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'Infidel Conversions: Counter-Conversion Experience in the Lives of Freethinking Feminists, England c.1830-1889'

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Historians of religion have long acknowledged the importance of conversion to the lives of evangelical Christians in the nineteenth-century and to the wider culture of the period. Less attention, however, has been paid to the process of 'counter-conversion'- the rejection of one's former faith in favour of militant opposition to religion. The counter-conversion experience was a common motif and propaganda-tool within the Secularist movement- a set of membership organisations and societies that emerged from the 1850s onwards with the goal of cleansing society of religious superstition and promoting freedom of thought. Prominent feminists within the movement wrote and spoke publicly about their experience of counter-conversion, holding it up as a model for others to follow.

This paper will explore the gender dynamics of these counter-conversion accounts, approaching them as both lived experiences and autobiographical narratives. Loss of faith was almost invariably accompanied by rebellion against a male authority figure, and in some cases women left their husbands to join the Secularist movement. Counter-conversion was also represented as a process of enlightenment, during which the woman who underwent it was able to lay claim to 'Truth' and 'Reason' and thus assume a traditionally 'masculine' authorial voice. This paper will therefore ask whether it is possible to read counter-conversion as a process of 'politicisation', given that rejection of religion led Secularist women to feminism as well as to Freethought. In doing so, it will engage with wider conceptual questions as to how historians should approach the personal experience of belief (or loss of it) of those in the past.

Laura Schwartz is a Career Development Fellow in History at the University of Oxford. She completed her thesis on 'Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Rights in England, c. 1830-1889' in 2008, and she is now working on a history of women's education at Oxford. Her article 'Freethought, Free Love and Feminism: Secularist Debates on Marriage and Sexual Morality in England, c.1850-89', won the Claire Evans Prize in 2008 and will be published in *Women's History Review* next year. She is a team-member of the Raphael Samuel History Centre and a founding member of the History of Feminism Network.