

UNDERSTANDING THE FREETHINKING FEMINIST ATTACK ON CHRISTIANITY FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE, BRITAIN 1830-1870



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Abstract:

This study seeks to refute the conventional view that associates atheism with Freethinking feminists on the one hand and to propose that their attack on religion was part of their wider agenda to rid society of false and repressive belief-systems and also as a means to promote women's rights on the other hand. The author argues that Freethinking women's decision to attack Christianity was not due to any lack of commitment to their faith, but because religion, in the end, contributed to the marginalisation of women in the social and political contexts. In fact, Freethinkers viewed the Christian Scripture as the founding text of female subordination, from which emerged all modern laws discriminating against women. Although were viewed as a liability, these 'infidel' feminists criticised, engaged with, and contributed to the wider women's suffrage movement, alongside the Christian values that dominated it. Based on this argument, Freethought needs to be written back into historiography as one of the few respectable feminist

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movements that gained reputability through its full rejection of false God-given notions of sexual difference and its wider commitment to supporting the woman question.

key words: Organised Freethought; Freethinking feminists; the attack on Scripture; respectability; female voting

1. Introduction

In the 19th century, the Freethought movement was home to a small number of prominent female activists who attacked religion and refused to accept that any aspect of it could be interpreted in rational terms. These Freethinkers viewed themselves as the intellectual descendants of the Enlightenment philosophers, for their claims against the existence of God were firmly grounded in an objective and logical examination of the natural world's workings (Schwartz, 2010, p. 777). In this way, women Freethinkers were viewed as extremists; an attitude that led to their inevitable exclusion from much of the subsequent historiography. Such marginalisation was due not only to their vocal opposition to all forms of orthodox religion, but also their openness to discussing new ways of organising heterosexual relationships.

Nevertheless, this article attempts to contribute to a general rethinking of the roots of nineteenth-century Freethinking feminism, with particular focus on the need to establish a new understanding of the concept of atheism with which to interpret women's attack on Christianity as a means to challenge contradictions regarding Christian views of woman's role in society. Therefore, two central arguments are used in this study to dissociate agnosticism from the stream of Freethinking feminism. The first and most important reason is that Freethinking feminists were devout Christians from a variety of denominational backgrounds. Second, they were at the forefront of the long struggle to guarantee women the right to vote, despite the overtly Christian tone that dominated the women's suffrage movement. For the sake of manageability, this article begins with a brief introduction of the Freethought movement and the distinctive form of feminism it gave rise to. It returns to look in more detail at the religious background of four Freethinking feminists. It then focuses on arguments over Christianity, analysing the varying Freethinking perspectives on this matter. It finally demonstrates the axial role played by Freethinkers in the campaign for women's suffrage.

2. Freethought and Feminism: An Historical Overview

The early nineteenth century saw a significant rise in the number of Freethinkers; the term applied to those who promoted anti-religious views. These progressively minded individuals defended science and reason and promoted a rational code based on autonomy and individual responsibility rather than revelation or authority. Furthermore, they used developments in Scriptural interpretation to reduce the value of the Bible to nothing but useless historical records and also to show that religious ideology had always reflected man's psychological needs and sexual desires.

On the whole, organised Freethought was a male-dominated movement. In the late eighteenth century, for instance, Thomas Paine gave birth to a more radical style of Freethought by disseminating scepticism about Christianity to a broad and influential audience and insisted that it should be opposed for a rational reason, against a backdrop of economic depression and mounting financial unrest (Royle, 1974, p. 29). In the 1830s and 40s, the Freethought movement gained momentum under the leadership of four prominent Freethinkers, namely Richard Carlile, Robert Owen, Joseph Barker, and George Jacob Holyoake. These Freethinkers were both political and intellectual radicals, consciously associating themselves with a history of resistance against the Established Church and authoritarian government which they traced back to the Renaissance and the French Revolution.

The numbers of women involved in organised Freethought were exclusively small. Taking into account the scholarship of the last thirty years, Freethought and feminism, Prof. Susan Budd (1977) indicated the proportion of women in attendance estimated them at a quarter of the total number (p. 50). Similarly, Dr. Laura Schwartz listed seven prominent feminists who were active in the Freethought or Secularist movement between 1830 and 1914. (Calvini, 2014)

In spite of the relatively small numbers of women involved in Freethought, they were active in the Secularist movement, had their writings published in the Secularist press, and made an extremely important contribution to the campaigns for female suffrage and the reform of laws on prostitution. 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 was well-known for disrupting churches and religious meetings and denouncing ministers in the middle of their sermons. She also edited the national newspaper *The Secular Chronicle* from 1876 and 1879 (Schwartz, 2012, 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.

While it is true that Freethought received scant historical attention from scholars of the post-1850 feminist movement, the Freethinkers provided, however, a crucial forum for radical debates on women prior to the emergence of an organised women's rights movement. The next generation of Freethought occurred within the Utopian-Socialist Owenite movement, which was active within popular radical politics throughout the 1830s and 1840s (Schwartz, 2010, p. 777). Its founder, Robert Owen developed radical sexual doctrines to equate female emancipation with liberation from the constraints of religion. He challenged all Owenite members, male and female, to re-think their own modes of sexual behaviour, and form their own hopes for the sexual life of the future. In 1835, Owen initiated his foray into radical middle-class literary circles with the introduction of his ten lectures on 'Marriages of the Priesthood in the Old Immoral World.' These lectures were reprinted in more than three editions in the following five years (Royle, 1980, p. 62). With their focus on voluntary sexual intimacy and the equality of both partners in such liaisons, Owen's lectures flew directly in the face of all orthodox Christian teachings, and soon accusations of adultery, prostitution, wife-swapping and other forms of libertinage were being hurled at the Socialists by their church opponents. One clergyman warned: "Let no man, let no woman especially, and dare to become a Socialist without first reading these ten lectures" (Taylor, 1983, p. 184). It is important to say that Owen's lectures contributed to the development of an evolutionist theory of sexual relations, in which changes in the position of women within the family were viewed as a sound indicator of humanity's progress from savagery to civilisation. Not all Owenites were Freethinkers, but their opposition to orthodox religion and openness to discussing new ways of organising heterosexual relations made them in

line with popular Freethought which also developed out of these two principles.

Again, the Socialist Owenite movement provided a Freethinking atmosphere in which feminism was able to thrive. Politically speaking, the male leadership of the movement made it permissible for its female members to take part in the election of Owenite branches, both at a local and national level. This practice reflected the egalitarian vision of Robert Owen and his supporters, in which men and women could meet as equal citizens and not members of different sexes. After 1835, it was reported, some Owenite councils had female 'Presidents' and 'Secretaries', and only one, the Finsbury branch in London, had a continuous history of female leadership throughout the 1830s and 40s (Taylor, 1983, p. 219). This historical fact clearly demonstrates that ideas on female suffrage were already in existence within Owenite and Freethinking networks, and flourished subsequently with the founding of the women's suffrage movement in 1866.

Debates on the status of married women were raised in Freethinking circles long in advance of the emergence of a women's rights movement, it is argued. According to Barbara Caine (1992), "the [Freethought] movement was concerned primarily and even exclusively, with gaining access for women to the public sphere, has given way to an ever-increasing recognition of the extent of Victorian feminist concern with the oppression of women in domestic life, in marriage, and in all forms of sexual relations" (p. 2). During the late 1840s, a tiny number of Freethinkers such as Richard Carlile, George Holyoake, Emma Martin, Eliza Sharples, and Newman began campaigning for marriage reform (Schwartz, 2012, p. 179). They critiqued the Christian institution of marriage, for the manner it converted women into a male property and established single-family interests, and demanded that a married woman should have the right to legally own her properties. To guarantee women's freedom and security, they also called for 'free love unions' or stressing women's right to leave unhappy marriages (Levine, 1989, pp. 150-174). Such a belief, directly or indirectly, gave birth to the campaign for the right of married women to hold property, which Elizabeth Wolstenholme later became one of its prominent leaders.

Throughout the 1830s and 40s, Freethinkers continued to address the more polemical issues of the status of married woman, divorce, and female suffrage that the mainstream women's movement generally felt unable to discuss. Although these individuals were excluded from historiography by the respectability-craving leaders of the women's rights

movement, this early Freethinking feminist tradition was heavily weighted with inherited political and feminist meanings created by the movement's strategy.

3. Freethinking feminists and Christianity: Early Devotion

In this section, and despite the little sources available, I shall trace the religious background of four Freethinking feminists, particularly Harriet Law, Annie Besant, Harriet Martineau, and Sara Hennell. These Freethinkers were among the most influential feminist figures in organised Freethought, and each of whom gained prominence within its intellectual and political branches. The intent, of course, is to prove that Christianity was key to women's empowerment, morally, socially, spiritually, and in leadership.

Admittedly, a study of English feminism must begin in the world of nineteenth-century serious religion. Almost all the women who feature here encountered serious Christianity as very young children. Given her deep absorption in religion at such a young age, it is not surprising to find that Harriet Law frequently testified to the strength of Christianity. Law was born in County Essex, England. She was raised as a Baptist, and her mother had a great impact on her religious upbringing. Law taught in Sunday school to earn some income for her family. Furthermore, she went frequently to the Baptist Church where she received her full study of Scripture and witnessed the light of faith. In fact, Law was an active defender of Christianity. In 1850, for example, when George Jacob Holyoake, a Freethinking activist, lectured to his audience at Philpot Street, White Chapel, in London, Law was amongst the attendees. The lecturer was employed to speak on the subject of Secularism. In the midst of the debate, he attacked religion, describing it as part of the old immoral world, and suddenly Law rose from the audience to argue against him with Christian arguments. This incident left an indelible impression on Holyoake's memory, who later recalled that "Law's rhetorical skill was, even then, impressive" (Schwartz, 2012, pp. 91-94).

Like Harriet Law, Annie Besant also testified to the constant presence of God throughout her childhood. Besant was born in Clapham, North East of London. She grew up in the theologically liberal Anglican Church, where she received her biblical study and practiced her daily prayers. Annie Besant's faith can be best understood in terms of her devotion to Jesus Christ, from whom she learned the essence of self-sacrifice. Before she encountered organised Freethought, Annie Besant stated that Christianity played a major part in the formation of her consciousness. She referred to the stories, rituals, and symbols of the

Church that had fundamentally shaped her intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and political worlds (Farningham, 1907, p. 280).

Although Harriet Martineau was never publicly associated with Freethought, her progressive ideas against religion made her a Freethinker. Martineau was born in 1802 in Norwich, the sixth child to parents who were descendants to Huguenot émigrés. She was brought up on strict educational principles, entrusted to a nurse as was fitting for a middle-class child, described in Martineau's *Autobiography* as "a Unitarian of some sort." At the age of seven, Martineau was continually attending, memorising, and then transcribing the weekly sermon delivered by the Priest (Martineau, 1877/1966, p. 30). The young Harriet found refuge in her readings of the Bible, concluding on her full rejection of the trinity. Scholar Robert Kiefer Webb (1960) claimed that the Unitarian education was key in shaping Martineau's thinking and professional career. "She had a tough mind, too tough eventually for her religion, yet fundamentally formed and toughened by it." (p. 65)

Sara Hennell was one of the oldest feminists in organised Freethought. She was born in 1812 at St Thomas's Square, Hackney. She belonged to the Unitarian family of James and Elizabeth Hennell. Like Harriet Martineau, Hennell had been brought up Unitarian. The Unitarian Church represented a source of fertility for Martineau because of its long history of religious tolerance, love, and openness. Throughout her early life, Martineau and her sisters used to attend Sunday Chapel morning and evening, where the Robert Aspland's sermons served to "bite in the facts and actual words of the Bible in memory, leaving a wonderful impression."(Schwartz, 2012, p. 88)

A study of the religious background of these female activists suggests that Christianity represented an important tradition within feminism. Recently, some historians of feminism have stressed the need to recognise the central role that Christianity played in the lives of the feminist women. Respectively, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Olive Banks, and Jane Rendall have offered a set of more or less historical assumptions: that the evangelical revival was key to the formation of middle-class gender roles in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain; that religion had an undeniable impact not only on the day-to-day lives of ordinary women but also on the rise of the post-1850 women's rights movement and the formation of collective feminist consciousness; and that women's involvement in the parish work expanded their activities outside the home, thereby preparing the ground for feminist campaigns for women's right to participate more fully in the

public sphere (Davidoff & Hall, 1987; Banks, 1993; Rendall, 1985). In regard to these arguments, it must be said that religion played a central role in the process of politicising women's consciousness and that women's motivation for their feminist politics must be understood primarily in terms of their Evangelicalism.

4. Why Did Freethinking Feminists Attack their Former Religion?

Despite their strictly Christian backgrounds, Freethinking feminists claimed that Christianity was the main factor for the subordination of women both historically and in the present day. They viewed religion as one of the sources that enhanced male domination in society, for women were presented in Scriptural texts as secondary citizens. Supposedly, the Freethinkers' attack on religion can be best understood in their endeavor to challenge dominant and oppressive attitudes to womanhood and reinforce equality between the sexes. It was from this commitment that the feminist ideology of Freethought developed, as Dr. Laura Schwartz (2012) explained in the following statement:

For [Freethinking] women, the rejection of their former religion encouraged and shaped support for women's rights... Their commitment to moral autonomy, free speech and the democratic dissemination of knowledge, their rejection of God-given notions of sexual differences and their critique of the Christian institution of marriage, provided powerful intellectual tools with which to challenge religious attitudes to womanhood. (p. 3)

Similarly, historian James Scott (1990) suggested that patriarchy operated on the religious assumption of subordination which automatically reinforced sexism and social disparity (p. 21). Accordingly, by the early nineteenth century, the activism of some feminist Freethinkers was interpreted as transgressing socially constructed codes of conduct for women, transgressions which posed not only a serious threat to the assumed superior position of men but also to the Established Church.

In fact, the theological ideology and its practical application had particular significance in creating the dichotomy between the private and public spheres during the Victorian period. The Established Church of England provided biblical support for a resilient, secure, but sexist social order, connected in domestic piety (Heeney, 1988, p.7). Almost all Christians considered women dangerous both sexually and in other ways,

and they did not allow them to have any leadership role in society other than in their roles as wives and mothers. Traditionally, St. Paul had selected some passages from the Holy Bible to prove that women could not exist independently of men's authority: "Wives, be in subjection unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as also Jesus Christ is the head of the Church" (Kurt, 1970, p. 824). Freethinkers saw this biblical interpretation as discriminatory towards women, for it enhanced the patriarchal ideology of separate spheres that claimed woman's "proper sphere" was the home, focused on childcare, housekeeping, and religion.

The second half of the nineteenth century brought numerous challenges to the Church's authority, including the growing trends of rationalism and higher criticism of the Bible. The Freethinking feminist attack on Christianity was framed as a response to one of its claims put forward on the behalf of the Bible by believers in its interpretation that women were created solely to exist in a subordinate position to men (Taylor, 2005, pp. 78-79). Harriet Law actively rejected the literal interpretation of the Bible, based on the premise that women's equality and faith were not compatible with one another. In justifying her attack on her former religion, Law offered a set of fundamental presuppositions, including maleness of Jesus and the creation of Adam before Eve, which tended to favour the male self-hood, while disadvantaging females and placing them at a subordinate position. In the following words, Law had explained what it meant to be male and female created in God's image: "the Bible does assign women a distinct and what is worse, subordinate sphere... [It] also renders her subject to men in nearly every relationship of her life." (Schwartz, 2012, p.146)

A literal interpretation of Scripture clearly revealed God's teachings to be in stark opposition to the claims of the women's rights movement. In response, the Freethinkers offered an alternative historical account of women based on religion and progress. They too accepted the premise of Christian historians that woman's domestic role was a sound indicator of social progress. Yet at the same time, they insisted that women's inclusion in public and political life would lead to a perfect democratic transition. Following this line of reasoning, Harriet Law agreed that "the progress of the human race cannot be very rapid while the education of one half is either neglected, or conducted upon unsound principles... the world's progress will be accelerated a thousand fold by [female] emancipation." In addition, Harriet Law and Annie Besant viewed Christianity as a Counter-revolution, detrimental to democracy

and therefore also to the development of feminist thought. They inverted the Christian scriptural interpretation to show that, "It is the business of the Bibleites to obstruct the revolt of the female and to prevent, if possible the forces of Evolution and Civilisation from giving woman her freedom" (Schwartz, 2012, p. 149).

The exclusion of women from politics was one of the favorite arguments which Freethinking women used to justify their attack on religion. They pointed to St Paul's passages on marriage and his opposition to women speaking in the churches to show how Scriptural teachings were responsible for women's exclusion from full and effective participation in formulating all policies issued by the British Parliament. An article in *The Contemporary Review* entitled "Women's Suffrage and the Teaching of St. Paul" covered the significance of changes in biblical criticism to the development of women's rights issues throughout the nineteenth century. It claimed that "Twenty years before, the majority of English Christians would have been unable to use the findings of Jewish or other historians in such a way as to negate the moral power of some specific injunction found elsewhere in the Bible." As a consequence, verses such as those in which St. Paul prevented women from speaking in churches would have been perceived to denote their exclusion from all public activities, especially parliamentary politics. However, once the need to approach the Scriptures as historical documents, steeped in the values of their own time, had been more widely accepted, it was possible to show that Paul's injunctions regarding women were simply a reflection of the backward rabbinical attitudes of the time and not true Christian teaching which must be adhered to. (Schwartz, 2010, p. 272)

Furthermore, Freethinkers claimed that the Churches helped to strengthen traditional ideas of domestic femininity in order to silence the proponents of women's rights. For example, the Anglo-Catholic practice of Marian devotion at the center of Christian worship was the backbone of "female submission," taken here to represent women's submissive role in society. In one of the sermons preached at St. Paul's Cathedral, Anglo-Catholic Henry Parry Liddon warned his female audience against women's rights advocates who believed they should be equal to men, and he urged them to follow blindly the path of the Virgin Mary through her passive obedience to God (Schwartz, 2012, p. 22). It must be said that the structural and systemic religious barriers that existed in Victorian society at that time, such as deeply entrenched gender roles, helped to create a false stereotypic image of middle-class women as subjects of political disabilities.

In summing up the previous arguments, scholar Lerner Gerda (1986) expounded upon how religion promulgated sexism and emphasised that most religious doctrines toward womanhood led naturally to their exclusion from public and political life. Gerda used the word 'patriarchy' to refer to certain religious institutions, of particular that of marriage, and practices in which the husbands were legally given absolute authority to oppress, dominate and deprive their wives of enjoying their civil rights. The Christian institution of marriage, she argued, was a 'strict system' that allowed "men to hold power in all the important institutions of society... Women are still deprived of access to such power." (p. 239)

Freethinking feminists advanced far more rational arguments to challenge their former religion, insisting that hypocrisy, manifested not in Scripture but its interpreters, was the root of women's ills. So, it might be inferred that their rejection of such religious hypocrisy encouraged and shaped support for women's rights, especially on the question of female suffrage.

5. Freethinking Feminists' Contributions to the Women's Suffrage movement

According to Laura Schwartz (2010), the women's rights movement in the 1860s was characterised by its crusading rhetoric. Thereby, many feminist campaigners became increasingly concerned to represent themselves as respectable, and Freethinking feminists represented an embarrassing reminder of the radical roots of the movement, posing a serious threat to its reputation (p. 784). Though of radical-Liberal heritage, the personal and political networks of some Freethinking feminists extended beyond the organised Freethought movement to encompass leading figures within the suffrage movement.

Surprisingly, Freethinkers such as Sophia Dobson, Harriet Law, and Elizabeth Wolstenholme have already called for the extension of the franchise for both sexes long before John Stewart Mill intended to introduce the First Reform Bill of 1866, whose aim was to eliminate any difference on "grounds of sex" (Rendall, 1987, p. 119). When the women's suffrage movement got underway, the Freethinking activist Elizabeth Wolstenholme was among the first signatories of the London committee, of which Caroline Stansfeld (née Ashurt) was a member. Wolstenholme founded the Manchester Committee for the Enfranchisement of Women (MCEW) and became its secretary in 1866. She also collected over 300 of the 1,499 signatures on the petition that

Mill presented to the House of Commons on 7 June 1866 (Holton, 1996, p. 21).

When the first female suffrage petitions began to be circulated, the issue was already being debated in a number of Secular societies and radical clubs around the country, with reports appearing in the national Secularist press. Public lectures were used as a powerful intellectual tool to enlighten the public consciousness and rally support for the 'Cause'. The appointed lecturers were a hodgepodge of Freethinkers and Secularists, who tended to be in favour of full political rights for women. In 1870, for example, Christopher Charles, a Freethinker, argued at the Birmingham Secular Club that there was absolutely no reason for "denying the largest half of the human race their rights", while Mr. Conway, a Secularist advocate, maintained that there "was no reason why women should not show themselves to be perfectly capable politicians" (Schwartz, 2012, p. 173). From a critical point of view, the Secularist movement, which was founded by leading Freethinker George Jacob Holyoake in 1851, provided Freethinkers with the necessary enthusiasm and editorial support to justify their radical attempts as women to assume the 'masculine' role of secularist preacher in order to democratise a variety of public arenas and political institutions.

Almost all Freethinkers supported female suffrage on similar grounds to the National Society for Women's Suffrage, though they tended to occupy the more radical end of the liberal spectrum. One of the major demands of nineteenth-century Freethinkers was the right to speak out against the injustices of their own position and contribute to social and political improvement. They also asserted that allowing women to vote in parliamentary politics would lead to a civilised democratic nation. In her first lecture, for example, Annie Besant set out to challenge those who claimed that women were unfit for the proper exercise of the franchise. She used the conventional rhetoric of human rights that drew back to the Enlightenment era in asserting that, "the rights of man had become an accepted doctrine, but unfortunately, they are only the rights of man... Women, as well as men, are born free and equal in rights and have as much claim on the franchise as men had" (Besant, 1879/2019, p. 4).

In the work of Laura Schwartz (2010), the suggestion that "Freethinking feminists in the 1860s made far more progressive demands on specific political issues than those advanced within the mainstream of the women's suffrage movement" (p.781). In the 1860s, when the nationwide campaign for women's suffrage was only just beginning,

Harriet Law was already calling for universal suffrage for both sexes. In 1866, Law carried her message to the streets during the protests that took place in Hyde Park, when the officers targeted those protesting for the expansion of the franchise under the proposed Reform Bill. In spite of the fact that, late in this phase, women's suffrage advocates were still arguing whether they should vote for both married and single women, Law's position was a radical one. That is, she relied on militant tactics to enable the people to rally and force through a more extensive measure of reform.

Perhaps due to the relative success of some Freethinkers in rallying public support of the 'Cause', their contemporaries at times attempted to dissociate them from the movement. Against a backdrop of the protests in the Hyde Park, Emily Davies, one of the advocates of women's right to education, showed considerable fear concerning the 'militant proclivities' of some of those on the London Committee, including Elizabeth Wolstenholme and Harriet Law. She wrote to Barbara Bodichon in panic, insisting that "It will clearly not do to identify ourselves too closely with Mill" (Holton, 1996, p. 23). One reason is put forward to justify such hostility. The Freethought movement was perhaps larger than the 'mainstream' women's suffrage movement, thereby resulting in an endless struggle between the more respectable Christian feminists and Freethinkers over which current of feminism would offer most to women.

If Freethinking feminists made such an important contribution to the women's suffrage movement, why were they entirely neglected in histories of First Wave feminism? One possible reason which could have contributed to this is that the majority of historians of feminism and feminist scholars tended to focus upon the circumstances that prompted the evolution of the suffrage movement more than their focus on the beliefs and ideas of feminists. Nevertheless, Prof. Olive Banks made a forceful case to recover the role of Freethought in historiography. In 1986, she surveyed bibliographical data of more than ninety women active in the First Wave, particularly in the women's suffrage movement, and came to the conclusion that 32% were Freethinkers (Gleadle & Richardson, 2000, pp.134–152). Arguably, Freethought was a highly politicised discourse dealing in particular with feminist libertarian causes, so it is not surprising that it would have intersected with the women's suffrage movement which also emerged during this period.

6. Conclusion

Freethought needs to be written back into history as one of the most respectable feminist movements in the Victorian era. Freethinking feminists were not atheists, and their arguments against organised

religion, not the existence of God, were those of use by the subsequent feminists in the women's rights movement in the 1860s. In fact, Freethinkers remained critical of the role of religion in repressing the female sex. The question of women's subordinate position, for instance, provided a way for these female activists to posit a feminist critical response to Christian persecution and hypocrisy on questions of sex and marriage; such a tradition was relatively uncommon among other feminist movements during this period.

The contributions of Freethinking feminists to the 'woman question' could not go unseen. The early organisational initiatives that went into forming a women's rights movement emerged from Freethinking circles. Freethinkers were the first to provide a forum for feminist discussions on marriage, divorce, and female voting, at a time when many other radical movements, including many of the women's movement, kept silent on such topics. Within the women's suffrage movement, Freethinkers continued to lend their support as these small organisational attempts gained momentum over the following decades to become national networks campaigning on a variety of women's rights issues.

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