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### Laura Schwartz, *Infidel feminism: secularism, religion and women's emancipation, England 1830-1914*

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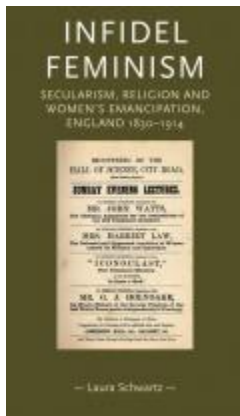
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**Marc CALVINI-LEFEBVRE**

Laura SCHWARTZ, *Infidel feminism: secularism, religion and women's emancipation, England 1830-1914*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2013, 256 pages, ISBN : 978-0-7190-8582-6, £65



*Infidel Feminism* makes a forceful case for rescuing the post-1850 Women's Movement from the throes of religious and sexual respectability in which it is currently ensconced. Indeed, on the one hand, the recent "religious turn" in gender history has emphasised just how central religious beliefs were to the identities, courage and rhetoric of most campaigners for women's rights after 1850. On the other, ever since Barabara Taylor's magisterial study of Owenite feminism, the post-1850 movement has been seen as a long prudish parenthesis between its much bolder Owenite predecessors and *fin-de-siècle* successors. Renewing with the great *herstory* tradition of uncovering voices that have been hidden from history, Dr. Schwartz convincingly challenges both of these narratives by drawing on the life and work of seventeen female "freethinkers", women who publicly challenged orthodox Christianity's claim to espousing both truth and morality. Usually harking from the upper working or lower-middle classes (though a few were better off), they fall into three broad groups: five were active in the Owenite movement between the 1830s and 1840s, five others were active in the Women's Movement from the 1850s and seven were active in the Secularist or Freethought movement between 1830 and 1914.

The most significant finding of Dr. Schwartz's study is that Owenite radicalism did not disappear circa the 1840s but found a new home in the Secularist Societies. Completely open to women, who were treated as men's equals, these societies, committed to the principle of free inquiry and to the dissemination of knowledge through public meetings, became a unique space in which to continue debating the issues raised by the Owenites over prostitution, suffrage and marriage. It was they who kept the most radical options (universal suffrage, birth control, free love) alive and who bequeathed them to the women's movement at the end of the century. They are, as Dr. Schwartz puts it, the "missing link" (2) between the radical feminism of the 1830s and the democratic suffragists and sexual radicals of the 1900s. What is more, the militant tactics and the persona of the female "militant combatant" (64), so central to the end-of-century Suffragettes, were arguably inspired by the leading female lights of the Secular movement, such as Annie Besant, themselves inspired by their Owenite foremothers, such as Frances Wright.

In addition to the Secularist Movement's crucial role as a conduit for radical ideas and practices, Dr. Schwartz's study highlights the considerable (and considerably overlooked) role of freethinkers who were active in the Women's Movement. The most striking of these campaigners was Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, who played a key role in getting signatures for the petition presented by J.S. Mill to the House of Commons in 1866 (167); was instrumental in convincing Josephine Butler to head the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts (160); and founded *both* the Women's Franchise League and the Women's Emancipation Union (170)! Yet Elmy rarely appears as a prominent figure in histories of the movement because, Dr. Schwartz argues, her secularism got her written out of those histories by the respectability-craving leaders of the Women's Movement and makes her invisible to

historians in thrall to the “religious turn”. This, however, is deeply mistaken because freethinking and Christian feminists were engaged in the same pursuit: to challenge religious orthodoxy. Secularist ideology, therefore, must precisely be explored, Dr. Schwartz argues, in the context of the “religious turn”, so that a more accurate picture might be rendered of the Women’s Movements responses to the debate over women and scripture that was so vibrant in Victorian England.

Dr. Schwartz’s bold conclusions are all the more convincing that she shows considerable attention to detail and nuance throughout the work. For instance, she is very clear that the Secular Movement was a far from perfect vessel for feminist thought and action. For one thing, the movement relied on a gendered dichotomy of reason versus emotion that led some of its members to hold the misogynist view that women’s greater inclination for religion was the product of their emotional natures and inferior intellects. For another, when leaders such as Holyoake sought to make the movement more respectable, one of their first measures was to ask their female public speakers to be less aggressive in their debates with clergy. Similarly, her insistence on rejecting overly broad or rigid categories of analysis like “libertarian” or “sensualist” (204) in favour of spectrums and shades of meaning, allows her to convey a rich sense of the complicated messiness of the past.

All of this is not to say, of course, that one cannot find anything to quibble with in this immensely thought-provoking book. For instance, a helpful graph presenting the different societies and their relationships with one another would have been useful, as one can rapidly get lost. More substantially, I would argue that the definition of feminism on which this study relies – “women’s recognition of their collective oppression and their positive identification with each other in the context of political struggle” (p. 29, fn. 3) – is inadequate to the task. Indeed, this work abounds with male feminists, sometimes to the point where the seventeen women we are meant to be following are, as in the final chapter, almost entirely eclipsed. Finally, the claim that this is a history of “popular thought and belief” (27) seems to me difficult to sustain, given that it rests, ultimately, on the study of the work of a handful of women and men. I was not convinced that we could, in any satisfactory way, gauge how deeply their views penetrated English society on the strength of the evidence presented.

One could also wish to take issue with the small size of Dr. Schwartz’s sample. This would be mistaken however as it only reflects how difficult, and therefore courageous, it was to hold secularist views in this period, particularly for women. Indeed, in addition to challenging the authority of religion, they were transgressing the dominant codes of female respectability which precluded engagement in heated arguments, notably on public platforms, and especially over theological questions. Many of these women were physically threatened, socially ostracised, publically slandered. What allowed them to persist, Dr. Schwartz suggests, is that they found secularism to be “a liberating ideology, which allowed them to (...) base their claims to freedom on no authority other than themselves” (224). As that quote intimates, there is a book boiling under the hood of this one, a work of political theory rather than of socio-political history. It is a book that is sketched out in Dr Schwartz’s conclusion, where she offers a spirited defence of secularism’s feminist potential. It is my ardent hope that her next work will take up the challenge of articulating an infidel feminism for our time.