

What Is a Freethinker and Why Does It Matter?

BY FRED EDWARDS

IN HIS 1957 ESSAY, “The Value of Free Thought,” Bertrand Russell writes:

What makes a freethinker is not his beliefs but the way in which he holds them. If he holds them because his elders told him they were true when he was young, or if he holds them because if he did not he would be unhappy, his thought is not free; but if he holds them because, after careful thought he finds a balance of evidence in their favor, then his thought is free, however odd his conclusions may seem.

By this definition, a wide range of people have been freethinkers: not only agnostics and atheists but also deists, liberal religionists, religious innovators, and those who have challenged the predominant orthodoxies in every field of endeavor, from science to politics to the arts. That adds up to a lot of people. And what it tells us is that almost every great individual in history had to, in some way or another, think free—else they likely wouldn’t have stood out enough to become famous in the first place.

A more useful definition is that provided by most dictionaries, which tell us that a freethinker is one who has rejected authority and dogma, particularly in religious thinking, in favor of rational inquiry. The term first came into use in England toward the end of the seventeenth century as a designation for those who inquired into traditional religious beliefs, tested them against experience, and drew their own conclusions. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the label was “claimed especially by the deistic and other rejecters of Christianity at the beginning of the eighteenth century.” But as Gerald A. Larue demonstrates in *Freethought Across the Centuries* (Humanist Press, 1996), there have been freethinkers in nearly every historical period and on every continent.

For example, in ancient Egypt, at the time of Cheops, builder of the Great Pyramid of Giza (circa 2550 BCE), we find wisdom schools for the sons of wealthy men where secular ideas were taught. Out of this tradition grew the secular songs of harpists, who sometimes brought critical

thinking to bear on religious belief. Similar wisdom schools of ancient Israel produced ideas reflected in a number of biblical proverbs as well as the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, written during the fourth century BCE.

In the Indian subcontinent, some divisions that developed within Hinduism during and after the sixth century BCE were decidedly godless. Moreover, breaking off from Hinduism at that time were Jainism and Buddhism, both nontheistic systems. Meanwhile, Lao Tsu developed Taoism in China, a quietist form of agnostic mysticism, and Confucius emerged to offer humanistic wisdom teachings aimed at creating ethical integrity. These latter became widely accepted three centuries later, merged with a system of social regimentation to become China’s state ideology.

In ancient Greece, the pre-Socratic Ionian philosophers tried out a variety of new ways of accounting for the universe and explaining nature without reference to gods—Xenophanes going so far as to say the gods had been created by humans in their own image. Then, during the Golden Age of Athens, a humanistic circle of thinkers led by Aspasia included Protagoras and Socrates. And the tragedian Euripides wrote plays that criticized religious fanaticism, superstition, patriarchy, and war. From that point on freethinking ideas became a regular part of European history.

Because the social experiment known as the United States of America was a product of the European Enlightenment, it’s no surprise that freethinkers figured prominently in the nation’s early history and that freethought went on to become a vital part of American culture. Nobody has made this point more clearly today than Susan Jacoby in *Freethinkers: a History of American Secularism* (Metropolitan Books, 2004). She illuminates the central, often germinal, role played by prominent freethinkers and freethought organizations in the nation’s defining struggles. One simply cannot correctly understand the American abolition movement or the movements for suffrage, labor, public health, birth control, civil liberties, civil rights, sexual freedom, peace, or ecology (among others) without understanding the freethought movement. Trying to grasp American culture and history while remaining ignorant of freethinking would give as distorted an image as trying to do so while

ignorant of Protestant evangelicalism. Indeed, in many of the leading cultural conflicts both were intertwined, often in direct confrontation, and from the beginning of the nation's history.

For example, immediately after the end of the American Revolution Patrick Henry sought to displace the position of the Episcopal Church as the official state religion of Virginia by introducing in the Virginia General Assembly a liberalizing bill that would tax all Virginians to support "teachers of the Christian religion." The aim was to replace one established church with a multiplicity of established churches. But James Madison objected, holding that no state government should be in the business of supporting any religion, and issued his now famous "Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments."

Its impact was profound. Jacoby writes that "although Madison was speaking from the perspective of an Enlightenment rationalist, his presentation of the pernicious possibilities for state interference with religion appealed powerfully to nonconformist Protestants, including small Quaker and Lutheran sects as well as the more numerous Baptists and Presbyterians, who had long resented the domination of the Episcopalians." Thus, at that moment in history, "the interests of the evangelicals and the Enlightenment rationalists coincided and coalesced in a common support for separation of church and state." As a result, not only did Patrick Henry's assessment bill disappear but it was replaced by one from Thomas Jefferson, the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom*, advancing complete church-state separation. It became law on January 16, 1786.

In the matter of the nation's subsequent conflict over the issue of slavery, memories have become distorted with time. Today many evangelicals and others seek to have passages added to U.S. history textbooks proclaiming the positive contributions of Christianity to American life. And they cite religious objections to slavery as a primary example. But Jacoby sets the record straight.

The religiously correct version of American history has never given proper credit to the central importance of the Enlightenment concept of natural rights—or to the anticlerical abolitionists who advanced that concept before the public—in building the case against slavery. Throughout the three decades preceding the Civil War, the anticlerical ethos of the radical abolitionists was used against them by religious opponents of emancipation, who frequently trotted out the specter of the French Revolution and even described abolitionism itself as an atheist plot.

It was the same with the struggle for women's rights.

From the 1848 Seneca Falls [women's rights] convention to the current battle over abortion, no cause has better demonstrated the conflict between America's religious and secular values than the drive for women's rights. As soon as news of the Seneca Falls convention began to circulate, feminism began to be portrayed by its opponents as a threat to religion.

Regarding other freethought social action, Jacoby acknowledges the role of Ethical Culture but neglects to mention that, in 1877, Ethical Culturists established the Visiting Nurse Service, the first of its type that did *not* do missionary work for organized religion but focused exclusively on physical care. In the 1880s Ethical Culturists founded the City Club to fight political corruption in New York City, established the first U.S. settlement house to address the social needs of urban slum communities, launched the Legal Aid Society, campaigned against child labor, and worked for improved public health. In the twentieth century they helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, engaged in union arbitration, and helped launch the American Civil Liberties Union.

Jacoby also mentions Humanism but not enough on individual Humanists, like Corliss Lamont, who successfully stood up to the House Un-American Activities Committee and Senator Joseph McCarthy and went on to win major litigation against government surveillance. Nor does she mention facts about the American Humanist Association, such as its founding of the National Commission for Beneficent Euthanasia in 1974 that issued the groundbreaking "A Plea for Beneficent Euthanasia" signed by medical, legal, and religious leaders. It called for "a more enlightened public opinion to transcend traditional taboos and move in the direction of a compassionate view toward needless suffering in dying" long before the activism of the Hemlock Society and Jack Kevorkian and before the current growth in interest in right-to-die legislation—all efforts of which have been top heavy with freethinkers and Humanists.

But the message is clear nonetheless; freethought isn't just a set of abstract philosophical ideas or critiques of religion. It is and always has been a commitment to social change and social action, having a profound and positive impact on the advancement of civilization. ☒

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