

Why the Name Church?

EDITOR TORCH OF REASON: I write you for the purpose of having you make a dissertation in support of the calling of a Freethought organization a "church."

Many of my associates in Freethought propagandism are opposed to the application of that word to such an organization; they claiming that a church is a building or organization for christian worship, as it is defined in the dictionary. Many of them are not willing, for that reason only, to join a Secular church which some of us propose to organize soon in this city; and myself and others desire you to make this argument as requested for their benefit.

I will hereinafter adduce those arguments which present themselves to my mind and I want you to bring forward those ideas which I fail to offer. It is only the name to which objection is made, everybody approves fully the nature of the organization; and they admit the expediency of the use of the word "church," but they declare that if they were to approve of it, they would be forsaking principle and following policy which they will not do. I fail to see that they would be forsaking principle, and will herein consider the question of principle only. A professor of foreign languages in a theological college in this city and a Unitarian minister both told me that it would be no abuse of the word to so use it and that it would be proper. This question is very much one of definition and authority.

I define a church to be any organization which has for its object the maintenance of a rostrum for the promulgation of religion. Now it is necessary to define religion which I do by declaring it to be any body of ideas, be they affirmative, negative, or agnostic, regarding the ultimate origin and destiny of all things; or in other words, the whence and whither of existence. Under this definition would be included as religious: Christianity, Buddhism, Brahmanism, Mohammedanism, Judaism, Materialism, Spiritualism, Atheism, Agnosticism, Theosophy etc. Superstition is a discarded religion.

"Usage makes language," which implies that a definition, that is lexicographical definition, follows custom; hence a dictionary is no more than a compilation of words and their definitions in accordance with their past, but not necessarily present usage, and that the use of a word according to the definition in the dictionary is not obligatory to avoid deception, misunderstanding, or invalidity in the use of the word. Thus the dictionary is not an inviolable authority.

The question now resolves itself into one of necessity. Why use the

word church instead of some other word? My answer is that there is no other word to my knowledge and opinion which so well indicates the nature of such an organization as the Secular church. The prefix Secular indicates the character of the church. Any one who understands the meaning of the word Secular, understands what kind of an organization it is. Since there is no other word which acceptably could be used instead of the word "church," it is imperative to use that word with an advanced meaning. The word "society" is too common a name to be suitable.

The Scotch Covenanters would not at first use the word church but used congregation instead, presumably because of the Catholic church using that word, but the covenanters had to eventually use the word "church" and so will we.

The law of evolution operates in the use of words as well as in animal life. The meaning of words constantly changes; the present meaning of many words has no similitude to that of one hundred years ago. Such being the case, it is justifiable to change the meaning of a word when necessary and whether we do so purposely or not, the meaning of words inevitably changes. With use would come an understanding of the new application and definition of the word.

The church, I hold to be an institution necessary in the very nature of things. It has existed in many ages under many different names: temple, synagogue, mosque and church. It certainly will exist in some form or other for innumerable if not all years to come. Such being the case it behooves us to have it in the most enlightened form possible. This I conceive we would have in a church which would be agnostic as to the ultimate origin and destiny of all things.

This I take the Secular churches of Oregon to be. It is certain to me that if they declare that this life ends all, they will be a failure. I am myself agnostic in this regard, believing that it can be neither proved nor disproved that this life ends all. The Secular church embodies the same elements which made necessary all past churches and is a higher-evolved form of the same inevitable institution which in many ages, has borne many different names. No particular doctrines or ideas regarding the whence and whither, are essential to the existence of the churches as an institution; the fact of the many different religions, past and present having been and being propagated by the same institution, being proof that no particular doctrines regarding the ultimate origin and destiny of all things are essential to the existence of the church as an institution. The Secular church would be a survival of the fittest of the type known as temple,

mosque, synagogue and church. It would be the highest form of the type of which we can conceive.

The true function of a church is the propagation of religion; and morality deducible therefrom. When I say morality I do not mean ethics; I make a distinction between the two. Of course the propagation of ethics is also a function of the ideal church. Religion, morality and ethics, is the logical order of the three elements or principles. That church which teaches the highest form of these three elements is the one which will survive.

The other night I listened to a street evangelist for a few moments who said that Ingersoll with all his teachings never saved a man from drink, but that Jesus had. At first I thought what he said was nonsense; but after cogitating a little upon the matter I came to the conclusion that he had made a point; although he had not expressed himself in logical form. The point he made was that Freethinkers in their propagandism fail to accompany their criticism with a propagation of morality and ethics. It is not Jesus who reforms the drinkers who are reformed in his name, and there are many who have been, but it is the arguments which the evangelists and preachers make against the habit of drinking; the valid part of their arguments being wholly secular.

In this connection, I will say that it certainly is necessary as you so ably declared a short time since, for the Secular church to have a declared ethical basis; and furthermore it is necessary that the Secular church should inculcate morals and ethics, in accordance with its declaration, with more detail. Simple declaration of general principles is not sufficient; we have had a plethora of that. The consequences of a bad and good conduct should be made so clear, particularly to the young, that they will realize that permanent pleasure is attained only by following the path of rectitude. If the young were systematically so inculcated, this idea would become a part of the warp and woof of their mentality; and there would be only a few who would succumb to evil habits.

Let the Secular church insist upon morality and ethics and its success is assured. Freethinkers have in the past made no organized numerical progress; in fact their organizations have numerically been miserable failures, for the very reason that they have almost ignored the inculcation of morals and ethics; and because of the poor polity of their organizations. I for one, propose to step out of the rut, and follow the new path; that of the Secular church; the first declared principle of which should be the Brotherhood of Man.

I wish my friends who may read

this to consider the same an invitation to subscribe for the TORCH and to become a member of the Secular church which shall soon be organized in this city. The list of charter members is in my possession and I desire anyone who will become a member of the Secular Church of Cincinnati to address,

Yours respectfully,

JAMES R. ALLEN.

Cincinnati, O.

Mr. B. F. Underwood.

Mr. B. F. Underwood is traveling in the East at present and is prepared to lecture on the following subjects:

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