marriages, for they were concerned that accusations of debauchery, prostitution and other forms of sexual libertinage would be hurled at the Owenites by the Established Church and the State. In 1833,

a female Owenite, writing to *The Crisis* under the name of “Concordia”, criticized these more liberal marriages and insisted that they should be rejected in full. She proposed that “her society must experience a great revolution in attitudes before the public opinion was ready for Owen's proposals.” In reply, Robert Owen stated that he “did not intend his views on marriage to be adopted in the present state of society, nor did he wish that any of his followers should incur the scorn of the world” (Cook, 1977, p. 45).

As the previous arguments illustrate, the Freethinking feminist project was on the brink of demise. Freethinkers were not welcomed by the State, and most of their radically sexual views did not gain acceptance in society.

### **3. Welcoming the Freethinkers into the Secularist Movement**

In 1851, leading Freethinker George Jacob Holyoake founded the Secularist movement, and the intent, of course, was to attract more Freethinkers willing to defend their convictions within the new secular project. Holyoake's secular vision was clearly modifications of patriarchal schemes for getting the oppressed group of Freethinking women to support them. In 1855, Holyoake published an article through which to encourage Freethinking feminists to join the Secularist movement. Holyoake strenuously believed that women possessed the necessary 'self-command' and 'intellectual strength' that would enable them play an active role in the public sphere, particularly in politics. Holyoake referred to the recently deceased Freethinking feminist Emma Martin, describing her as a true 'propagandist,' who had played a key role in the public space in her role as a speaker on the behalf of the oppressed women. He urged other female Freethinkers to follow Martin in becoming preachers of 'the public' (Schwartz, 2013, p. 111).

However, very few Freethinking feminists became involved in the Secularist movement. In spite of the relatively small numbers of women involved in the Secularist movement, they acted as public speakers and had their writings published in the Secularist press. They included Harriet Martineau (1802-1876), who put forward a series of feminist arguments against the Contagious Diseases Acts which became common in the repeal campaign (Walkowitz, 1980, p. 79). Sara Hennell (1812-1899) was friends with George Jacob Holyoake, with whom she published Freethinking tracts before she encountered organised Secularism. Harriet Law (1831-1897) was probably the most prominent and important feminist figure in organised Freethought; she gained prominence as a public preacher and she also edited the national newspaper *The Secular*

Chronicle from 1876 and 1879 (Schwartz, 2013, pp. 65-6). Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy (1833-1918) was active in the British women's rights movement and contributed to the wider campaign of women's suffrage in the 19th century (Wright, 2011). Annie Besant (1847-1933) rose under the patronage of Charles Bradlaugh and became a vice president of the National Secular Society in 1875. She also achieved recognition as a public speaker and prolific journalist for the Secularist movement.

What was George Jacob Holyoake's intention behind inviting the Freethinking feminists to join the Secularist movement? Holyoake had grown up around and among working women who were self-sufficient and proof of women's capabilities. Entering the political sphere, and developing his own ideas, within Owenism, he was then part of a movement which viewed the emancipation of all people, including men and women, as central to their goals. This included those women mentioned above, and others, who occupied key positions as speakers, writers, and organizers within organised Freethought, as well as women like Frances Wright, Harriet Law, and Annie Besant who built on Freethinking principles in efforts to found a new community of their own. Holyoake's vision for secularism, a humanist philosophy focused on reason, equality, compassion, and making the most out of the one life we could be certain of naturally called for the inclusion of women. Secularists also recognised the key role of women in lending power to the Church, and therefore knew the importance of women being part of, and being seen to be a part of, secularism, to strengthen the movement and to weaken the hold of the Church.

Striving to represent the Secularist movement as respectable was a smart strategy adopted by Holyoake both to gain acceptance for his views in society and keep the Freethinkers in a safe position from judicial prosecutions. Arguably, Holyoake as a young man was as radical and outspoken as Bradlaugh later became. However, as he got older his personal desire for respectability and acceptance grew. This is always a dilemma for those seeking socio-political change. Holyoake could accept that some individuals with religious opinions could be secularists. Scholar Richard Allen Soloway (1976) once argued in his article "Royle Edward. Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791-1866", that "Holyoake and his successors in the 1850s called not for confrontation but positive cooperation, even with Christian reformers" (p. 590).



The term 'Secularism' came to replace 'Freethought' to demonstrate that the tradition of 'unbelief' in utopian schemes of Freethought and Owenite societies of the early nineteenth century was not really abandoned, but was rather combined with a secular language of 'acceptance'. Hence, respectability marked a new stage in Secularity itself, and this was key to integrating the more radical Freethinking feminists into subsequent women's rights campaigns, most particularly the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts.

#### **4. The Role of Freethinkers as Public Speakers**

Mid-century Secularism did not distinguish between male and female members, no matter what the condition or sex, and women were permitted to participate in the wider intellectual and public life of the movement. To find their rightful place in the Secularist movement, a handful of Freethinking women gained prominence as public speakers. A free and open public discussion was a common intellectual activity within the Secularist movement, whereby Freethinkers competed publicly with male Christian preachers for the same audiences, sometimes numbering up to a thousand. Richard Carlile, a Freethinker, declared that "it is the only system of purification, the only system that abates wrong bias, and strengthens right and wrong" (Schwartz, 2013, pp. 114-115).

In general, a public discussion revolved around various topics such religion, Scripture, Secularism, marriage, divorce, female suffrage, and education. Many debates took place in the open air since women activists were "regularly denied enclosed bookings" because of their progressive ideas (Heather and Hitchcock, 2003, pp. 165-182).

Holyoake insisted that the speakers should hold certain behavioral characteristics. Accordingly, Holyoake published a guide to public speaking and debate, in which he urged the Freethinkers to act as professionals, avoid sarcasm, and respect the arguments of the Christian proponents (Schwartz, 2013, p. 121).

In practice, some Freethinking feminists were engaged in an 'antagonistic relationship' with the churches, thriving on their attacks and gaining publicity through their opposition. Women like Harriet Law and Annie Besant were not simply beneficiaries of changes in the public sphere, but rather were themselves advocates of a mode of public discussion that emphasised the authority of the speaker and the positivity of the audience. In 1876, for example, Law debated Rev. J. H. Gordon, and the core issue structured around 'The Gospel according to Secularism, and Secularism according to the Gospel.' This public debate



took place in Darlington, North East of England, and a large number of attendees usually harked from the upper working or lower-middle classes. The general atmosphere resembled that of a football match complete with their rival teams of supporter to cheer on their respective side, "a great crowd had gathered in the knowledge that Law was to attend this lecture... and was loudly applauded by her partisans on entering the hall, as were the lecturer and local ministers" (Schwartz, 2013, p. 160). In the midst of the debate, Law was arguing that Scripture should be rejected in full, based on the premise that it did not satisfy her search for truth and morality.

It is important to stress upon the fact that hostility towards the Freethinkers this time did not come from the government but from the Christian supporters. Direct confrontations with the masses usually occurred in spaces that did not have a large secular base. When, in 1869, Harriet Law travelled to Newcastle to deliver a lecture on 'Chinese Mission,' she had received harsh criticism from the angry crowds. In addition to Harriet Law, Annie Besant had also witnessed a similar experience when she delivered a lecture at Congleton. The mob smashed the windows of the building where she was Lecturing and stuck Besant's neck with some hard substance (Schwartz, 2013, pp. 118-120).

A number of presumptions are put forward to justify such a Christian hostility towards the Freethinkers. The first and most important reason is that the Church of England (the dominant religious institution in C19th England) was a conservative organisation highly supportive of the status quo (i.e. a hierarchical, aristocratic socio-political system). Leading clergymen were drawn from the ruling class and reflected their attitudes. In the absence of democratic processes, the whole system was justified by the idea that the socio-political system was ordained by a deity. The second one is that these female Freethinkers had come to play an active role in the 'masculine' public sphere, which many Christians viewed it as an unacceptable feminine behavior. The final one is that Freethinkers were using arguments based on science, reason, and free inquiry, which would be threatening to the moral and spiritual authority of the church.

In effect, Freethinkers have focused upon such a Christian hostility to criticize religion. On 5 March 1876, Harriet Law declared that the right of any individual to interpret, and even dismiss, the Bible posed, of course, a serious threat to the authority of the Churches. She attacked the undemocratic structures of the ecclesiastical sect, arguing that, by banning women from speaking at its annual meeting, its ministers were

simply seeking to ensure that their legitimacy would not be challenged. (Schwartz, 2013, p. 124).

The exclusion of women from politics was one of the favorite arguments which Freethinking women used to justify their attack on religion. An article in *The Contemporary Review* entitled "Women's Suffrage and the Teaching of St. Paul" emphasised how Christianity was key to promoting the widespread belief that women were unfit for politics and public issues. It examined the declarations and speeches of St. Paul and the manner in which he prevented women from speaking in the churches thereby formalizing their exclusion from the public sphere. The article maintained that these repressive views existed in the literal interpretation of Scripture, from which emerged all modern laws discriminating against women (Schwartz, 2010, p. 272).

Holyoake's vision within the Secularist movement centered on one single egalitarian principle; men and women could meet as equal citizens and not as members of different sexes. Thus Freethinkers like Annie Besant and Harriet Law used public talk as a powerful intellectual tool to jolt the attention of the public, weaken the authority of the Church, and democratize a variety of public institutions and political arenas.

### **5. Freethinkers' Support to Fallen Women's Liberties**

The study of Victorian sexuality was one of the dynamic fields that received a serious attention from contemporary feminist historians. Among the most popular topics was the introduction of the Contagious Diseases Acts and its consequences on 'fallen women' or prostitutes. The task is not to investigate in detail the extraordinarily introduced Acts and the successful campaign to repeal them, but to shed light on how the Freethinkers' arguments were at the heart of supporting the liberties of prostitutes.

In 1857, a number of military soldiers in the military and marine forces were put under the medical test. After visiting the doctors, these servicemen were tested positive for various venereal diseases. In a report from the Select Committee on the Contagious Diseases, it stated that there had been an outbreak of syphilis at the Aldershot military camp, in England, where many prostitutes frequented. This epidemic forced the British governors to immediately intervene in order to contain this epidemic. As a result, they made the prostitutes responsible for the spread of the contagious diseases, and soon it was to be followed by the passage of the so-called Contagious Diseases Acts in the British Parliament (Hiersche, 2014, p. 1).

Later, the British Parliament passed three Acts known as the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869. These Acts were passed without any serious and open debate in the House of Commons. They provided for the sanitary inspection of prostitutes in eighteen districts in Southern England and Ireland. Their aim was to shield non-commissioned soldiers from a range of genital diseases. The Acts were enforced by the ordinary police under the authority of the Metropolitan Police, and aimed to identify prostitutes and submit them to internal examination by designated official doctors. If a prostitute was found to be infected, she was to be detained in hospital for a certain period, and if she refused to undergo examination, she was confined on the charge of breaking the law of the state. These Acts attempted to give British police officers unlimited authority to arrest any woman or girl who was suspected of being a prostitute (Sung-Sook, 2002, p. 94).

Supporting the liberties of prostitutes was one of the major demands of Secularists, particularly from 1869 to the 1880s. Freethinkers such as Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Wolstenholme, and Annie Besant began straight away to debate the implications of the Acts and the way in which to bring about their repeal. They had also helped to spread ideas about the negative image of women characterised as subordinated, silent victims of male sexual abuse, which emerged from the uncritical study of pornographic literature (Schwartz, 2013, pp. 177-178).

Mid-century Freethinkers adopted the Owenite discourse about sexual morality, which rejected the moral authority of the Church in legitimizing the heterosexual relationships. Among the feminists influenced by Owen's sexual views was Harriet Martineau. This Secularist activist had published four letters on the Contagious Diseases Acts, which were re-printed from *The Daily News* by the Ladies' National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Martineau provided a vision of the repeal campaign based on secular insights, and most of her arguments were highly supportive to the liberties of prostitutes.

In the second letter, for example, Martineau believed that prostitution was a result of the sexual double standard morality and the arbitrary of the British laws. In her opinion, the British Parliament authorized prostitution and made men think it was a 'social necessity,' thereby making the prostitutes responsible for the consequences. Martineau had also asserted that the C.D. Acts provided men with the illusion of safety, with registered sex workers undergoing examinations to ensure the absence of venereal diseases. Thus, the demand for

prostitution grew tremendously, and the supply rose to meet it. Martineau was of the opinion that the passage of the Contagious Diseases Acts would not put an immediate end to prostitution. Instead, she urged the British legislators to reconsider the laws organising the practice of prostitution (Walkowitz, 1980, p. 79).

Martineau's central arguments is that the Acts were applied only to the prostitutes, although the soldiers used to go to the brothels frequently. Martineau had noticed that the number of servicemen admitted to the hospitals was higher than the places under the surveillance of the Acts like Newcastle, Sunderland, Darlington, and other Northern and Midland counties (Sharp & Jordan, 2002)

In the fourth letter, Martineau used the French system of licensed prostitution as a case study to prove that it is impossible to regulate prostitution in Britain either. In her opinion, the difficulty to regulate prostitution was due to the misleading statistics that connected the spread of prostitution to poorly working-class zones, whereas prostitution was a highly-demanded market even among the middle and upper classes. For example, Walkowitz (1980) argued that the statistics used by the LNA repealers were "sensational and misleading" and "largely propagated by the medical profession" (p. 256).

In the 1880s the LNA repealers opened up a controversial debate over the regulation of prostitution in Britain. This led to the emergence of two opposing groups: the repealers who supported the more repressive laws on prostitution and those who were striking to maintain the preservation of prostitutes' personal liberty. In August 1885, leading Secularist figure William Thomas Stead founded The National Vigilance Association (NVA). It was one of the most influential organisations which had grown out of the Contagious Diseases Acts repeal campaign. Its major aim was the enforcement and improvement of the laws for the repression of criminal vice and public immorality (Schwartz, 2013, pp. 164-166). The association's advocates were also known as Social Purity Activists. They maintained a strict religious view on prostitution, and they valued family and the home life almost above anything else (Vicinus, 1972, p. xiii). In practice, they engaged in relief efforts, advocated to increase the age of consent, and, in some cases, lobbied for the closing of brothels and imprisonment of their owners. They also supported the Criminal Law Reform Act of 1885, which provided for the compulsory closing of all brothels and the arrest of someone renting rooms to a registered prostitute.

However, some Secularist activists like George Jacob Holyoake and Elizabeth Wolstenholme rejected the provisions of the Criminal Act of 1885 and were repelled by what they saw as the repressive and authoritarian direction taken by some social purity organisations. As a consequence, they joined the Vigilance Association for the Defense of Personal Rights (PRA), which was founded on 14 March 1871. The PRA activists powerfully opposed certain clauses of the Criminal Law Reform Act of 1885, claiming that it limited the freedom of women in the same manner to the C.D. Acts (Schwartz, 2013, p. 183).

In an article published in the (PRA) journal in 1886, Elizabeth Wolstenholme powerfully challenged the Social Purity Activists who presumed that the closure of the brothels would be the perfect solution to put an end to prostitution. She provided two secular assumptions that reflected her fuller understanding of the crux of the problem. First, the decision to close the brothels, she argued, was not key to rid society of prostitution. For her, prostitutes lived in hard social and economic circumstances, and that prostitution was viewed as a means for living for these women. Thus, the authorities were to blame for not providing these sex workers with a paid work that would preserve their dignity. Second, these prostitutes, once in prison, would be subject to the same 'internal examinations' that the supporters of social purity, including "the Christian and Freethinking repealers, had spent more than fifteen years campaigning against" (Schwartz, 2013, p. 184).

Nevertheless, this Freethinking vision of 'personal liberty' was strongly opposed by some Freethinking activists, who feared that this would damage the reputation of the Secularist movement. For example, older Freethinkers such as Sara Hennell and Sophia Dobson Collet both bolstered William Thomas Stead in his sentimentalist journalistic crusade against the 'white slave trade', which led to the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act in 1885. Besides, Collet fiscally supported Stead's family at a time when he was in jail for the obtainment of whores as a result of his undercover work (Schwartz, 2013, p. 184). From a critical point of view, Freethinkers such as Annie Besant and Elizabeth Wolstenholme continued to lend their support to fallen women's liberties and were completely hostile to those respectable feminists who claimed that repeal of the C.D Acts could only be achieved through moral influences rooted in Christianity.

In spite of the fact that the vision of a purified public and private world was strongly shaped by the Christian faith of the majority of social purity campaigners, it is impossible to ignore the role played by the

Secularist supporters of individual freedoms in the repealing process. The Secularists made more explicit arguments in favour of women's right to sexual promiscuity, with the emphasis to the preserve the prostitutes' liberties. The central argument of the repeal campaign was that men should abide by the same ethical standards as women, and to remain chaste until they married. The Secularists, on the other hand, argued that chastity was not a solution to resolve the problem of prostitution, for it denied the inherent expression of sexuality.

## 6. Conclusion

In sum, Freethinking feminism cannot be viewed in isolation from the Secularist movement. In the 1830s and 40s, Freethinkers were subject to judicial prosecutions and harsh society's criticism, which made the Freethinking feminist project on the brink of demise. As a committed Freethinker, Holyoake established the Secularist movement to be the shelter of the persecuted Freethinkers. Some Freethinking feminists had come to play a key role as public speakers in the 'masculine' public sphere. They criticized religion publicly and were not afraid of expressing their vocal support to the liberties of prostitutes. Holyoake's new articulation of 'respectability' within the Secularist movement was key to gaining acceptance to the Freethinkers' views in society and keep them in safe position from prosecutions. Therefore, the Freethinking feminist discourse has become a dominant feature in the Secularist branch culture, and Freethinkers were less restricted by the cultural and judicial constraints found in early Victorian times.

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