



Religious Freedom in Frances (Fanny) Wright (1795-1852)

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Frances Wright places religion “without [outside of] the field of knowledge,” for, “no religion stands on things known” in that religion is based on “assertion, hypothesis, tradition” rather than observable evidence. In her Lecture V, Wright distinguished religion from morality. Religion: “a belief in, and homage rendered to existences unseen and causes unknown.” Morality she defined as: “a rule of life drawn from the ascertained consequences of human action.” Are moral outcomes better from religion or science? Morality as the “science of human life” involves humans’ relations to each other and to the mass. It involves the mutual relation of the two sexes, relation of old to young, parents to children. In contrast, it is the disposition of a religion’s people who determine its gentle “complexion” or its zealotry and fanaticism. The latter result in immoral “fatal effects” and leads religions into becoming enemies of “true science.” Rather than have churches of various religions which proselytize people into “angry combatants,” better to have “halls of science,” where people come to discuss opinions on moral living. With science’s reason we “govern not crucify” the passions, and with ready sympathy and philanthropy regarding the happiness of our fellow man we seek “human improvement” with active virtue.

Thus Frances Wright lectures not so much on religious freedom, as freedom from religion. Various religions render “strife and hypocrisy” in a spirit of “censoriousness” and so interfere with “mental liberty.” So for true freedom and better morals, religion itself is best supplanted with science, meaning philosophy and other rational endeavors. Wright had witnessed religious revival meetings whose rhetoric was based on emotion and whose message sometimes promoted slavery of both African-Americans and women. Such experience shored up her beliefs in the negative effects of religions as much regarding morality as regarding freedom and equality.

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