Bentham on Religion: Atheism and the Secular Society

James E Crimmins
Between 1809 and 1823 Jeremy Bentham carried out an exhaustive examination of religion with the declared aim of extirpating religious beliefs, even the idea of religion itself, from the minds of men. Applying the utilitarian test at every turn, his analysis was squarely focused upon the supposed perniciousness of man's reverence for otherworldly beings, for the authority of "holy books" and the sanctity of churches and their clerical officiates. In Swear Not At All (1817) and Church-Of-Englandism and Its Catechism Examined (1818) he criticized organized religion and laid plans for the disestablishment of the Anglican Church. In the Analysis Of The Influence Of Natural Religion On The Temporal Happiness Of Mankind (1822) he sought to disprove the logic of Christian theology, and in Not Paul, But Jesus (1823) he ridiculed historical Christianity. It cannot be said, however, that these works provide anything other than a superficial treatment of the subject of religion. Bentham was an atheist and in no sense of the word could he be described as a theologian. His "unspirituality" was a central feature of his system, and this manifested itself in his complete inability to come to grips with the spiritual content of religion and its meaning for the pious believer. How then are we to understand Bentham's critique of religion? The answer is that it only makes sense when viewed against the larger canvas of his political views and aims, and specifically his aspiration to make his secular social science serve the needs of the Utilitarian society of the future. Taken together, Bentham's religious writings constitute the negative side of his plans for the construction of an entirely secular and rigorously Utilitarian society.

His intentions with regard to religion were clearly stated very early in his career: in an unpublished manuscript (from the early 1770s) he had written that so far as religious matters were concerned he considered them "solely in the character of the politician: not at all in that of the

1 Bentham in 1809 started on a work, "Church," as part of his radical attack on the English political establishment and gradually expanded the scope of the work over the next five years. See Bentham MSS University College Library, London, U.C. Box 28/32. Despite the efforts of the Bentham Committee to publish Bentham's unpublished work in a new definitive edition of The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham (London, 1968-), there remains much of importance in the 176 boxes of MSS at University College which has still not seen the light of day, not the least of which are the writings on religious matters. This material is indexed in Catalogue of the Manuscripts of Jeremy Bentham in the Library of University College, London, compiled by A. Taylor Milne (London, 2nd edn., 1962).

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divine.” The “sole object” is “to state in as clear terms as I am master of what I apprehend to be for the temporal benefit of . . . my fellow-men. . . .”2 Looking back over his long and industrious life, Bentham would no doubt have been satisfied that he had consistently adhered to this objective.

His battle with religion began in modest fashion,3 but in its subsequent development, in his writings on ethics and jurisprudence as well as in his works on religion, he traversed a whole range of issues. Some of them were of pressing political concern, as when he defended the political rights of Nonconformists,4 others of only incidental interest, as when he took Christianity to task for its intolerant attitude to homosexuality5; but always the aim in view was to test the institutions, practices, rituals, doctrines, and beliefs of religion against the standard of utility. The results of this test were invariably negative and stand as a compelling testimony to Bentham’s unmitigated atheism and to his desire to sweep away all religion in order to construct society anew according to the principles of his secular utilitarianism.

The critique of organized religion was always the strong point of Bentham’s offensive against religion. His attack on the redundancies and perniciousness of subscription to articles of faith and on the imposition of compulsory oaths in Swear Not At All,6 on penal laws against religious dissent,7 on the Common Law crime of “blasphemy,”8 and his defence of the nonsectarian Lancasterian schools9 were all undertaken against a Church determined to stem progress toward a more tolerant (and, admittedly, secular) society. Even his discussion in Church-Of-Englandism of the political motives of the Bishops in opposing seemingly rational

2 U.C. Box 69/36 (c. 1774). Even at this early stage in his career Bentham held that where matters of virtue or vice are unaffected, questions of theology are unimportant. Questions of theology, insofar as the disputes they occasion do not affect morals, are akin to problems in mechanics: “Vice gains nothing Virtue loses nothing by a decision of the Question one way more than another.” And again: “It is his indifference to the happiness of mankind that . . . suffers . . . a man to acquiesce in such principles unfavourable to it which have been inculcated into him under the name of Religion.” U.C. Box 96/327, 289 (c. 1773).
3 See U.C. Boxes 5/1-32 (1773) and 96/263-341 (c. 1773), and my article, “Bentham’s Unpublished Manuscripts on Subscription to Articles of Faith,” British Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies, 9 (1986).
4 See the discussion of the Unitarian Toleration Bill (1813) in Church-of-Englandism and its Catechism Examined (London, 1818), “Preface on Publication.”
5 See U.C. Boxes 73/90-100, 74a/1-25 (c. 1774), 72/187-205 (c. 1785), and 74a/26-34 (c. 1785, written in French).
8 Church-of-Englandism, “Preface on Publication.”
9 Ibid., “Introduction,” Part IV.
proposals for reform was not entirely misconceived. Had not the lack of public spirit on the part of the ecclesiastical establishment served to quash any hopes Bentham had for his cherished Panopticon—a circular prison in which to “grind rogues honest”? (Works, X, 226)10 Were not the Bishops the ones who watered down the Unitarian Toleration Bill in 1813,11 who helped to delay the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, and who threw their weight behind the government whenever the tide of seditious, libellous, or blasphemous literature seemed to threaten the traditional order of society?12 But for all we can contrive to say on behalf of Bentham’s radical campaign against the Anglican Establishment, we are hard pressed to stay at his side when he turns his attentions to religious beliefs. The discussions of life after death, the Scriptures, miracles, Christian asceticism, the nature of the soul, and the existence of God in the Analysis and Not Paul, But Jesus all leave one cold.13 Bentham could not countenance any common ground between the spiritual world of religion and the perceptible world of physical experience; they are, he believed, mutually exclusive worlds. Indeed, in taking his stand on the apparently solid ground of the latter, he confidently declared the nonexistence of the former. All his tools of analysis, his logic, the presuppositions of his nominalist metaphysics, and his descriptive theory of language,14 served to convince him beyond any shadow of doubt that the life of the spirit was an illusion. Unlike the philosophical skeptic David Hume, with whom he had so much in common, Bentham did not suggest that judgment be suspended when measuring the claims of religion against the standards of empirical science.15 Rather, like his close friend, the radical Francis Place (1771-1854), he moved quickly and confidently to


11 Church-of-Englandism. “Preface on Publication.”


13 For Bentham’s notion of the soul as a generic term for the composition of the corporeal substances of the human psyche and his exposition of God as a “non-entity,” see “A Fragment On Ontology,” Works, VIII, 196.

14 The methodological principles of Bentham’s social science are mapped out in a series of manuscripts written between 1811 and 1821 and subsequently edited for inclusion in the Works. The essay “Nomography” with an appendix on “Logical Arrangements, Or Instruments Of Invention And Discovery Employed By Jeremy Bentham” appears in vol. III, and included in vol. VIII are the “Essay On Logic”; “A Fragment On Ontology”; the “Essay On Language”; and the “Fragments On Universal Grammar.”

an outright denial of the truth of religion, of the existence of an immortal soul, of a future life, and of the existence of God.\textsuperscript{16}

Bentham never in so many words publicly avowed his atheism; he was much too cautious to do this.\textsuperscript{17} But that he was an atheist in substance there can be no doubt. His destructive criticisms of religious doctrine left no residue that could be of any value. To his one-time amanuensis John Colls, Bentham was that “hoary headed infidel” who made tasteless jokes at the expense of Abraham and who viewed death merely as the “altering the modification of matter” (which Colls thought an appropriate notion for an atheist).\textsuperscript{18} Bentham’s friend and admirer, John Quincy Adams, too, had no doubts about his unbelief:

The general tenor of his observations . . . was to discredit all religion, and he intimated doubts of the existence of a God. His position was, that all human knowledge was either positive or inferential; that all inferential knowledge was imperfect and uncertain, depending upon a process of the human mind which could not in its nature, be conclusive; that our knowledge of the physical world was positive, while that of a Creator of it was inferential; that God was neither seen nor felt, nor in any manner manifested to our senses, but was the deduction from a syllogism, a mere probability from the combinations of human reason; that of the present existence of matter we have positive knowledge; that there was a time when it did not exist we assume without proof, for the purpose of assuming equally without proof, an eternal Creator of it.\textsuperscript{19}

This is a concise statement of Bentham’s secular positivism, but it is also important to note the conviction with which his unbelief is stated. Duncan Howlett, in his history of the “critical way” in religion, has pointed it out as a persistent defect in the religious person’s perception of the atheist that he fails “to see how deeply the so-called unbeliever believes; . . . to recognize that he is an unbeliever because of his positive beliefs.” It is on the basis of these “positive beliefs” that the unbeliever repudiates the concept of miracles and that he can find no evidence that divine intervention occurs in the world. All the evidence points the other way, to a

\textsuperscript{16} Concerning his early doubts about religious beliefs, Francis Place wrote: “Hume’s writings put an end to them for ever, all doubt vanished and I was ever after at ease on this subject.” The Autobiography of Francis Place, ed. Mary Thales (Cambridge, 1972), 121.

\textsuperscript{17} In a letter to Place (24 April 1831) Bentham wrote of his meeting with Archibald Prentice, author of a History of the Anti-Corn Law League (2 vols.; London, 1853): “As to the point in question, I took care not to let him know how my opinion stood; the fat would have been all in the fire, unless I succeeded in converting him, for which there was no time; all I gave him to understand on the score of religion as to my own sentiments was, that I was for universal toleration; and on one or two other occasions I quoted Scripture.” Quoted in Graham Wallas, The Life of Place (London, 1898), 82.

\textsuperscript{18} John Colls, Utilitarianism Unmasked (London, 1844), 18, 49, 50.

\textsuperscript{19} Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, ed. Charles Francis Adams (12 vols., 1874-77; New York, 1970), III (entry for 8 June 1817), 564.
“non-miraculous world.” What Adams’s statement highlights is the depth of Bentham’s conviction, and this helps us to understand better the venom of his attack on religion. He could not remain a passive unbeliever; his profound belief in a material world free from all spiritual content made of him an active, not to say a zealous, atheist, committed to the promulgation of his beliefs, and it gave him comfort when he was in the company of those who shared his opinions. It also gave him cause for much anger when atheists were persecuted and prosecuted for their unbelief. To such intolerance he was always hostile, but even in the ordinary way of things there could be no compromise for Bentham: the spirit of dogmatic theology poisons everything it touches. By focusing the attentions and labors of men on a life to come, religion detracts from the stockpile of happiness in this world and, as such, must be considered one of the principal causes of the world’s evils. Simple theism, therefore, without an ecclesiastical establishment or even without Christianity would still be a curse.

At the heart of the confidence with which Bentham condemned religion was the scientific framework of his view of the world. To this source can also be traced his failure to comprehend the inner spirit which motivates the truly religious person. Surely was it not the height of injustice for Bentham to suppose that philanthropists inspired by religious beliefs, like the saintly penal reformer John Howard (1726-90) and the anti-slave trader William Wilberforce (1759-1833), tried to do good in the world simply from fear of Hell and hope of Heaven? He never really understood the distinction between reasoning, which is based on knowledge and experience, and faith, which involves the total personality in submission to the highest ideal. This is not to say that there is no “reasoning” to be done in religion or theology. It is only to mark the differences between the kinds of reasoning that one expects in the realm of science, on the one hand, and in religion, on the other. But what is clear is that the “reasons” for one’s religious beliefs are not and cannot be given in terms of scientific proofs or rational demonstration; ultimately all comes back to faith. When we discuss religious matters, therefore, we must seek less for rational demonstration than for “evidences” of their }


21 James Mill provides the testimony for his own unbelief in a letter to Place (6-13 Sept. 1815), BL Add. MSS 35, 152/163. Sections of Mill’s Commonplace Books also offer evidence of his unbelief. See esp. II, 82, and III, 201. For transcriptions of Mill’s letter to Place and of relevant sections of the Commonplace Books I am indebted to Professor R. A. Fenn of the University of Toronto.

22 See JB to Richard Carlile (c. 1821), *Works*, X, 528. Carlile had a history of publishing radical and blasphemous works, including several of his own ventures in “free thinking,” and was imprisoned on several occasions as a result. See G. D. H. Cole, *Richard Carlile 1790-1843*, Fabian Society Biographical Series, No. 13 (London, 1943).
truth. For Bentham reason, or rather science, tells us what is and what is to be expected. Faith, on the other hand, as Paul put it in the Epistle to the Hebrews, is concerned with "the confidence of things which are hoped for, and the certainty of things which are not seen" (Hebrews XI: 1). William Paley (1743-1805), the Cambridge Divine and "theological" utilitarian who shared Bentham's view of man's psychological make-up, nevertheless knew that the essence of Christianity was internal and mysterious. As he wrote in A View Of The Evidences Of Christianity (1794):

The kingdom of heaven is within us. That which is the substance of religion, its hopes and consolation, its intermixture with the thoughts by day and by night, the devotion of the heart, the control of appetite, the steady direction of the will to the commands of God, is necessarily invisible. Yet upon these depend the virtue and the happiness of millions.23

Bentham's utilitarianism with its materialist and nominalist underpinnings could not encompass the "internal" and "mysterious" and this impoverished his analysis. At the very point where he touched upon man's spiritual nature in his "Essay On Logic," he halted the examination. Following Descartes he divided man in the first instance into "corporal" and "incorporal" substances, but unlike Descartes he denied that the mental was more certain than the corporeal. Accordingly, he only continued the analysis on the physiological side of the division, and this is a tacit avowal of the limitations of his "science of man" (Works, VIII, 253). Whatever cannot be reduced to discrete and concrete entities, he claims, does not exist; but this, in his sense of it, is a tautological statement. Not surprisingly, the belief that human beings do not have a spiritual nature fosters a science unable to deal with deep inner feelings and personality. But it is certainly false logic subsequently to employ this science, as Bentham did, to "prove" that the belief in man's spiritual nature is unfounded or that the god he worships does not exist.24

Bentham's unbelief owes a debt, too, to the French Enlightenment. His vehement and ironic language when disparaging religion is reminiscent of that used by Voltaire, Helvétius, and Holbach in their condemnations of French clerics and their religious doctrines. Like the philosophes, too, Bentham argued that he must destroy in order to build, and he often followed them in using metaphors of aggression to dramatize his destructive activities.25 Voltaire used to say, "I'm tired of being told


24 "A Fragment on Ontology," ibid., 196.

that twelve men sufficed to establish Christianity, and I'm longing to prove that only one is needed to destroy it." Bentham thought similarly, and in his writings on religion he sought to bring about its destruction. Like Voltaire his hatred of religion increased with the passage of years. He first attacked clericalism and religion as an agency of moral regulation, and he later launched a furious assault upon the Scriptures, Church dogmas, and the person of Christ. The irreligion of both men was militant and aggressive.

Bentham was always loud in his praise of Helvétius's refusal to compromise his scientific principles by making concessions to theology, and his early work on ethics and legislation owed much to the secular positivism of Helvétius's *De l'Esprit* (1758). It was with the Baron d'Holbach, however, that Bentham had most in common in his approach to religious matters. To Baron d'Holbach "an atheist is a man who knows nature and its laws, who knows his own nature, and who knows what it imposes upon him." His principles "are much less liable to be shaken than those of the enthusiast, who founds his morality upon an imaginary being, of whom the idea so frequently varies, even in his own brain." But more than this an atheist "is a man who destroys chimeras prejudicial to the human species, in order to reconduct men back to nature, to experience, and to reason." The strict empiricist would be forced to suspend judgment, since atheism (like Christianity, he would say) is the laying claim to a form of knowledge that essentially lies outside man's ken. Bentham, however, preferred to follow d'Holbach in roundly condemning religion as a source of human misery and exposing its tenets and doctrines as empty imaginings and the product of intellectual confusion. In this he stood with the French *philosophes*, and his anticlericalism and atheism both come dressed in *philosophe* clothes. Bentham,

27 U. C. Box 5/1-32 and 96/263-341; *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (printed 1780, published 1789), ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (London, 1970), Ch. II, secs. 2-10, 18; Ch. III, secs. 6-7, 10; Ch. V, sec. 25; Ch. X, secs. 24, 40.
28 The criticisms in the later publications on religious matters are supplemented by much unpublished material in U.C. Boxes 7/1-160 (two appendices omitted from *Church-of-Englandism* for want of space); 138/1-154 (headed "True History of Jesus"); 161a/141-214 and 139/332-531 (material on the doctrinal differences between Paul and Jesus and appendices on "Paul's Inducements" and on "Church History" — all suppressed from *Not Paul, but Jesus*); BL Add. MSS 29, 806-809 (includes material intended for subsequent parts of the *Analysis* concerning Christianity and religious establishments).
as many have said before (though not necessarily for the same reasons), was the English philosophe.\textsuperscript{31}

To this we might add that Bentham was the last of the English philosophes. In the period following his death, English moralists, and utilitarians among them, resumed the effort to find a place for religion within their thought. Even in France the rigorously critical spirit which accompanied the natural-science approach to religion became blunted by the prophetic fervor and messianic expectation which characterized political thought in the years following the defeat of Napoleon.\textsuperscript{32} During the revolutionary period the French moved decisively away from the atheism of Helvétius and d’Holbach, with its strict separation of religion and ethics, towards the religious sensibility of Rousseau. The desire to build new philosophies to replace the beliefs that had been abandoned served to balance the destructive mood of the Enlightenment. Indeed, the substitution of the Republican Calendar for the Gregorian, the transforming of the parish churches of Paris into Temples of Reason, and the declaration of the Paris Commune that it would henceforth recognize only the religion of Truth and Reason were fitting preliminaries to Saint-Simon’s Temple of Newton and Auguste Comte’s Positivist Calendar. The new philosophic systems of Saint-Simon and Comte were in fact new religions. Having rejected Christianity the attempt was made to retain religious commitment by setting it in a more overtly ethical or political context (Ibid., 4-5).

While we may safely assume Bentham’s abhorrence for philosophies of this nature, it is noteworthy that he shared with Comte certain peculiarities of character and thought.\textsuperscript{33} Both men possessed an irresistible urge to build a “system” in which every discipline and science was to find its place and also to account for all aspects of social, political, and intellectual life. The character of their respective utopias was to be dic-

\textsuperscript{31} The comparison made by Michael Oakeshott in “The New Bentham” goes too far in asserting that Bentham was a philosophe rather than a philosopher, a man with belief in “encyclopedic knowledge,” “remarkable for his general credulity,” who “begins with a whole miscellany of presuppositions which he has neither the time, the inclination nor the ability to examine.” He has little in common with the philosopher: “For the philosophe the world is divided between those who agree with him and “fools”; “science” is contrasted with superstition and superstition is identified with whatever is established, generally believed or merely felt.” Scrutiny, No. 1 (1932-33), 120.

\textsuperscript{32} For a discussion of this period of French thought see D. G. Charlton, Secular Religions in France 1815-1870 (London, 1963).

tated by the form of these systems—the one Utilitarian, the other Pos-
ativist—and insofar as each prophesied a better world, their prophesy
was not for a distant future but for the here and now. Both Bentham
and Comte persistently upbraided their fellowmen for delaying the in-
stitution of a felicity in which they believed there no longer existed any
historical or scientific barriers that could not be rationally ignored. Nor
can one resist the comparison between Comte’s vision of himself as the
“high priest” of Positivism and Bentham’s “dream” of himself, recounted
in language rich in religious allusions, as “a founder of a sect, of course
a personage of great sanctity and importance. It was called the sect of
the utilitarians.” It is clear from this dream that Bentham had an exalted
notion of himself as the prospective savior of the nation. When asked by
“a great man” (presumably his patron of the time, Lord Shelburne) what
he should do in order “to save the nation,” Bentham replied, “take up
my book, & follow me.” The book in question is An Introduction To The
Principles Of Morals And Legislation (printed 1780, published 1789), and
it is certainly implied that as a substitute for Scripture there could be no
better blueprint for the salvation of the world. It is, he says, a book with
“the true flavour of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.” Nor was the
angel who is supposed to have delivered the book to Bentham one to be
fussy about methods: unlike St. John, who had to eat his revelation
(Revelation X: 9), all Bentham “had to do was cram it down the throats
of other people. . . .”34 The end in view is, of course, the rationally ordered
Utilitarian society.

Like Comte also, Bentham occasionally sought to enlist the institu-
tions of conventional religion to serve secular ends. The role of the clergy
in pauper management—disseminating information regarding job vacan-
cies and compiling statistics to aid endeavors at poor relief—the idea of
using churches as banks for the use of the poor after Sunday service,35
and using the clergy as instructors of morality in the poor man’s Pan-
opticon and in the Panopticon in its originally intended use as a prison,36

34 U.C. Box 169/79, “Dream,” (c. 1780-82). The text of this MS is ambiguous here.
A plausible alternative reading might be that it was the angel, symbolizing the Church,
who crammed the principles of religion down the throats of the people. However, other
references in the “dream” appear to favor the interpretation given. Bentham often used
religious terminology and referred to religious figures when describing his thought and
its importance. For examples, see Charles F. Bahmueller, The National Charity Company.
Jeremy Bentham’s Silent Revolution (Berkeley, 1981), 66-67, 167. On one occasion Ben-
tham fancied himself as the “Luther of Jurisprudence” come to search with “penetrating
eye and dauntless heart” into the cells and conclaves of the law. Rationale of Judicial
Evidence in Works, VI, 270n. The description of Bentham by Bruce Mazlish as “a very
eccentric version of Jesus Christ” takes such comparisons too far: James and John Stuart
Mill. Father and Son in the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1975), 132.

35 “Tracts on Poor Laws and Pauper Management” (1797), Works, VIII, 400, 414.
36 Ibid., VIII, 420-21, 427, 431; Panopticon (1791), ibid., IV, 47. See also Bahmueller,
The National Charity Company, Ch. 7, esp. 197-200.
were all suggestions he made at one time or another for employing the clergy and religious institutions for secular purposes. Bentham seems to have believed that the sentiments men attached to these persons and institutions were mistakenly understood to be religious in character and that their transposition to a secular context, therefore, was simply the recovery of their true character and use. The main thrust of his later thought on the role of religion, however, went much further than merely to suggest ways of employing religious institutions for secular purposes. In the ideal secularized world all traces of religious sentiment would be banished; it was to be the first duty of the legislator to do all in his power to eliminate religious beliefs.

Bentham's advice "To obey punctually; to censure freely"—given in his A Fragment On Government (1776) at the outset of his career—was a maxim always to be followed save where sober calculation showed a clear advantage to be had by disobedience. The case of religion he thought to be such an occasion. But to criticize or to destroy with no idea of what was to follow was for Bentham an anarchical approach to political inquiry. Disorder in anything, most of all in political affairs, he always found offensive. Accordingly, he rarely criticized anything without a notion of what was to take the place of what he criticized. In his Constitutional Code he provides us with his most extensive and detailed plans regarding the institutional make-up of the ideal state, his utopian Utilitarian society. In this vast text (662 double-columned pages in the Bowring edition of the Works) he mentions religion hardly at all. The opening sentence of Bk. I, Ch. XIV, "Established Religion—None," states Bentham's position: "No power of government ought to be employed in the endeavour to establish any system or article of belief on the subject of religion." The "truths" of religion must be accepted or rejected free from remuneration promised or penalties threatened by government. The power of the state adds nothing to religious truth, and indeed its exercise in this case is liable to be understood as a confession by those who enforce it "that in their eyes the system thus supported is false." Added to this is the consideration of the expense of maintaining an established religion, and Bentham delights in pointing out that nowhere in the Scriptures did Christ sanction an order of priests, let alone an Established Church. Nowhere did he say "give money to those who say they believe in what I have said, or give money to those who teach others to believe what I have said." Nowhere did he say "apply punishment to


those who will not say they believe what I have said, or to those who say they believe what I have said is false." Finally, in a note to Bk. II, Ch. XI, "on the subject of a Religious Establishment, to be paid for at the public expense," Bentham says all that he has to say in the Constitutional Code on the administration of religious affairs: "For the business of religion, there is no department: there is no Minister. Of no opinion on the subject of religion, does this Constitution take any cognizance" (Ibid., 452-53).

It is plain that Bentham's attitude to religion was much the same as his attitude to political and legal institutions: it was a public service which, because of the vested interest of its functionaries in sustaining it in a corrupt condition, was in need of a complete overhaul. The difference, however, was that whereas the reformed political and legal institutions would still be an essential feature of the Utilitarian society, Bentham came to believe that even if disestablished, religion would still be an enemy to human happiness, due to the doctrines and beliefs it expounded. To reform the Established Church was not to reform its teachings. It was not sufficient merely to blunt the harmful political effects of religion; as long as religious beliefs constituted an active spring of human action, the rational, that is the temporal, pursuit of self-interest would be thwarted. Irrespective of the additional problems presented by established religion, while men are still influenced by religious beliefs to forego the pleasures of this life, political coercion, direct and indirect, will be necessary. And, as one commentator has said, this means that "the enlightened state will be in the paradoxical position of 'forcing men to be happy' and will therefore refute a purely utilitarian justification for political obligation." 40

The secularization envisaged by Bentham thus involved more than the disentanglement of the religious and political spheres of social life. Certainly his policy of disestablishment set out in Church-Of-Englandism was designed to achieve this end. But ultimately secularization meant for Bentham the elimination of religious beliefs as influential psychological factors in the human mind, and this was to be the task of the legislator.

Just how central the abolition of religion was to Bentham's vision of the Utilitarian society can in part be understood by a reading of his final work, the Auto-Icon; Or, Farther Uses Of The Dead To The Living, written in 1831 and printed for private circulation in 1842. 41 Rarely noticed by

39 Constitutional Code, 93.


41 In a note at the head of the work Bowring (or perhaps John Hill Burton) relates that Bentham spoke of this as his "last work." For a discussion of the context in which Bentham wrote this tract, verification of its authenticity and other details concerning its printing, and the execution of his will as it regards his remains, see C. F. A. Mamoy,
scholars in the past, it is an odd utilitarian tract containing several allusions to traditional Christian practices but designed to show the irrelevance of religion to mankind. Here the immortality promised by Comte’s Positivism—the survival in memory, in the thoughts and affections of those whom a man benefitted and loved—finds a parallel in Bentham’s suggestions for the creation of “auto-icons.” For both men, the only real sense in which a man lives on is in posterity—this Diderot thought a more virtuous object than the personal kind of immortality promised by Christianity.42

Being an unbeliever and a rigorous utilitarian, Bentham was almost bound at some point in his life to consider the question: “Of what use is a dead man to the living?” That this question should foster an entire thesis about the usefulness to be derived from corpses, particularly if they are the remains of men of some achievement and intellect, is also typical of Bentham; but that he should have been thinking along such lines even in his youth is extraordinary. As Bentham points out in the Auto-Icon, his decision to leave his own body for the purposes of medical research was “no hasty—no recent determination” but was decided as early as 1769 on the occasion of his coming of age.43 As an indication of the indifference of the young Bentham to religious practices this first will is interesting enough, but the request concerning his body, given the age in which he writes, is remarkable:

... as to my body my will is that it be buried by the rites of the Church of England, or the rites of any other Church, or no rites at all at the discretion of my Executor [Richard Clark], so that the funeral expenses do not in any wise exceed forty shillings, but it is my Will and special request to my Executor that if I should chance to die of any such disease as that in the judgment of my said Exor the art of Surgery or science of Physic should be likely to be any wise advanced by observations to be made on the opening of my body, that he my said Executor do cause my said body as soon after my decease may be delivered unto George Fordyce now of Henrietta Street Covent Garden Dr. of Physic; ... 44

42 For Diderot’s view of posterity see John McManners, Death and the Enlightenment. Changing Attitudes to Death among Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth Century France (Oxford, 1981), Ch. 6, sec. IV.

43 Auto-Icon: Or, Farther Uses of the Dead to the Living (printed but not published, 1842), 2.

44 The will of Jeremy Bentham (24 Aug. 1769), Correspondence, I, Letter 84a. Bentham drew up this will six months after his coming of age. Some two months before his death he sent it to Dr. Southwood Smith, the physician who performed the autopsy upon his remains. Dr. Smith quoted the final sentence from the will in his Lecture Delivered over the Remains of Jeremy Bentham, Esq. . . . On the 9 June, 1832 (London 1832), 4.
In confirming this request in his final will (dated 30 May 1832)\textsuperscript{45} not two months before his death, Bentham showed that he was entirely in agreement with those who argued that people should not be prohibited by law from leaving their bodies for the purpose of dissection.\textsuperscript{46}

However, in his essay \textit{Auto-Icon}, Bentham was to take the idea of the utility of corpses much further. Besides having an anatomical or dissectional purpose, auto-icons were to serve a "conservative" or "statuary" function. Of the first he says little: he discusses past methods of preserving bodies and the benefits to mankind derived from anatomical studies. For the remainder he refers to an essay by Dr. Southwood Smith on "The Uses of the Dead to the Living," published in the \textit{Westminster Review}, No. 12 (1824).\textsuperscript{47} Bentham's suggestions under the second head are the more interesting. He explains the auto-icon, absurdly enough, as a man who is his own image, preserved for the benefit of posterity, and discusses the many uses of embalmed bodies under the following divisions: "1. Moral; including 2. Political; 3. Honorific; 4. Dehonourific; 5. Economical, or Money saving; 6. Lucrative, or Money getting; 7. Commemorative, including 8. Genealogical; 9. Architectural; 10. Theatrical; and 11. Phrenological" (\textit{Auto-Icon}, 3).

One of the more curious possibilities Bentham suggests, however, is the use of auto-icons in a religious manner: "On certain days the Auto-Icons might be exhibited, and their exhibition associated with religious observances. Every sect would choose its own exhibition-day. . . . Out of Auto-Icons, a selection might be made for a Temple of Fame—not in miniature—a temple filled with a population of illustrious Auto-Icons" (\textit{Ibid.}, 4). Bentham even envisaged "Temples of Honour and Dishonour," with the transference of auto-icons from one to another depending on the current state of public opinion, and even an "Auto-Icon purgatory" in which are to stand, with their heads turned away from public view, those auto-icons judged unfavorably by mankind (\textit{Ibid.}, 6 and 7). Auto-icons, rich, poor, famous, and infamous, are to replace the monuments of conventional religion in the churches, realizing the Christian equality which escapes mankind in life: all are "on the same level" and "the beautiful commandment of Jesus would be obeyed; they would indeed 'meet together' . . ." (\textit{Ibid.}, 3). "Dialogues of the Dead" are suggested for their theatrical and educational possibilities. Bentham fancies an Elysian Field of the auto-icons of famous philosophers, who, by the aid of actors using mechanical devices, are to converse before a studious au-

\textsuperscript{45} There is a typed copy of the will in U.C. Box 155/36-8 (1928).

\textsuperscript{46} Warburton's Anatomy Act was passed in 1832, the year of Bentham's death. For a discussion of the agitation which led to the legalization of the practice of donating corpses for medical purposes, see M. J. Durey, "Bodysnatchers and Benthamites: The Implications of the Dead Body Bill for the London Schools of Anatomy, 1820-42," \textit{The London Journal}, (1976), 200-25.

\textsuperscript{47} Later published as a pamphlet, the \textit{Use of the Dead to the Living} (Albany, 1827).
dience on the progress of their respective sciences and discuss the ideals for which they labored while alive in the flesh (*Ibid.*, 12-13). Typically enough Bentham offers snippets of conversations that might take place between himself and Socrates on the subject of happiness and on the philosophical developments of the past two thousand years; with Bacon and d’Alembert on “the Encyclopedical Tree”; with Bacon, Dumont, and Montesquieu on the “Law as it ought to be”; with Locke on the fiction of the original social contract; with Porphyry, Locke, and Bishop Sanderson on logic; and with Euclid, Apollonius, Diophantus, Newton, and La Place on mathematics.48 Finally, pilgrimages to the shrines of dead philosophers are suggested as fitting substitutes for the pilgrimages to the shrines of saints and martyrs (*Auto-Icon*, 15).

What are we to make of all this? In the first place, it is obvious that Bentham found it almost impossible to divorce his train of thought from the practices of conventional religion. Yet he maintained the difference: in his secular observances no spiritual content is to be found. In the secular Utilitarian society there was to be no God, and the idea of an immortal soul was to be banished from discourse. Men lived on only through their achievements and their presence as ideas in the minds of the men who came after them. There being no supernatural sanction for morality, a man’s reward for his contributions to the public good is to be remembered affectionately by his family and to be commemorated by his fellow citizens. Religious rewards and punishments in a future life are replaced by the verdict of future generations, a verdict which is renewed century after century in the case of great men.

It is at this point that the affinity between Bentham and his French contemporaries, revolutionary and philosophical, ends. His desire to eliminate the idea of religion, to the end of constructing a new society unhindered by my myth, contrasts with the efforts of the French, particularly Comte, to construct a secular equivalent to Christian belief and practice—a secular “religion of humanity” stripped of otherworldly referents. In the Utilitarian society men are bound to each other by the ordinary arrangements of the state and by the knowledge that ultimately their own happiness is dependent upon the actions of others. The only notion of common faith they share is belief in utility and in man’s ability to build a new society free from the superstitions with which the old order was fraught. There is to be no Comtean Positivist priesthood, no modes of private or public worship, no religious signs or symbols, however devoid of mysticism they might appear, no idolization of the feminine virtues, and no “Great Being” or “Goddess” for men to contemplate.49

True, Bentham’s Elysian Field was to be occupied by a record of mankind’s great men similar to those in Comte’s Calendar of “saints” (heroes and benefactors serving as objects of veneration each with his own special day), but it was not Humanity that was to be worshipped. For all Bentham’s dependence on the theoretical principles of natural science, he could not elevate reason to a position where it became the object of a cult, and neither could he envisage a “religion of humanity.” The notion of Humanity for Bentham could be only an abstraction, a “fiction”; the presuppositions of his nominalist view of the world dictate that there are only specific individuals in the world, and it was these in their iconized form that he intended to be admired, respected, held in affection, or condemned for their misconduct. His aim was not to placate a religious need or to redirect religious sentiments to secular objects; he refused to recognize that man was anything more than a complex physiological being. The auto-icons, therefore, serve a useful function entirely divorced from any spiritual or mystical considerations. They inspire or disgust and are aids to instruction, but no more than this. From the stories of their lives, their failings and achievements, their contributions to the public good, and their crimes against the community we can learn how best to conduct our own lives. But there is no use in our praying at their feet for guidance or forgiveness, for grace or salvation. In this they are impotent. “Has religion anything to do with the matter?” asks Bentham. “Nothing at all. Free as air does religion leave the disposal of the dead.” Religion is silent, “neuter,” having nothing to do with the business: “The religion of Jesus leaves it to rank among things indifferent” (Auto-Icon, 16).

Bentham’s aim was to build a Utilitarian heaven on earth, but it was to be a heaven without gods, angels, saints, or any other fictional beings or otherworldly entities. Religion is entirely absent from this utopia; in its most perfect condition the secular Utilitarian state is peopled by atheists who deny both the existence of a spiritual aspect to their nature and the reality of a world beyond the perceptible universe, and who order their lives in strict accordance with the rational dictates of the principle of utility. To be sure the inevitable hardships and inequalities of life will not disappear in the Utilitarian utopia:

Fire will burn, frost pinch, thirst parch, hunger grip as heretofore: toil even as now must be the prelude to subsistence: that the few may be wealthy, the many must be poor: all must be tantalized more or less with the prospect of joys, which they are out of hopes of tasting, and how much lighter soever may sit than it does now, coercion must be felt, that all may be secure.50

Nor could Bentham conceive of the world in any other terms. Lacking

any sense of man's incorporeal nature, religious or otherwise, and lacking, too, John Stuart Mill's profound understanding of the capacity of human beings for self-development. Bentham concluded that "Sense, which is the basis of every idea, is so of every enjoyment; and unless man's whole nature be new modelled, so long as man remains man the stock of sense . . . never can increase."51 Man, as a "bundle of sensations," will always remain just that, and this meant that in the Utilitarian utopia the onus to achieve reform lies with the legislator; he it is who must contrive to manipulate and coerce men into conformity with the dictates of utility. Insofar as he succeeds in this task the stock of happiness will be increased, and insofar as he fails it will be diminished. There is nothing inherent in human nature that can save it from this ignoble dependence; pain and suffering are part and parcel of the inhabited world, and all attempts to transcend this reality are chimerical. What progress there is to be had is to be had by altering the social and political arrangements, which must be stripped of all superstitious and mystical elements and all other impediments to the task of maximizing utility. Such a functional utopia is characterized by adequacy and efficiency; however, as J. S. Mill and other critics have remarked, Bentham's utopia, spiritually and emotionally impoverished, could never rise to the level of magnificence.

The poverty of Bentham's vision is, of course, firmly rooted in his social science and specifically in his understanding of human nature, but we should not doubt the strength of his commitment to its creation. His aim was to construct the Utilitarian utopia according to the principles of his exhaustive legislatorial system. Free from all taint of religion it was toward this end that "the sect of the utilitarians," the works of their great "founder" in hand, were to devote all their efforts.

The University of Western Ontario.

51 Ibid., n. 28.