



Atheism in Frances (Fanny) Wright (1795–1852)

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With these words Frances Wright described herself as non religious: “I am no Christian, in the sense usually attached to that word. I am neither Jew nor Gentile, Mohammedan or Theist, I am a member of the human race.” Preaching, she claimed, does no good, but “fill the vacuum of the mind.” Religion, she defined as “a belief in, and homage rendered to, existences unseen and causes unknown.”

Wright described herself as an atheist when she claimed she could not believe in what did not have its basis in scientific proof, in reason, and experimentation. Since “the best road to correct reasoning is by physical science,” it is science and rationality that are “the sweet guides to virtue,” not religion. The Scottish Enlightenment was a guide to her thinking, and so her strong belief that it was reasonable to practice the virtues of generosity and sympathy. Having witnessed the plight of the poor, the under classes, African-American slaves, and lives of ordinary women, she saw in England and America, religious and upper-class inaction in regard to these “evils.” She deduced that, as a member of the human race, the principle underlying human action was the principle of “human improvement.” Wright reasoned according to this principle and adopted it as a guide to virtuous living. “Human improvement” was based on materialist rather than spiritual foundations. She lectured, “Let Epicurus be your guide” for his philosophy was that enjoyment and happiness meant the pleasure of the mind. Fanny Wright therefore spent her life attempting good works by lecturing and by brave social action. In fact, although an atheist, she might be called a secular saint or a secular martyr in her efforts toward “human improvement.” The irony is that her two grandsons, who came to appreciate her ethical stance, became religious ministers.

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