

Page 110

LETTERS

WHAT IS SECULARISM?

There is much that is undoubtedly true in Harry H. Pearce's simplistic article "What is Secularism?" (March "Freethinker"). Yet in equating secularism with science he gives too narrow a view. He says that science is the only alternative to religion, but science is not an alternative to religion. Even if one takes religion in a narrow sense as meaning revealed religion, science is only an alternative to the part of it which purports to explain the universe.

Moreover science is only an alternative even to that part if one makes the large assumption that human brainpower and the resources of this planet are adequate to discover all the facts about the universe. In saying "there are no mysteries, only problems waiting to be solved" Mr Pearce makes this assumption, I believe unjustifiably.

Even if the assumption is justified there is a large gap between what we know now and what we are still waiting to discover. If it is not justified, part of that gap will never be filled. In these circumstances it is unrealistic to suppose that man's questing mind will not speculate. Nor do I see why, if it is recognised as such, speculation should be thought undesirable. Mr Pearce is wrong to accept "how?" but forbid "why?". Justly regarded, they amount to the same thing. The primitive tribe who ask why the gods have ruined a crop in fact destroyed by disease will be answered if a scientist explains to them how the disease originates and operates.

A further point. Mr Pearce says there is no absolute or ultimate code of conduct for humanity. From this he concludes that all moral rules are based on expediency. Once again there is a gap in his argument. Some moral rules go beyond expediency, and derive from the essential nature of man. Perhaps all do, if they are valid.

While science is not a substitute for religion, secularism or humanism ought to be. Otherwise it will fall.

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