

2017 Curran Fellowship Report

The *Secular Review* and the freethought press, 1876-1907.

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I am extremely grateful to the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals for awarding me a Curran Fellowship. This funding has supported the initiation of my postdoctoral research into freethought periodicals from the second half of the nineteenth century. The fellowship enabled me to spend much of August and September 2017 working through issues of the *Secular Review* and the *Agnostic Journal* (different incarnations of the same periodical) held at the Bishopsgate Institute Library, Conway Hall Library, and the British Library in London. As an early career researcher who was unemployed and unaffiliated during the summer months, the Curran Fellowship provided me with the financial support to continue researching through a period when I would have otherwise needed to put such scholarly work aside.

This intensive period of primary research has enabled me to create a multifaceted spreadsheet that records key features of the work published within this currently undigitized weekly periodical. I used a sampling method whereby I looked at ten consecutive issues at five-year intervals between 1876 and 1907. During this volatile 'Golden Age' of British secular thinking, the journal and its editors, including G. H. Holyoake and W. Stewart Ross (Saladin), were embroiled in high-profile disputes with key figures within the freethought movement and beyond. As such, this journal shaped nineteenth-century discourse around faith and doubt, being the subject and reporter of the current affairs. The Curran Fellowship has given me the opportunity to start unpicking the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that shaped this particular periodical. I have identified important transatlantic links, for example, arising from scissor-and-paste journalism, North American subscribers, and dispatches from visits to the USA, as well as the publication of articles from prominent American and Canadian freethinkers.

My approach to this primary research has involved reading and cataloguing all printed matter in a total of seventy issues. Alongside noting down the title, by-line, and page span of each item published, I labelled each piece in terms of its form and subject, and documented any details regarding the identity of the author. Now that I have categorised the range of writing that was published in the *Secular Review/Agnostic Journal* over the course of thirty years, I am in a position to proceed with an analysis of prevailing trends. The archival holdings at the Bishopsgate Institute facilitated contextualisation of the founding and running of this publishing endeavour regarding the editorial process. Files of Holyoake's correspondence, press cuttings, and other ephemera have proved useful, as have the extensive archival holdings related to Charles Bradlaugh, who often came to blows with the editors of the *Secular Review* via his rival periodical, the *National Reformer*. Such archival holdings have also provided wider-

ranging insights into the functioning (and in-fighting) of the late-Victorian freethought movement, which will be essential as I go on to broaden this project outwards.

The primary outcome of this research will be a journal article that outlines key themes and trends in the content of this freethought periodical. I am particularly interested in building an argument that explores how modes of communication inform the content and impact of freethought writings. By attending to the function of essays, poems, reports, dialogues, and other forms of writing, I will examine *how* freethinking ideas were being communicated and in doing so nuance our understanding of popular Victorian secularism.

Furthermore, this work represents the early stages of a postdoctoral project provisionally titled 'Reading the Freethought Movement in Britain, 1866-1907'. The Curran Fellowship has enabled me to commence the primary research associated with this project, and I am confident that this groundwork will strengthen subsequent bids aimed at large-scale early-career grants. This intended research will seek to establish a broader perspective on these discourses by taking the same approach to reading other freethinking journals, such as the *National Reformer*, *Freethinker*, *Secular Chronicle*, and *Our Corner*. My overarching aim is to show how genre and form underpin political, social, and interdisciplinary networks within these publications and consider how writers and readers participated in the network of freethought. I will continue to use undigitized periodicals and related archival holdings to contextualise the founding, running, and readerships of these publishing endeavours. More broadly, this project will ask how the multivocality and interdisciplinarity of the freethought press might challenge genre-based approaches to periodical studies.

An additional positive outcome of the Curran Fellowship is that I have developed strong working relationships with the libraries that I visited. This is particularly true of Conway Hall, where I have now been invited to give a public lecture about their important freethought periodicals holdings. I am extremely glad of this opportunity to strengthen the impact of, and encourage wider engagement with, this research project.

I would like to thank, once again, the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals committee for awarding me this funding. I look forward to seeing where this research facilitated by the Curran Fellowship will take me.