

## “THE AGE” AND FAIRPLAY.

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### *Reply of Mr. Thomas Walker to the Sub-leader of May 24th.*

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FOR the purpose of comparison I republish the sub-leader of the *Age* of the above date :—

“The very best cause may suffer from the character of its advocates ; and we are satisfied that the cause of a free Sabbath is being very seriously injured by the injudicious people who bring forward Mr. Thomas Walker as one of its champions. It is the grossest insult that can be offered to men like Bishop Moorhouse and the Rev. Chas. Strong to find such a man placed shoulder to shoulder with them in the controversy. Mr. Walker is only known as a sort of Infidel Cheap John, who carries about with him wherever he goes a wallet full of scraps of Voltaire, Volney and Tom Paine, and is prepared to prove to any-body who will listen to him that he was consulted at the making of the creation, and is perfectly familiar with all its secrets. “Having flown over many “knaveish professions,” Autolycus tells us that he finally settled in that of rogue as the most profitable of all. Mr. Walker is not Autolycus, of course ; but he is almost as much favored by fortune, for he finds people ready to pay for hearing his ribaldry and flattering his egotism as easily as that famous snapper-up of unconsidered trifles found yokels to buy his extravagant stories about fishes singing songs a hundred fathoms above the level of the sea, and usurers’ wives being brought to bed of money bags. From figuring as a trance lecturer in the interests of Spiritualism, he now takes the platform as an avowed opponent of everything spiritual, turns upon his former friends with the usual violence of the renegade, and admits that he is an impostor by teaching down the things that he once taught up. That he should be able to gather an audience about him in such a city as Melbourne has always struck us as a circumstance of very unhappy augury. A moment’s consideration should tell any thinking man or woman that the themes which he handles with such pertness and audacity have puzzled and outwitted all the commanding intellects of the day, and that problems which Spencer and Huxley and Tyndall have retired from in despair are not likely to be solved by a pinchbeck Bradlaugh, for whom the kangaroo and the savage have only just made room.

Outside and behind the phenomena of nature there is a Power "absolutely inscrutable to the intellect of man ; and as little in our day as in the days of Job can men by searching find this power out," says the last named physicist, with true philosophic humility ; but the philosopher of the Melbourne Opera House, unillumined by a single gleam of reflection, backs himself to prove right off that there is no such Power at all, and the universe can be explained without it. There cannot be a doubt that a large number of people who look upon the Sabbath question with sufficient coolness to take no active part one way or the other would recoil with horror at the thought of being suspected of sympathy with a cause of which a person like this Mr. Walker appears to be accepted as a champion. They would be goaded at once into active hostility to the side that espoused him, and we do not see how anybody could blame them. Excellent Christians and churchmen are found in abundance to declare for opening the Library and Picture Galleries to the public on a Sunday, and only a fool or a bigot can see any anti-Christian feeling therefore in the agitation. But it is a very different thing when an avowed hawker of second-hand Infidel wares of the Walker type is given a prominent place among the agitators. Everybody knows what the motive of his hostility to the Sabbath of the Bible is, and his appearance in the field is properly regarded as an attempt to advertise himself and his business. Our own efforts have been anxiously directed to the preservation of a reverential attitude in the discussion, and above all things to prevent it from getting into the hands of charlatans and coxcombs. The movement is ostensibly set on foot for the benefit of the working classes, and it is most undesirable that they should be led to regard it in an irreligious spirit, or as a covert attack upon Christianity. As long as they have the arguments and opinions of men like Bishop Moorhouse and the Rev. Chas. Strong to guide and inform their efforts, there is no danger of such a catastrophe. Christians of the type that are rapidly bringing Christianity to mingle itself in the sisterly embrace of Philosophy, may be safely trusted to expose the tricks of the sophisters and mountebanks who trade upon the ignorance of the masses, as Autolyceus did upon the witless clowns and sheep boys of Bohemia. We do not want to have Mr. Thomas Walker gagged, because this is a free country, and every man has a right to talk as much nonsense as he can get his neighbors to swallow ; but for goodness' sake let no one run away with the impression that Mr. Walker, who was a Spiritualist yesterday, is an Atheist to-day and may be a Jumper to-morrow, is in any way a recognised agent or spokesman for the Sunday Society.

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In answer to the above charges and imputations, I, the same day, delivered the following reply at the *Age* office :—

## TO THE EDITOR OF THE "AGE."

SIR,—Since you admit you do not want to have me "gagged because this is a free country," and I suppose your paper a portion of the "free press" guarding and procuring those principles of fair play, without which no country can be free, perhaps you will grant me space to reply to a leader of your to-day's issue. When I am compared to Autolycus who finally settled to the "profession" of a "rogue" because that was "the most profitable of all;" when I am called a "sort of Infidel Cheap John;" when I am accused of admitting that I am an impostor, and finally when it is urged that my motive in my "hostility to the Sabbath of the Bible" is only an attempt to advertise myself and my "business," which business you declare to be the hawking "of second hand infidel wares;" in common fairness I claim the right to be heard in my own defence, against these and your other accusations. Now in the first place, Mr. Editor, what warrant in fact have you for saying "Mr. Walker is only known as a sort of Infidel Cheap John, who carries about with him wherever he goes a wallet full of scraps of Voltaire, Volney and Tom [generally spelled—Thomas] Paine, and is prepared to prove to anybody who will listen to him that he was consulted at the making of Creation, and is perfectly familiar with all its secrets?" Surely you, who profess to be writing in the interest of morality, the Bible and the clergy, should not descend to the reckless utterance of such charges, unless you are well backed with the necessary proofs of them! To descend to such childish abuse as that just quoted is scarcely becoming the editorial dignity, and its silliness is exposed by yourself when a little later on you aver that I back myself to prove that there never was a "Creation" nor yet a "Creator" to consult with me. As to my "scraps" from the "Infidels" you have mentioned it may not be out of place to ask you when you poked your sagacious eye into my "wallet?" Am I right in surmising that you have been a regular attendant at all my lectures? If so, it is reprehensible of you to speak disrespectfully of the ignorant "masses" upon whom such as I are reported to "trade." If not then how are you in a position to judge as to what "scraps" I use, or as to whether my "wares" are "second-hand" or original?

Because I was formerly a spiritualist and have had the manliness to "give it up" in more mature years, you charge me with positive dishonesty; call me a "renegade" because I advocate what now I am forced to accept by evidence as correct, and say that I admit that I am an impostor by teaching down the things that I once "taught up." If this method of reasoning be sound, it cuts the throat of every "converted christian." Not a single convert either from sin or heathenism, but preaches down what he once "taught up," to use your own expression. Paul becomes a self-admitted "impostor" because from being a persecutor of Christians, he accepted Christianity. Luther, Calvin, Knox, and all

the reformers are admitted "impostors" because they preached down the "Romanism" which in earlier years they accepted and "taught up." Wesley was an "impostor," for like reasons. Gladstone is a self-admitted "impostor" because he altered his political views from Conservatism to Liberalism. Sir Robert Peel was a self-admitted impostor because from being an opponent of the Anti-corn-law agitation, he eventually announced his views as changed, and carried the wishes of the Anti-corn-law agitators into effect. Lord Beaconsfield was a self-admitted "impostor" for similar reasons. But why multiply examples. Is it not manifestly absurd to say that no change can be made honestly, and that all who alter or relinquish any of their views must necessarily be "charlatans"? And is it not a manly course to take, when you have discovered your mistakes, to announce them and to do all you can to get others out of them? Is he undeniably an "impostor" who takes this course? When neither Bishop Moorhouse nor the Rev. Chas. Strong will have their recent utterances contrasted, without complaining, with the Orthodoxy of their early youth, why should it be held a crime in me to modify my views in accordance with the growth of my intellect and the accumulation of evidence? And so far as your sneer about the possibility of my becoming a "jumper" to-morrow is concerned, permit me to say it will be time enough for you to complain on that score, when you discover me consorting in believing fellowship with the "jumpers." You may be a drunkard to-morrow for anything you or I can now prove to the contrary, but I shall not accuse you of being one until I have seen you drunk. Exercise then the same fairness to me.

I have never backed myself "to prove right off that there is no such Power" behind phenomena as that spoken of by Prof Tyndall. This is an unfair representation of my position. Behind phenomena I recognise the necessity for their substratum and whether this substratum be called "Power" or "Matter" or by any other name I do not now concern myself, but simply wish to record my protest against the assertion that I back myself to prove that no such "power" exists. If your meaning be that I deny the existence of "God," I again deny that this is untrue. The existence of "God" I neither affirm nor deny, since I contend that until the word is defined to me, it is unmeaning.

I fully admit that what Spencer, Huxley, and Tyndall cannot solve either to their own or the general satisfaction, it would be folly to expect me to finally settle. But if by this is meant that I have no right to hold or express an opinion on the matter, I join issue with you. If I have no right to hold and publicly express views upon unsettled questions, neither have the general clergy of Melbourne, for the same reasons. We are not all philosophers, nor bishops nor editors, but surely we have a right to our opinions and

to the expression of them for all that! And if the truth were known, perhaps after all, you are not so opposed to my views as you now wish it publicly to appear, for I will undertake to quote from your leaders of the last two years expressions quite as heretical as any of my own, and which, if uttered by me, would have been called blasphemy and would consequently have received vigilant chastisement from your own pen.

It is customary, even to a criminal, to credit him with honesty until the charges brought against him are proved, and I therefore may justly complain that you discredit any honorable motives I may have in joining in the agitation for the opening of our Libraries and Museums on Sundays. To insinuate, nay, to positively declare that my motive in what I have done is simply "business" advertisement is mean beyond expression. Perhaps the knowledge that some editors and leader writers, write for pay, and just as they are "instructed," without any reference whatever to their honest convictions, may incline you to a warped judgment of the honesty of others and cause you to throw suspicion everywhere. Under these circumstances there would be some excuse for your charge, but otherwise there is none. Whatever you may say, I claim to be actuated by an honest love of the work I am doing, and I claim, as a citizen, my right to do it. What prescriptive right have you or the clergy to agitate for reforms? Why do you deny me, what you claim for the clergy and yourself in this respect? And although the movement is ostensibly set on foot for the good of the working men, by what virtue do you presume to declare yourselves the only friends the working men may have? By what authority do you call those "charlatans and coxcombs" who, whilst they differ from you on some points of theology, are yet anxious to see the reform in question carried out! Is it because it is an insult to Bishop Moorhouse and the Rev. Chas. Strong to have my name mentioned in the same breath with theirs? Without wishing to cast the slightest reflection on either of these justly honored names, I may ask who is to blame for the insult? I reply those narrow and bigoted individuals, who, in consequence of their intolerance, insist upon insulting these clergymen, because on this one point at all events, I agree with them. They cannot help my agreement with them, neither can they help my expression of that agreement. And how can it be insulting to them, that I should agree with them? Evidently the insult is not offered by me but by those who persist in urging accusations against these prelates for what they can in no wise help. Then you should abuse these bigoted people, not me, for the insult you complain of. And in like manner if there be those who refuse to do good because there are those working for the same end and whom they dislike, and if there be others who will positively do harm because I am working for an admitted

good, blame them, for the fault is theirs, not mine. I refuse to be the scape-goat of a pack of moral cowards and religious bigots. Either I have the right to do good or I have not. If I have I shall make use of the right, no matter who takes offence at it. If not, I want to know, why not? Those whom I represent are now by no means few, and they positively object to being ignored and insulted, when a movement is on foot in which they are admittedly interested. Their claim is just and would at any other time be readily conceded. They simply claim the rights of citizens to advocate for what they believe to be for their own and the general good. And when you, the clergy or any others insult or deny these rights, and rob them of what you yourselves enjoy, you become foes of liberty and act the part of tyrants.

I remain &c.,  
THOMAS WALKER.

Hawthorn, May 24th, 1883.

In place of the appearance of the above, the following was inserted in the "Notices to Correspondents:"—  
"We have received a letter from Mr. Thomas Walker vindicating his position before the public, but as we have no interest whatever in his views and do not recognise him as an authority on the subjects he handles, we cannot find space for it. Received.—'Please a Friend.' 'A Stanch Walkerite,' 'A Secularist.' \* \* \*"

It will be seen that not only I, but others, had written and met with refusal of justice, because they had spoken in my defence. Again I replied by the following brief letter, which was not even acknowledged as received:—

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "AGE."

SIR,—In your sub-leader of yesterday, you say you have no desire to "gag" me, yet in the very next issue you virtually admit you have done it; you refuse to publish my reply on the grounds that you take no interest in my views, and you do not regard me as an authority. If you have no interest in my views, why devote a leader to the abuse of them? Having taken so much interest, you certainly should take the further interest to grant the appearance of my defence. As to my being no "authority" on the subjects I treat upon, I have only to say, that has nothing to do with my claims. You have abused me and made charges which are untrue, I claim the right to refute these charges. If I am not an authority on my own views, I may be pardoned for saying neither are you. But this is a point for the public to decide. You have no moral right to "dub" me as you please and then to assume infallibility by denying me the right to reply. You have made accusations, I have replied, dare you leave the decision upon them to the public? This is all I ask.

Yours &c.,  
THOMAS WALKER.

Hawthorn, May 25th 1883.

On the following Sunday I delivered a lecture to one of the largest audiences ever assembled in the Opera House, in reply to these newspaper calumniations. In the course of that lecture I stated it as a fact within my personal knowledge that more than one of the leader writers of the *Age* held views in close affinity with my own. By comparison of the leading articles of this paper, its lack of principle becomes self-evident, for in the course of a year almost every point of the compass is traversed from Atheism to Puritanism. Ostensibly a working-man's paper, it would appear that its only quality entitling it to that claim is its clap-trap and cheapness. From all appearances what it calls "the masses" in its columns, it calls "them asses" in its council chambers. So far as the writer (whom I have reason to believe is a Spiritualist) of the sub-leader above quoted is concerned, I need not mention further his lack of logical consistency. The fact that he talks about "the making" of "creation" is sufficient to display either his verbal redundancy or his want of clearness of thought, or as is most likely, both. And the fact that he should make it appear in one paragraph that I admit, what he says I deny in another, shows that his memory was too weak and his logic too flimsy to tide him through a single article. His unfairness, or folly, or both, are displayed by the fact that he presumes to gauge not only my abilities and moral proclivities, but my acquirements, without having heard me deliver half a dozen lectures in his life. Perhaps this is giving him credit for too much. It is more likely he has heard none. I do not wish to boast, but in self-defence, if it be needful any further, I may be excused for saying that to fill the Opera House Sunday after Sunday for nearly two years; to conduct several debates; to hold numerous week-night meetings; to secure 761 votes in the electorate of Richmond when contested by seven candidates, all men of wealth or political fame except myself; to receive the abuse of most of the clergy and that touchy old lady the *Age*, requires something more than a few "scraps" from three freethinkers. I mention these facts not egotistically, but to show the absurdity of the writer's criticism. Let me recommend a "scrap" from one of the writer's own authorities. He has quoted Prof. Tyndall against me; now let me confront him with Tyndall's own words:—"Most heartily do I recognise and admire the spiritual radiance, if I may use the term, shed by religion on the minds and lives of many personally known to me. At the same time I cannot but observe how signally, as regards the production of anything beautiful, religion fails in other cases. Its professor and defender is sometimes at bottom a brawler and a clown. These differences depend upon primary distinctions of character, which religion does not remove. It may comfort some to know that there are amongst us many whom the gladiators of the pulpit would call 'Atheists' and 'Mate-

rialists,' whose lives, nevertheless, as tested by any accessible standard of morality would contrast more than favourably with the lives of those who seek to stamp them with this offensive brand. When I say 'offensive,' I refer simply to the intention of those who use such terms, and not because Atheism or Materialism, when compared with many of the notions ventilated in the columns of religious newspapers, has any particular offensiveness for me. If I wished to find men who are scrupulous in their adherence to engagements, whose words are their bonds, and to whom moral shiftiness of any kind is subjectively unknown; if I wanted a loving father, or faithful husband, an honorable neighbour, and a just citizen—I should seek him and find him among the band of 'Atheists' to which I refer. I have known some of the most pronounced among them, not only in life, but in death—seen them approaching with open eyes the inexorable goal, with no dread of a 'hangman's whip,' with no hope of a heavenly crown, and still as mindful of their duties, and as faithful in the discharge of them as if their eternal future depended upon their latest deeds."

I need say no more except to advise the writer of the criticised article to become more familiar with his own authorities.

At the conclusion of my lecture in reply, a vote was taken, and by a show of hands fully 3000 people designated the article as "unfair and cowardly." I now submit the *pros* and *cons* for the silent decision of the Melbourne public.

**THOS WALKER.**

*Hawthorn, May 29th, 1883.*

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