



## *Atheism* in Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904)

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Cobbe always opposed atheism. Her most comprehensive critique of it in 'A Faithless World' (1884) was apparently provoked partly by Annie Besant's views. Besant had argued that utilitarianism provided morality with a scientific basis that was stronger than its two traditional bases, namely Biblical authority and Cobbeian intuition (1874). Besides Besant Cobbe also took issue with James Stephen's view that the replacement of religion with science leaves unscathed all the goods of life, including moral values.

Cobbe argued that these goods only seemed unscathed because our horizon tacitly remains shaped by Christianity, but in the long term, without the latter, those goods would be lost. These goods are all finite and single, whereas religion provides an overall framework of value and meaning. Without a transcendent horizon, life will be diminished, nature disenchanting, and art trivialised; no-one will strive for virtue and moral action will lose its point. Without faith in an afterlife in which justice will be done, suffering will become meaningless and unendurable. Love will become insufferably painful and be avoided unless we trust that after death we will be re-united with those we love. Also 'the temperature of all moral sentiments will fall so considerably when the sun of religion ceases to warm them that not a few will perish of cold' (1884: 804). Overall, meaningful life is bound up with an evaluative dimension, and evaluative distinctions require a contrast between the transcendent and natural realms.

Besant wrote a spirited reply, 'A World Without God' (1885), arguing that the contrast with a transcendent realm diminishes rather than enables life's goods, and that Christian tradition contains as much immorality – vengefulness, violence, hierarchy and oppression – as morality.

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### **Keywords:**

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