In 1910, just four years after Holyoake’s death, the Hastings *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* included an entry on Secularism, but one that fell under the heading of Atheism. Within the subheading of Secularism, the 1910 edition rather sloppily announced the equivalence of Holyoake’s and Bradlaugh’s Secularism on the grounds of atheism, and professed both to be mistaken and problematic because they had relied on negation rather than the positing of distinct values. While Holyoake, Bradlaugh, and company surely had reasons for their hostilities and vituperations, they were essentially locked in a position of denunciation from which nothing positive could emerge.¹ Thus the revision of Secularism was well underway and Holyoake’s particular contribution, in fact his construction of Secularism itself, was effectively erased and overwritten, as the two currents of Secularism were conflated.

But by 1920, the same encyclopaedia offered a separate heading for Secularism, and a description quite at odds with the previous interpretation. While characterizing Secularism as ‘negatively religious’ – by which the author meant that Secularism undertook the functions of ‘morality’ and ‘a theory of life … without reference to a deity’ – the entry aptly characterized Secularism (as founded by Holyoake) as agnostic with reference to metaphysical questions: ‘Neither theism nor atheism enters into the secularist scheme, because neither is provable by experience’.² Declaring that Secularism had sprung from particular political, social and economic conditions, which no longer obtained, the author pronounced organized Secularism defunct and unlikely to be resuscitated. Yet, he continued, Secularism should be evaluated in terms of its philosophical value, rather than strictly in terms of its organizational viability: ‘The question’, he argued, ‘is rather whether its spirit and principles are destined to continue in being’.³
Calling attention to the two streams of Secularism, the 1920 entry, which did a much better job than the earlier entry to correctly position Secularism as a movement and creed based on positive principles and the eschewal of the metaphysical, continued by challenging the theoretical coherence of Holyoake’s version and extolling the greater consistency and worldly impact of Bradlaugh’s atheistic and anti-religious variety. The problem with Holyoake’s Secularism, it argued, was that it claimed to ignore what cannot be ignored by any self-consistent and independent system:

The attempt to ignore rather than deny religion is impractical, because religion embraces both secular and spiritual concerns. Religion denies the secular conception of life, and that conception cannot establish itself without defeating the claim of religion to control life. It is an impossible proposition to maintain that there may be a God, but that He does not concern material existence.4

While Holyoake never suggested that God ‘does not concern material existence’, rather only that the Secularist need not (although she may) concern herself with God, the author of the entry made some salient points. He rightly pointed out that religion not only lays claim to religious life and concerns, to the otherworldly, but it also stakes its claims on the secular as well, to ‘this world’. Since religion denies the secular conception of life, or life construed as strictly a secular matter, the secular conception can only be positively asserted by negating the religious conception. For this reason, Bradlaugh’s Secularism was both the more coherent and the more successful type. Bradlaugh was correct, theoretically and practically, the entry’s author continues, to attack that which barred Secularism’s claims over secular life. For his part, Holyoake had inadvertently yielded the ground of the secular to theology. This mistake explained the relative weakness of his position, and the greater the success of the negative strain. Further, it explained why Secularism as a whole only found firm footing during periods of religious repression and persecution, and during the heightened opposition between science and religion.5

While it is certainly debatable whether or not a philosophical system can subsist without addressing the question of deity (either positively or negatively), the more important point here for my purposes has to do with the tensions that the author of this encyclopedia entry registers regarding Holyoake’s Secularism. With Secularism, Holyoake envisioned a broad tent movement based on an agnostic ecumenism within which