

## Dialogic Forms in Freethought Periodicals: Free Discussion and Open Debate

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Nineteenth-century atheists, agnostics, and secularists were committed to the pursuit of truth via reason and viewed debate to be an ideal form through which to further their cause. As Agnosco, a regular contributor to the *Secular Review*, wrote in 1890: “He must study both sides of every debateable question. It is only by examining both sides that the truth can be discovered.”<sup>1</sup> Freethinkers such as George Jacob Holyoake considered open debate to be at the heart of their movement. His four “rights of Secularism” each address a different facet of intellectual freedom:

1. The right to Think for one’s self, which most Christians now admit, at least in theory.
2. The right to Differ, without which the right to think is nothing worth.
3. The right to Assert difference of opinion, without which the right to differ is of no practical use.
4. The right to Debate all vital opinion, without which there is no intellectual equality—no defence against the errors of the state or the pulpit.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, he asserts, freedom and progress are predicated upon reasoned dissent and being unbound by prevailing opinion. The influence of John Stuart Mill’s brand of liberalism, as well as Richard Carlile’s libertarian stance, upon freethinkers’ commitment to a free platform has been well established.<sup>3</sup>

In 1886, a symposium on the “Value of Platform Discussion” in the *National Reformer* provided the opportunity for W. H. Utley to explain how the right to liberty of thought and discussion, and the creation of platforms where this could be freely expressed, was conceived as a challenge to religious authority: “Free discussion of all lectures is a tradition which has rooted itself into the very core of the Secular movement, and not without

cause, as all must recognise who have ever sat through a sermon in a church or chapel and felt the almost uncontrollable desire to get up and lay bare its absurdities, and the sense of utter impotence the prohibition causes.”<sup>4</sup> This ethos of open debate and honest enquiry permeates freethought periodicals’ form and content, promoted as a tactic to overturn religious dogma and what was characterised as the unenlightened faith of believers. Through debates, dialogues, and correspondence, the editors of and contributors to freethought periodicals sustained and grew a radical secular movement that challenged Christian conventions. This article considers how these divisive Victorians used dialogic forms to enact freethinking ideals, but it also identifies ways in which the concept of free debate proved at times to be more of an aspiration than a reality.

Freethought is a useful term for understanding the extent of this primarily working- and artisan-class movement, which encompassed multiple forms of irreligion as well as a wider political and social commitment to challenging the status quo. Freethinkers supported a range of activist causes, particularly those that sought to address inequalities such as women’s rights, workers’ rights, secular education, and birth control, and they advanced republican and (sometimes) socialist views. The proliferation of their periodicals in the second half of the nineteenth century indicates the heterogeneity of freethought ideologies and tactics, with no single publication or editor backed by the movement unequivocally.

The first journal devoted to freethought that had a sustained presence in Britain was Holyoake’s the *Reasoner*, which was published weekly from 1846 to 1861 and then very sporadically up to 1872. Publications proceeded to proliferate: the highest profile and longest-lived ones were the highly political *National Reformer* (1860–93), established by Charles Bradlaugh and allied with the National Secular Society (NSS); the more esoteric *Secular Review*, later the *Agnostic Journal* (1876–1907), which was also established by Holyoake but for the majority of its run was edited by William Stewart Ross; the vehemently

anti-Christian *Freethinker*, which was established by George W. Foote in 1881 and continued to be published throughout the twentieth century; and *Watts's Literary Guide*, which from 1889 stood in opposition to preceding titles by fostering connections with more academic freethought and distancing itself from explicitly working-class radicalism (in the 1970s it became the *New Humanist*). Some significant but shorter-lived periodicals included the *Secular Chronicle* (1872–79), edited by George Reddalls and then by Harriet Law; Annie Besant's socialist *Our Corner* (1883–88); and John M. Robertson's *Free Review* (1893–97), which served as a continuation of the *National Reformer* after Bradlaugh's death.<sup>5</sup> Alongside local and national secular societies, these periodicals advanced a national discussion by those who were empowered by, and committed to, freethought.

Reading, writing for, and editing these periodicals built social networks, imagined communities, and feelings of shared endeavour. However, the range of periodicals speaks to the extent to which this was not a single, unified movement; factionalism and infighting were rife. Most notably, there was a split from the 1870s onwards between Bradlaugh and Besant—aligned with the NSS, established in 1866 to “actively attack the barriers to equal freedom of thought and utterance for all, upon political and theological subjects”—and Law, Holyoake, Foote, and Charles Watts (who started the short-lived rival British Secular Union in 1877) over whether the publication of birth control literature brought the wider cause into disrepute.<sup>6</sup> Debates and dialogues therefore looked both inward and outward. However, one thing upon which freethinkers tended to agree was that, as per a *National Reformer* editorial, “free discussion is an old tradition of our platform.”<sup>7</sup>

Jane L. Chapman and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen have explored how, both historically and today, newspapers foster public participation in politics and provide a platform for activists and marginalized groups to enact “cultural citizenship.”<sup>8</sup> Wahl-Jorgensen examines readers' letters as a significant vector for this activity, illuminating the process through which their

publication is mediated by editorial decision-making, while Chapman’s transnational approach to women’s use of periodicals to agitate for democratic participation shows the importance of the activist press as a forum for debate.<sup>9</sup> Scholarship on the social, cultural, and political functions of letters and correspondence columns in nineteenth-century periodicals, more specifically, includes Allison Cavanagh’s insights into how readers’ letters were “tools of citizenship,” whereby “the platform of letters to the editor provided a space for both the expression of private concerns and their crystallisation into matters of wider significance.”<sup>10</sup> Several scholars have emphasised how correspondence columns provided readers with agency, most notably Cynthia Ellen Patton who identifies how readers of the *Girl’s Own Paper* drove “continuing and lively discourse” in its health advice columns.<sup>11</sup> Previous research has also considered how periodicals as a medium can produce platforms for exchanging ideas concerning politics. Alexis Easley has shown how in the 1830s *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* actively created a “dialogic space” that sought to “express the views of ‘the people’ . . . by facilitating dialogue between middle-class and artisan class reformers” as part of an editorial endeavour to “minimize conflicts and contradictions” between members of reform movements from different socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>12</sup> The appetite for debate (particularly on the topic of religion) among “young men of the ‘self-educating classes,’” as freethinkers often were, has been powerfully demonstrated by Michael Wolff in his detailed account of the *British Controversialist and Impartial Enquirer*.<sup>13</sup>

Sustained work on dialogue and debate as distinctive forms of content within periodicals has thus far been limited to considerations of middle-class monthlies as intellectual forums that published multiple viewpoints on controversial issues. Bernard Lightman has explored how *Macmillan’s Magazine* experimented with different debate formats to expand and nuance conversations about the relationship between religion and science.<sup>14</sup> Hao Li’s analysis of how W. K. Clifford’s 1877 essay “The Ethics of Belief”

sparked a debate that spanned the *Contemporary Review*, the *Fortnightly Review*, and the *Nineteenth Century* illuminates the “temporal and spatial opportunities for developing individual positions as a legitimate form of ethical debate” created by periodical publishing.<sup>15</sup> Both Li and Lightman note the correspondence between the rise of signed work in periodicals and the propagation of debate in their pages. In the case of freethought journals, while the use of pseudonyms was common, debates and dialogues were invariably signed (whether with real name, pen name, or initials) so that conversations that built across issues could be followed by readers. In turning our attention to how cheap activist weeklies also fostered space for debate through the prioritisation of dialogic forms within their pages, the radical affordances of this innovation become clear.

### **Dialogic Forms**

Towards the end of 1886, a discussion sprang up in the pages of the *National Reformer* about the role of debate after freethought lectures. An article by D. on “Edification and Discussion” on November 21 argued that the tone and content of discussion after lectures at secular society meetings was not always beneficial and suggested that not all talks should be followed by an open platform for responses from the audience.<sup>16</sup> Two weeks later “The Value of Platform Discussion: A Freethought Symposium” appeared, which included contributions from several high-profile speakers. Besant highlighted the benefits of debate for the speaker—“The knowledge that he may be challenged . . . tends to make him accurate in statement, careful in language, logical in argument”—while Foote suggested that a speaker “replying to a real objection will often produce more conviction than an hour’s set discourse in which the lecturer has obviously all his own way.”<sup>17</sup> Arthur Hunt observed, “A discussion draws a larger audience than a lecture, and many come to a *lecture* only to hear the discussion which follows it.”<sup>18</sup> This forum was followed by further letters to the editor, and freethinkers’ appetite for debate on the question of debate is highlighted in the December 12 “To

Correspondents” column: “We have received many other letters on this subject, which appears to have excited much interest, nearly all supporting the practice of a free and open platform.”<sup>19</sup> The proliferation of dialogic forms in freethought periodicals performed a similar function to debates after lectures, providing readers with the opportunity to engage with the arguments set forth and writers with the knowledge that they were contributing to a forum in which they could be challenged.

I will consider four dialogic forms found in freethought periodicals, each of which serves to evoke a sense of a known audience from whom response is encouraged, or at least possible. The first is verbatim debate reports, which provided transcriptions of public events that had taken place on stage. Usually, this entailed figureheads of the movement taking on each other or members of the clergy as part of national speaking tours. Public debate had long played an important role in the history of British radicalism and, in this regard along with many others, freethinkers were the inheritors of the Owenite tradition of platform debate in particular.<sup>20</sup> Some of the movement’s figureheads first took to the podium to debate from the Christian perspective before being won over to the secular cause, making Besant (and, earlier, Emma Martin) testament to the efficacy of rational debate to change minds.<sup>21</sup> Such debates, often concerning big questions such as the veracity of the Bible or the definition of atheism, were published serially in periodicals and also appeared as standalone pamphlets. Even in instances where an article purports to be a “verbatim report,” the oral and written versions should not be conflated.<sup>22</sup> My interest is not in the events themselves but in how they are rendered textually in the pages of periodicals, extending their temporal and geographic reach.

The second form under consideration is imagined dialogues. These are formal dialogues that draw upon both the Socratic method and the “familiar format,” which in freethought periodicals functioned primarily as ideal debates. They cannot be said to evoke real-world conversations and sometimes draw on strawman arguments to articulate opposing

ends of belief spectrums, but they nonetheless model modes of challenging those in power or those who held received beliefs. The dialogue played a significant role in nineteenth-century pedagogic tradition. As Ann Shteir has shown, the fictional narrative framing of the “familiar format” was common within popular science writing, particularly that which was written for family audiences.<sup>23</sup> It was therefore an accessible, recognisable form for freethought periodicals’ readership, who were generally keen to build upon the foundations of their limited compulsory education.<sup>24</sup> Mass-market periodicals also adopted imaginative approaches to, in Lightman’s terms, “expanding a public space for the discussion of heterodox opinion.”<sup>25</sup> A version of the fictional debate format was a prominent feature of early issues of *Macmillan’s Magazine*, and while its irreverent tone did not find critical favour, the subsequent appearance of more traditional imagined dialogues indicates the value of the form.<sup>26</sup>

Conventionally, the Socratic method of dialogic philosophical questioning was used to convince the interlocuter, the reader’s proxy, to reconsider their ontological and epistemological views. The privileging of inquiry, scepticism, and doubt within Socrates’s method, in addition to his persecution for religious nonconformity which rendered him a freethought martyr, meant that he played a significant role within freethinkers’ conception of their intellectual heritage.<sup>27</sup> In Plato’s *Apology* the Socratic approach is described in terms of taking on the role of gadfly, which Joel Alden Schlosser glosses as entailing an “unremitting interrogation that can often irritate” that stems from “an unflagging commitment to questioning the assumptions upon which Athenian democracy rests, to rouse the horse to wakefulness.”<sup>28</sup> This conceptual alignment of unexamined faith with sleep and reasoned enquiry with higher knowledge resonates strongly with the freethought movement’s inversion of religious conceptions of revelation, as illustrated by the opening of Besant’s polemical *On the Nature and Existence of God*: “Reason may force us to see contradictions where we had

imagined harmony, and may open up our eyes to flaws where we had dreamed of perfection.”<sup>29</sup> Dialogues in freethought periodicals enacted this desire to force others to confront the contradictions that freethinkers saw to be self-evident at the heart of religion.

The third dialogic form is open columns, where short articles were styled as letters to the editor or addressed to previous contributors. They accommodated a range of views, including those that challenged the tenets of freethought. These columns enabled debate to span consecutive issues and were usually prefaced with some version of the notice that the “Editors are not responsible for any opinions expressed in the letters.”<sup>30</sup> The presence of letter sections contributed to the popular press’s sense of itself as an institution that, in Wahl-Jorgensen’s terms, realised “the liberal democratic vision” of active participatory citizenship.<sup>31</sup>

The final form to be discussed is “To Correspondents” columns, which gesture towards dialogue while precluding it by largely omitting readers’ voices and instead replacing these with responses from the editor. This is a form of dialogue that, for all except the original writer and the respondent, is incomplete and therefore ultimately unfulfilled for the majority of readers. Patton, among others, asks to what extent such reader correspondence is real and whether a significant proportion might be editorial creations.<sup>32</sup> In the case of freethought periodicals, this matter is uncertain. While the majority of such items do seem to be genuine, it has not been possible to trace them back to original manuscript correspondence. However, for the purposes of this article, the veracity of individual letters is not crucial. What I am interested in is how the presence of dialogic forms modelled debate and invited participation.

### ***The Secular Review/Agnostic Journal and the National Reformer***

This article focuses on how dialogic forms functioned across the three-decade lifespans of two freethought periodicals with divergent rationales: the *Secular Review/Agnostic Journal*



and the *National Reformer*.<sup>33</sup> The former was a two-penny Sunday weekly that was founded in 1876 by Holyoake as the *Secular Review: A Journal of Daily Life* but in 1877 merged with short-lived title the *Secularist* and was placed under the editorship of Charles Watts and Foote as the *Secular Review and Secularist*. Upon Foote's departure in 1878, Watts helmed the publication alone until Ross (under the name Saladin) came on board in 1882 and it re-adopted the subtitle "A Journal of Daily Life." Under Ross's sole editorship from 1884 the subtitle changed to "A Journal of Agnosticism." Then, in 1888, the periodical went under more wholesale change to become the *Agnostic Journal and Secular Review*, though continuity with the preceding title is indicated by the continuous volume numbering. The following year it became the *Agnostic Journal and Eclectic Review* and this title remained until it folded in 1907, soon after Ross's death. Throughout, editorial pieces were significant regular features that shaped reader engagement, with Ross's "At Random" columns setting the tone, but these appeared in the context of myriad other voices so that each issue emphasised multiplicity over homogeneity.<sup>34</sup>

The epigraphs chosen for the masthead emphasise how the *Secular Review/Agnostic Journal* encouraged readers to challenge received ideas. In 1877 Watts and Foote chose John Henry Newman's observation "False ideas may be refuted by argument, but only by true ideas can they be expelled," while in 1902 Ross used St. Jerome's edict "If an offence come out of the truth, better is it that the offence come than the truth be concealed." The co-option of religious writings for the epigraphs neatly demonstrates freethinkers' charge of hypocrisy against Christianity. This gambit encouraged readers to reconsider the actual words intoned by religious adherents and think about the imperative to find truth on one's own terms rather than unquestioningly following dogmatic teachings. Thus, the epigraphs' content and sources established active debate as a priority.

The *National Reformer* had a less complex publishing history, retaining the same title throughout with a minor tweak in 1877 when the subtitle changed from “Secular Advocate and Freethought Journal” to “Radical Advocate and Freethought Journal.” Closely aligned with Bradlaugh’s political career as well as the wider activities of the NSS, the periodical nonetheless experienced shifts in editorship. It was founded by Joseph Barker and Bradlaugh in 1860, but by 1861 the latter had taken sole control. He briefly ceded this responsibility to John Watts in 1864 but retook the helm in 1866 and held this position until his death in 1891. Besant coedited the *National Reformer* between 1881 and 1887, until her increasingly socialist views made partnership with Bradlaugh untenable. After Bradlaugh died, Robertson became the editor, but it soon foundered and the final issue was published in 1893.

The form and function of the *National Reformer* was significantly different from the *Secular Review/Agnostic Journal*. The former’s role as the organ of the NSS and platform for Bradlaugh’s political campaigning more broadly meant that it focused upon growing an activist movement, whereas the latter largely refused to align itself with specific politics and became increasingly filled with esoteric and philosophical content under Ross’s editorship. Given these differences, which attracted distinct (though overlapping) readerships, it is notable that both prioritised dialogic forms and devoted a significant proportion of each issue to bringing the voices of diverse freethinkers, and their detractors, to their readership.

### Debates

In March 1870, Holyoake and Bradlaugh publicly debated the overlapping but contested meanings of “secularism” and “atheism.” Their speeches were printed verbatim in the *National Reformer*, and readers’ responses appeared in subsequent issues.<sup>35</sup> To say that this was an ongoing debate is an understatement. The question of defining the parameters of the freethought movement and the labels that freethinkers adopted to describe their irreligious positions animated their periodicals for the rest of the century. Indicative of this is an 1891

article in the *National Reformer* by Robertson that begins, “Holyoake raises afresh the old but apparently still open issue as to the proper purport or connotation of the word Secularism,” followed by correspondence on the matter from Holyoake himself.<sup>36</sup> However, most debates were between freethinkers and representatives of religion (orthodox and otherwise).

Although it was primarily high-profile advocates who took to the stage to debate, the format of periodicals enabled lay members to engage on their own terms, ensuring that rank-and-file freethinkers were active members of a network of thought and action. Debates were also effective for more practical reasons. They tended to draw large crowds—building the movement’s public profile, creating a sense of community for members, and raising funds through collections and the sale of freethought literature—while their serial publication provided content for editors who were often stretched thin in terms of both commitments and finances.<sup>37</sup>

The *National Reformer*’s serialised debates were often printed in pamphlet form as well by the Freethought Publishing Company, which shared its press at 28 Stonecutter Street with the periodical. One such debate between Bradlaugh and Rev. James McCann, “Secularism Unphilosophical, Immoral, and Anti-Social” (published across issues spanning December 1881 to January 1882), not only demonstrates the tenor of these events but also indicates how the printing of debates served to preserve, as well as circulate, otherwise ephemeral words. On the third night of the debate, Bradlaugh is recorded as having said, “I must express my regret that Dr. McCann did not think it worth while to obtain an original report, instead of quoting third or fourth-hand from a sixpenny debate”; upon objection from McCann, Bradlaugh brandished the pamphlet “of which some sixty thousand have been sold during the last twenty years.”<sup>38</sup> This scene dramatizes how freethinkers sought to use their radical presses to reduce possibilities for their words to be misrepresented, even if an argument had, as in this case, been made two decades prior.

Reports of debates were a particular feature of the earlier years of the *Secular Review* while under the editorship of Watts and Foote. Both men were active on the lecture and debate circuit, and the appearance of such content reflects their priorities.<sup>39</sup> The decision to publish serialised verbatim reports of debates not only provided a larger audience for their ideas but also created the conditions for others to respond. For example, in June 1877 they published a two-night debate “between Mr. Charles Watts and Dr. Sexton” that had taken place at Batley Town Hall in Yorkshire on the subject “Is Christianity of Divine Origin, and Adapted to the Wants of Humanity?”; the text appeared in four instalments, the second of which was paired with a report of the debate by B.<sup>40</sup> This was followed by four issues that carried verbatim reports of Sexton’s subsequent two-night debate with Foote at Batley, “Is Secularism the True Gospel of Mankind?”<sup>41</sup> Across these eight issues, the reports were complemented and challenged by contributions to open columns. The continuance of debates in the pages of periodicals created the opportunity to respond and engage, enabling disputes to unfold and develop both temporally and formally. Sexton, who was once a secularist lecturer but by this point had become a spiritualist, responded to B.’s report in an open column letter, sparking further correspondence before the editors closed down the exchange as having become “more personal than useful.”<sup>42</sup> Then in August the *Secular Review* published Francis Neale’s “Secularism and the Batley Debate,” an article that had originally appeared in the *National Reformer*, demonstrating the circulation of debates and exchange of ideas between periodicals across the wider freethought sphere.<sup>43</sup>

Textual elements of the printed debates shaped the reception of, and engagement with, the form in a periodical context. In the verbatim reporting, the live nature of the debate is made abundantly clear through parenthetical references to the audience’s “applause and laughter,” providing readers with a richer sense of what it was like to be in Batley Town Hall.<sup>44</sup> An interjection from an anonymous “voice” agreeing with Foote (“No doubt about it”)

preceding the concluding speeches to the second debate demonstrates that it was possible for the audience to engage with those on the platform; however, the chair's response—"If you please, do not let us have, at this stage of the discussion, any unseemly disruption"—indicates how this was circumscribed.<sup>45</sup> While spontaneous contributions were deemed a disruption, responses were accommodated both in person after the formal debate had finished and subsequently in periodicals. The right of reply from the audience was asserted by B.'s report and a subsequent letter in the open column that responded to Sexton's printed defence of his initial debate performance. B. writes, "Undoubtedly, as one of the audience at that debate, I had a perfect right to state my opinion respecting it."<sup>46</sup> The writer critiques both the form and content of Sexton's contributions, characterised as "a heap of sentences strung together which are a parody upon the name of debate, and a mimicry of argument."<sup>47</sup> This response emphasises freethinkers' expectations about debate as a highly valued form that must rise above mere rhetoric. Furthermore, those who, like Sexton, engage in public debates and are "desirous of having a wide reputation," B. argues, "must leave the public to say what, or act as, they think best about these matters."<sup>48</sup> It was therefore a codified form which interlocuters were expected to enter into with openness to critique and willingness to accept that both their arguments and their manner of expressing them would be under scrutiny.

### **Imagined Dialogues**

Throughout the 1880s, the *National Reformer* published Bradlaugh's "Doubts in Dialogue," in which imagined scenarios—such as "Christian Priest and Unbeliever" and "A Missionary and an Atheist, on prophecy as evidence for Christianity"—work through points of disagreement, the freethinker highlighting contradictions and hypocrisies found in religious teachings.<sup>49</sup> Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner's note to the first edition of the collected *Doubts in Dialogue* states that the volume was put together by popular demand and describes the subjects as "based upon real doubts, many of them put personally by word of mouth or by

letter to Mr. Bradlaugh, or suggested by the reading of certain books.”<sup>50</sup> This process is made explicit in the column “Between a Christian Lady and an Infidel,” which was prefaced with a disclaimer: “The views attributed to the Christian Lady are all taken textually from a small religious book, ‘The Test of Truth’ by Mary Jane Graham, published by S. W. Partridge, and sent to me to convert me. The answers are mine.”<sup>51</sup> This is, therefore, a more overtly two-sided dialogue than other examples, although it is not truly reciprocal given that the Christian Lady’s answers are Graham’s words selected and ventriloquised by Bradlaugh.

This dialogue received a response in the open column two weeks later. W. H. Smith’s letter, titled “The Existence of God,” takes up the role of interlocuter. Smith professes that while “the word ‘God’ to my mind as to yours is quite meaningless,” he wishes to press Bradlaugh to explain if “no *first power* was necessary to cause [the universe’s] existence . . . how do you account for *all* present existence?”<sup>52</sup> Smith’s continuation of the dialogue does not, therefore, reiterate the Christian Lady’s stance but instead seeks to nuance Bradlaugh’s often black-and-white view of atheism when set in opposition to theism. Bradlaugh responds in an editorial note, in which he admits that while “there are many phenomena I am unable to ‘account for,’” this does not necessitate a first cause: “Existence, except as phenomenal, is beyond and above demonstration or explanation.”<sup>53</sup> This exchange is indicative of how forms of debate bleed into one another and how the periodical provided space for the development and nuancing of an argument. Nonetheless, the editorial position is unequivocally stated, and in giving himself the final word Bradlaugh implies that readers should be convinced by, and therefore adopt, his position.

Bradlaugh’s “Doubts in Dialogue” are characterised by the freethinking voice moving quickly between different lines of argument that undermine believers’ stances. Once a point has been sufficiently stated, the freethinker moves on to another, giving the dialogues an interrogatory rather than conversational tone. They are dialogues in their form but are lacking

in reciprocal feeling, and the freethinker always gets the last word.<sup>54</sup> This framing is perhaps expected, given the author and publication venue, but it is also unsurprising that the form appealed to Bradlaugh in the 1880s, when he was particularly embattled and vulnerable to attacks from the establishment during his legal struggle to take his seat in Parliament. An imagined dialogue empowered him to take control of the debate.

Such dialogues are not written in accordance with the Socratic model, which is characterised by open questioning rather than adversarial sparring between opposing ideological positions. In the *Meno*, Socrates professes, “I am not teaching the boy anything, but all I do is question him.”<sup>55</sup> However, Schlosser notes that Socrates “frequently appears to lead his interlocuters to particular positions,” and from the eighteenth century onwards the Socratic dialogue had gained favour as a pedagogic form in the Anglophone world.<sup>56</sup> The profession of ignorance also plays a part in both the classical Greek and freethought dialogues. While Socrates’s denial of knowledge drives his interlocuters to think for themselves, Bradlaugh’s challenges to the biblical foundations of religious knowledge both embrace not knowing—“There are many phenomena I am unable to ‘account for’”—and seek to affirm rational explanations where possible.<sup>57</sup> As Bradlaugh’s Heretic asserts, “I do my best at least on religious questions to dissipate their ignorance,” providing people with “sounder judgment on the affairs of life.”<sup>58</sup> The dialogues found in the pages of the *National Reformer* are characterised by refutation, rather than the reciprocity that sits at the heart of Socratic dialogues. They nonetheless share Socrates’s aim to, in Schlosser’s terms, “emancipate his interlocuters, to free them from the constricting bonds of dogma and ideology and bring them to think and to act for themselves.”<sup>59</sup> For the more dogmatic freethinkers, freedom to think for oneself meant that interlocuters would inevitably come to realise the falsity of religion through the application of reason, curtailing aspirationally open debate.

An alternative kind of imagined dialogue was authored by Joseph Taylor, who styled himself “the late Rev. Joseph Taylor” when giving freethought lectures.<sup>60</sup> A regular writer for the *Secular Review*, his essays and letters on philosophical subjects appeared frequently in the mid- to late 1880s. Over the course of eighteen (nonconsecutive) issues between October 1886 and April 1887, he contributed a column titled “Relativism, Non-Relativism, Absolutism. An Exposition: and a Vindication of Method and Terminology.” While it began as a serialised essay, from part 8 (January 8, 1887) to 18 (April 2, 1887) it appeared in the form of a dialogue between an “Absolutist” (representing Taylor’s own position) and a “Relativist.” The conversation ranges across phenomenalism, dogmatism, and egotism, and in later parts turns to consider how Christianity sits within this spectrum of positions. The artificiality of the imagined exchange is made explicit, although the dialogue is written in such a way that it reflects natural speech. The rules of engagement are declared when the Absolutist states: “You are aware that I sometimes like to moralise a little as I go along. We understand each other, and there is no danger of giving offense.”<sup>61</sup> The Rationalist replies, “Decidedly! There is no need for explanation. I know you never refer to me personally. But, if you did, I should think none the worse of you on that account. I admire a man who has the courage of his convictions.”<sup>62</sup> While the dialogue seeks to convince readers that Taylor’s absolutism is the correct belief, the formalised nature of good-faith debate is nonetheless made explicit, thus also serving to model such modes of exchange both on and off the page.

### **Open and Correspondence Columns**

Letters published in open columns and the snippets found in “To Correspondents” columns function in different ways from each other and from the forms previously discussed. Nonetheless, their consistent presence in both the *Secular Review/Agnostic Journal* and the *National Reformer* indicates the importance of readerly exchange in these periodicals, inviting freethinkers around Britain and beyond to share their thoughts and experiences.<sup>63</sup>



The movement's periodicals provided an infrastructure to connect with fellow thinkers and build a secular imagined community.

Early in its publication history, the *Secular Review and Secularist's* editors (Charles Watts and Foote) ran a "Notes and Queries" column. This functioned in a manner that was halfway between correspondence columns, which printed editors' answers to readers' questions, and letter columns that were more open ended regarding whether a reply was expected or desired. The "Notes and Queries" format elicited information or clarification from fellow readers on a wide variety of topics, often enquiring after verification of, or sources for, historical anecdotes and quotations. To take a column at random, in June 1877 requests range from "Can any reader inform me who is the author of the following lines [of poetry]?" to someone seeking corroboration for "the statement—made I believe by Robert Taylor—that one of the Popes canonised a holy dog, the bones of which are worshipped, or revered in some parts of Spain?"<sup>64</sup> Answers to these kinds of questions persisted in "To Correspondents" columns in both the *Secular Review/Agnostic Journal* and *National Reformer*. However, the shift in format meant that the original questions were no longer published, curtailing the participation of other readers and situating editors as the arbiters of knowledge.

Ross sometimes used these columns to make statements about his impartiality as editor. For example, in 1892 he stated, "Considerations of personal friendship shall never induce us to suppress letters from strangers attacking the positions held by those for whom we have great personal regard. This journal is subsidised by no one, and is utterly and absolutely fearless and independent."<sup>65</sup> The absolute authority of the editor asserted here suggests that there is no one to challenge his decision-making (despite the plural pronoun), indicating how his own biases might nonetheless prove a barrier to participation.

These columns indicate how editorial choices dictated whose voices were heard and why aspiring contributors might be kept out of the periodicals' pages.<sup>66</sup> Taking a single example from the *Agnostic Journal* (February 20, 1897), we find expressions of various kinds of editorial power. Ross's response to R. F. rejects a poetry submission as derivative: the lines "too readily remind us of the passage in [Walter Scott's] 'The Lady of the Lake.'"<sup>67</sup> This intervention may be compared to the function of correspondence columns identified by Kirstie Blair in Dundee's the *People's Journal*, through which editors offered criticism and advice in order to develop their working-class readers' poetic capabilities.<sup>68</sup> Some responses imply that a letter written for the open column has not been deemed worthy of inclusion, while others speak to delays in inserting letters. Ross's apologetic note to J. H. Beatty (a "valued contributor") explains that "there is keen competition for our space; and often, contributions, after being accepted, have to wait for months" before publication, indicating that dialogue between readers could be held up by purely practical matters.<sup>69</sup> The column's content also demonstrates how it is inherently an unresolved dialogic form, as the meaning of "We agree to the terms you propose" is only legible to the originator of the correspondence.<sup>70</sup>

Another function of "To Correspondents" columns was to encourage certain activities by praising specific behaviours. In the *National Reformer*, Bradlaugh and Besant indicate one of the benefits of readerly debate's proliferation in freethought journals: it modelled the kind of rebuttals that readers might also send to the local and national press. The editors were often called upon to weigh in on matters that readers disagreed with in both mainstream and provincial periodicals. In December 1886 we find a grateful editorial note addressed to A. M. stating, "We are much obliged for the papers, and for your excellent and accurate letter on our behalf. Friends who fight our battle in the local press help to make our work much easier."<sup>71</sup> This praise for freethinkers who actively supported the cause outside of the movement's direct networks demonstrates the principles of the NSS in action: "active

members” were expected to “aid in the circulation of Secular literature, and generally in the Freethought propaganda of his neighbourhood.”<sup>72</sup>

Turning to open columns and letters to the editor, these exchanges were dispersed across issues so that only committed readers who read every number would have been able to follow the cumulative discursive threads.<sup>73</sup> Readers’ contributions could diverge from the editors’ stance, but the tone and structure often echoed those of the editorials and the verbatim transcripts of public debates. The correspondence between Sexton and B. in the *Secular Review* (discussed earlier) demonstrated how these columns, which filled between half a page and two pages towards the back of every number, facilitated the continuation of debate across issues of the periodical. There it was notable that both theist and atheist perspectives were being articulated.

A comment in 1902 that “the A. J. is often read by Christians” illuminates another purpose of debate and dialogue in the pages of freethought periodicals.<sup>74</sup> This observation about the *Agnostic Journal* is precipitated by a letter from Halberd asking why Investigator closed an earlier article titled “Retrospection” with a series of questions challenging fundamental religious beliefs. Halberd contends that this is “flogging a dead horse” because “the old theology is vanquished.”<sup>75</sup> Investigator counters that this simply is not true: “If my words should perchance fall under the vision of such Christians as I am daily in the habit of meeting, I know they will give them pause.”<sup>76</sup> In this way, the sustained use of dialogic forms, including the aforementioned provocative questions, did not simply provide existing freethinkers with a space to discuss secular ideas and hone their debating skills; they might also convert readers who were religious but nonetheless open to engaging with the content of periodicals of this kind.

Countless other such exchanges between readers appeared in freethought periodicals. However, some letters garnered substantial editorial responses as well. These may be

categorised into two types: those from individuals outside the movement, and those from freethinkers querying the movement's position on specific topics. The former is exemplified by the *National Reformer's* publication of a letter from Charles Voysey, heterodox preacher and founder of the Theistic Church in London, on the topic of the Bible, dogma, and morality. Bradlaugh's editorial comment notes, "We may take the opportunity for further comment in an early number, but desire at once to thank the Rev. Mr. Voysey for his frank and courteous reply."<sup>77</sup> It is therefore the tone as much as the content of the letter that is highlighted. Bradlaugh's fuller reply states his objections and the contradictory nature of Voysey's stance while acknowledging their shared opposition to the Church of England.<sup>78</sup> This modelling of rational debate with someone characterised as engaging in good faith epitomises Bradlaugh's vision for the freethought movement.<sup>79</sup> Adversarial, impolite, and uninformed attacks to which freethinkers were regularly subjected were rarely given column inches and, if they were acknowledged at all, were usually dismissed with a line in the "To Correspondents" column.<sup>80</sup>

The response to a letter titled "Spiritualism" in 1884 illustrates a more combative editorial intervention. Manning Prentice concludes, "While I am not prepared yet to accept the theory of the Spiritualists, I am certain it would be folly to try to ignore the facts they have been the means of discovering."<sup>81</sup> The editors' note states, "We insert the letter with some reluctance, and are bound to add that while we have wasted many hours of our lives with so-called Spiritualists, we have never had any results worth higher examination than would be given the public performances of Robert Houdin. We quite concede that under the heads of hypnotism, animal magnetism, electrobiology, and mesmerism, there are many unexplored fields, but in none of these is it possible to dispense with 'human intervention.'"<sup>82</sup> Here the editorial line is clear: Bradlaugh and Besant position themselves as having undertaken investigations into the topic on behalf of their readers and effectively shut down

subsequent discussion of the topic as antithetical, or at least superfluous, to the freethought cause.

Commentary on letters with which the editors did not agree could be extensive and functioned as displays of authority that sat at odds with their support of freedom of thought and utterance. Such responses imply an unwillingness to leave it entirely up to readers to formulate their own opinions on key issues. This dynamic is indicative of a fundamental tension between the *National Reformer*'s political purpose—“maintained not as a business speculation but in the interests of the propaganda of Freethought”—and its ideological commitment to freethinking.<sup>83</sup> Editors sought to rouse the movement and persuade others to join and promote the cause. Part of this cause was concerned with giving artisan and working-class radicals a platform to voice their opinions and challenge the status quo. However, successful agitation requires some degree of consensus around which to rally. Bradlaugh's 1886 new year's greeting to readers epitomises this tension. He asserts, “The programme we issued for this journal in 1859 has known no change,” but he goes on to explain, “we have always left all our co-workers the fullest freedom of expression.”<sup>84</sup> The word choice here frames contributors as coworkers and thus raises them up to the same level as the editors. This speaks to the egalitarian nature of the freethought movement, challenging social hierarchies so often upheld by the intersection of church and state. Through the *National Reformer*, Bradlaugh, Besant, and others created and sustained a textual space in which readers were comrades who were empowered to correspond with the leader of their movement, an MP no less; this was, in itself, a radical act.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, the realities of editorial control meant that the core reformist policies of the paper were not in danger of being overthrown.

## Conclusion

The ostensible purpose of dialogue and debate was to challenge dogmatism and aspire to a better understanding of society and the world at large. The dialogic forms in the freethought movement's periodicals are therefore as significant as their content. It was often acknowledged that ideal truth was unknowable, so the periodicals' key concerns were to challenge religious orthodoxy, highlight hypocrisy, and use the light of reason and science to reshape society for the benefit of all. That absolute truth might be unknowable did not, however, mean that it was not worth debating all manner of subjects to achieve better understanding. Periodicals provided a space for freethinkers to develop their skills and hone their arguments as spectators of and participants in debates in a textual space. Readers' ability to engage on equal terms with those who had elite educations and sat above them in the social hierarchy was empowering. Dialogic content provided opportunities for freethinkers to absorb debating skills in an environment that invited them to participate. Given that no women and only a portion of men in Britain had the vote during the second half of the nineteenth century, to hold one's own in debates was a way of performing the right to citizenship through political participation.<sup>86</sup>

Readers' correspondence indicates that other regular periodical content, such as accounts of the deaths of well-known atheists and agnostics including Strauss, Paine, and Voltaire, was deployed to rebuff anti-secular sentiments encountered within their social networks.<sup>87</sup> While I am yet to find evidence that dialogues were drawn on as models to facilitate real-world conversations, the proliferation of dialogic forms equipped readers and writers to engage in the kind of conversations that might be required to forge a more secular society grounded in equality of citizenship and political participation. The multivocality of freethought communities is emphasised across different forms of content, shaping shared revolutionary discourses while maintaining an awareness of the power of disagreement.

The struggle for cultural citizenship was entwined with the activities of the press in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>88</sup> Dialogic forms enabled readers to identify themselves as participants in the public sphere. While the consistent presence of letters to the editor from the eighteenth century to the present is indicative of the enduring importance of newspapers as a forum for public debate, a more expansive consideration of dialogic forms in other periodicals offers new perspectives on how editors conceptualised the figure of the reader. There is a distinction to be drawn between their function in activist periodicals, where both readers and editors conceived of themselves as part of a counterpublic, and their presence in mainstream periodicals with more heterogenous audiences, where starker power differentials between producer and consumer of print shift the terms of engagement.

Li has identified a clear, though not always popular, “discursive turn in Victorian ethics” that took place as periodicals proliferated in the 1860–70s.<sup>89</sup> While freethought periodicals were not only concerned with ethics, the emphasis placed upon dialogic forms by this minority movement indicates a similar discursive turn outside of the mainstream, which future scholarship might trace in other activist periodicals. For freethinkers and other radicals, the stakes were higher than academic disagreement. Emphasising their embattled position, Bradlaugh wrote in 1886 that despite progress over the preceding decades, “At present we must fight to live, and debate is our war.”<sup>90</sup> In spite of this martial imagery, the freethought movement’s codification of dialogic forms in their periodicals highlighted their commitment to open debate.

Returning to where we began with Agnosco’s statement on debate as praxis, we find that the form is highly idealised: “We learn to respect the views of our opponents better, and, at the same time, after putting ourselves in a position for making a fair comparison—which we cannot do while we know only our own ideas, and those, perchance, none too well—we learn to respect our own faith the more when we have discovered wherein it excelleth.”<sup>91</sup>

What begins as a good-faith argument for understanding both sides of a debate takes a sharp turn in the final clause: the debate is envisioned as reinforcing the excellence of one's own opinions rather than being a true challenge to them. This tension complicates freethinkers' commitment to open debate. Nonetheless, in their adoption of dialogue as a primary mode, those who edited, wrote for, and read freethought periodicals modelled forms of honest enquiry and participatory citizenship, demonstrating how social and political change might be enacted through impassioned arguments paired with secular reasoning.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Agnosco, *Freethinking and Free Enquiry*, 14.

<sup>2</sup> Holyoake, *Principles of Secularism Illustrated*, 40.

<sup>3</sup> Royle, *Radicals, Secularists, and Republicans*, 222–26.

<sup>4</sup> "Value of Platform Discussion," 356.

<sup>5</sup> Nash, "Unfettered Investigation," provides a more detailed consideration of these periodicals' interventions and affiliations. For *Watts's Literary Guide*, see Lightman, "Ideology, Evolution and Late-Victorian Agnostic Popularizers."

<sup>6</sup> "Principles of the National Secular Society," in Holyoake and Watts, *Secularist's Manual*, 5. Bradlaugh and Besant were tried in 1877 under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 for publishing Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy, or The Private Companion of Young Married People* (Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 59).



<sup>7</sup> “To Correspondents,” *National Reformer* (November 28, 1886), 345.

<sup>8</sup> Chapman, *Gender, Citizenship and Newspapers*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Wahl-Jorgensen, *Journalists and the Public*, 30, 41–45; Chapman, *Gender, Citizenship and Newspapers*, 123–30.

<sup>10</sup> Cavanagh, “Letters to the Editor as Tools of Citizenship,” 91.

<sup>11</sup> Patton, “Not a limitless possession.”

<sup>12</sup> Easley, “*Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* in the 1830s,” 263.

<sup>13</sup> Wolff, “*British Controversialist and Impartial Inquirer*,” see especially 374–75.

<sup>14</sup> Lightman, “Creating a New Space for Debate.”

<sup>15</sup> Li, “Victorian Periodical Publishing and Ethical Debates,” 171.

<sup>16</sup> D., “Edification and Discussion.”

<sup>17</sup> “Value of Platform Discussion,” 356.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>19</sup> “To Correspondents,” *National Reformer* (December 12, 1886), 377.

<sup>20</sup> See McCalman, “Ultra-Radicalism and Convivial Debating Clubs in London,” and Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*.

<sup>21</sup> Stainthorp, “Freethinkers.”

<sup>22</sup> Martin, “Oratory, Itinerant Lecturing and Victorian Popular Politics,” 33–34.

<sup>23</sup> Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science*, chap. 4, “Botanical Dialogues.”

<sup>24</sup> Nash describes the secularist press as “a vehicle for the utilisation of cultural skills, and visible incentive for their acquisition” (“Unfettered Investigation,” 125).

<sup>25</sup> Lightman, “Creating a New Space for Debate,” 86.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 91–94, 101.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, John Watts and Bradlaugh’s popular *Half-Hours with Freethinkers* (published serially in 1864), in which Socrates is introduced as “the first recorded man who

set men to philosophise in the right direction, and by the use of the proper method. He taught the uncertainty of everything, the necessity of inquiry, the dignity of scepticism—the dignity of doubting even what is most universally accepted and generally believed” (1). Nash positions the trial of Socrates as foundational to the history of blasphemy and the freethought cause (*Acts Against God*, 26–30).

<sup>28</sup> Schlosser, *What Would Socrates Do?*, xiv.

<sup>29</sup> Besant, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> “Letter to the Editors,” *Secular Review* (July 29, 1882), 78. The *National Reformer* specified, “The full legal responsibility for everything which appears in these columns rests on Mr. Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant, as Editors and Publishers of the Paper. For the opinions expressed in all signed articles the writers alone are morally responsible.” Bradlaugh and Besant, Editorial column, 42.

<sup>31</sup> Wahl-Jorgensen, *Journalists and the Public*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Patton, “Not a limitless possession,” 115–16.

<sup>33</sup> For an overview of these publications’ histories and position within the freethought movement, see Royle, *Radicals, Secularists, and Republicans*, 157–59, 161.

<sup>34</sup> Lightman, “Ideology, Evolution and Late-Victorian Agnostic Popularizers,” 289–90.

<sup>35</sup> It was standard practice for both parties to sign off on the text of debates prior to publication. For the significance of this debate in defining the terms of the freethought movement and typifying Bradlaugh and Holyoake’s rivalry, see Royle, *Radicals, Secularists, and Republicans*, 110–11.

<sup>36</sup> Robertson, “Meaning of Secularism,” 49; Holyoake, “Meaning of Secularism,” 283.

<sup>37</sup> Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, 149–57, 178–85.

<sup>38</sup> “Secularism Unphilosophical, Immoral, and Anti-Social,” 38.

<sup>39</sup> Holyoake emphasised that the periodical's rationale had in part arisen from his debates with Bradlaugh about secularism versus atheism ("Field of Action," 1–2).

<sup>40</sup> "Debate Between Mr. Charles Watts and Dr. Sexton," 24; B., "Debate at Batley," 39.

<sup>41</sup> Their dialogue was reprised as a written debate in the *Secular Review* (November 5, 1880–October 1, 1881) on the grounds that "more justice could be done to the views respectively advocated, by sitting down in the calm atmosphere of the Study than by extemporaneous speaking amid the noise, tumult, and excitement that usually prevail at public meetings" (Sexton and Watts, *Christianity and Secularism*, n.p.).

<sup>42</sup> Sexton, "Batley Debate," (June 30, 1877), 61; B., "Batley Debate," 94; Sexton, "Batley Debate," (July 12, 1877), 110.

<sup>43</sup> Neale, "Secularism and the Batley Debate."

<sup>44</sup> "Is Secularism the True Gospel of Mankind?," 98.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> B., "Batley Debate," 94.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Bradlaugh, "Doubts in Dialogue: Christian Priest and Unbeliever," 148; Bradlaugh, "Doubts in Dialogue: A Missionary and an Atheist," 260. An analogous series of four columns by Charles C. Cattell titled "Conversations with Christians" appeared in the *Freethinker* between December 11, 1892, and January 1, 1893.

<sup>50</sup> Bradlaugh, *Doubts in Dialogue*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Bradlaugh, "Doubts in Dialogue: Between a Christian Lady and an Infidel," 52.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, "Existence of God," 92.

<sup>53</sup> Bradlaugh [C. B.], editor's note, 92.

<sup>54</sup> The *Westminster Review* observed that “the best [theist] replies are not always given [by Bradlaugh], and a real debater would have found something better to say in his own defence” (“Philosophy and Theology,” 675).

<sup>55</sup> *Meno* (83e, 882), quoted in Schlosser, *What Would Socrates Do?*, 38.

<sup>56</sup> Schlosser, *What Would Socrates Do?*, 38. Schneider describes the Socratic form’s rise in popularity during the eighteenth century in Britain through handbooks such as Isaac Watts’s *The Improvement of the Mind* (1743), which was republished throughout the nineteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic (“Remembrance of Things Past,” 616).

<sup>57</sup> Bradlaugh [C. B.], editor’s note, 92.

<sup>58</sup> Bradlaugh, “Difficulties in Dialogue: A respectable man of the world,” 59–60.

<sup>59</sup> Schlosser, *What Would Socrates Do?*, 39.

<sup>60</sup> “Editorial Notes,” *Secular Review*, 91.

<sup>61</sup> Taylor, “Relativism, Non-Relativism, Absolutism,” 92.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Such content also served the more prosaic function of filling column inches in financially precarious publications. See Wahl-Jorgensen, *Journalists and the Public*, 39.

<sup>64</sup> “Notes and Queries,” 59.

<sup>65</sup> “To Correspondents,” *Agnostic Journal* (January 23, 1892), 57.

<sup>66</sup> Practical factors like poor literacy and the cost of writing materials and postage would have precluded the participation of some freethinkers as well.

<sup>67</sup> “To Correspondents,” *Agnostic Journal* (February 20, 1897), 121.

<sup>68</sup> Blair, “Let the Nightingales Alone.”

<sup>69</sup> “To Correspondents,” *Agnostic Journal* (February 20, 1897), 121.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> “To Correspondents,” *National Reformer* (December 19, 1886), 393.

<sup>72</sup> “Principles of the National Secular Society,” in Holyoake and Watts, *Secularist’s Manual of Songs and Ceremonies*, 5.

<sup>73</sup> In addition, these exchanges were not collected and published as standalone pamphlets or volumes.

<sup>74</sup> Investigator, “Investigator, Why?,” 78.

<sup>75</sup> Halberd, “Investigator, Why?,” 61.

<sup>76</sup> Investigator, “Investigator, Why?,” 78.

<sup>77</sup> Voysey, “Religion and Morality,” 9.

<sup>78</sup> Bradlaugh [Iconoclast], “To the Rev. Charles Voysey,” 25. Bradlaugh’s response is indicative of his willingness to build relationships with heterodox religious figures, particularly those who shared his political commitment to improving working-class lives.

<sup>79</sup> Cohen quotes from a letter in the *Times* regarding one reverend’s experience of debating in the *National Reformer*: “Bear my witness to Mr. Bradlaugh’s fairness and courtesy” (*Bradlaugh and Ingersoll*, 108).

<sup>80</sup> For contemporary practices regarding editors’ selection of letters and the discourse of civility, see Wahl-Jorgensen, *Journalists and the Public*, 87–95.

<sup>81</sup> Prentice, “Spiritualism,” 359.

<sup>82</sup> [Bradlaugh and Besant], editors’ note, 359. Indeed, in December 1872 Bradlaugh had participated in a two-night debate on “modern spiritualism” with J. Burns (editor of *Medium*).

<sup>83</sup> [Robertson], editorial, 74.

<sup>84</sup> Bradlaugh, “Greetings to our Readers,” 10.

<sup>85</sup> Ordinarily, an MP’s “‘accountability’ required little more than ensuring that an agent replied to constituents’ letters, holding an annual ‘meeting of account’ in the constituency, and maintaining a high public profile during the election” (Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters*, 11–12).

<sup>86</sup> For debate's equivalent role in facilitating Victorian schoolgirls' political education, see Sutherland, "Politics in Schoolgirl Debating Cultures in England."

<sup>87</sup> Nash "Unfettered Investigation," 132. On the significance of the secular deathbed, see Nash, "Look in her face."

<sup>88</sup> Chapman, *Gender, Citizenship and Newspapers*, 194–95.

<sup>89</sup> Li, "Victorian Periodical Publishing and Ethical Debates," 172, 178.

<sup>90</sup> Bradlaugh, editorial response to "Edification and Discussion.—II," 371.

<sup>91</sup> Agnosco, *Freethinking and Free Enquiry*, 14.

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